

Date: March 19, 2012
To: All Interested Parties
From: Paul DiPerna, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
RE: Louisiana K-12 & School Choice Survey Findings

Note: Generally, comments are included for demographic subgroups only when comparison differences are statistically significant ($\geq 90\%$ confidence level).

Topline in Brief

The Louisiana polling numbers definitely favor school choice policies, private schools, and K-12 education reforms. The net support is solid for vouchers (in general), the Student Scholarships Program (SSP), and the plan to expand vouchers. The demographics favor reform as well. Majority support is there for charter schools, vouchers, SSP, and teacher seniority/tenure reform. Support cuts across party lines. Interestingly, Democrats express higher support than Republicans and Independents for vouchers; Democrats and Independents state higher support than Republicans for SSP. Orleans and Tangipahoa appear to be bases of greatest support on school choice policies and the expansion proposal. Livingston less so, though a majority are still favorable to the plan. Majorities of support also emerge in other oversampled parishes. All oversampled parishes favor reforming teacher tenure, seniority, and compensation—approximately 6 of 10 in each parish support the plan.

Overview

The “Louisiana K-12 & School Choice Survey” project, commissioned by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and conducted by Braun Research Incorporated (BRI), measures Louisiana registered voters’ familiarity and views on a range of K-12 education topics and school choice reforms. In this document we report response *levels* of public opinion.

In a forthcoming polling paper, we will expand this discussion to examine *differences* of voter opinion (using the term “net score” or “net”) and the *intensity* of responses.

Where do Louisiana’s voters stand on important issues and policy proposals in K-12 education? We make an effort to provide some observations and insights.

A randomly selected and statistically representative sample of Louisiana voters recently responded to 18 substantive questions and 11 demographic questions. Our methodology included probability sampling and random-digit dial. A total of 2,218 telephone interviews were completed in English from February 14 to 27, 2012, by means of both landline and cell phone. There was a hiatus between February 19 through February 22 to account for prohibited Sunday dialing, Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday. The statewide sample includes 802 registered voters in Louisiana. BRI oversampled to reach another 1,634 total interviews in the following parishes to complete, combined with the statewide sample, approximately 325 interviews in each: East Baton Rouge (326), Livingston (325), Orleans (325), St. Tammany (333), Tangipahoa (325). Based on U.S. Census data, statistical results were weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the statewide sample is ± 3.5 percentage points. The margins of sampling error for the parish samples are approximately ± 5.4 percentage points.

Key Findings

- ▶ **The vast majority of Louisiana’s voters (79%) are paying attention to issues in K-12 education. Only 21% of voters say they pay “very little” or no attention.**

See Question 1

In the state, those Louisianans who say they pay “a lot” of attention (50%) to K-12 education issues outnumber those who say they pay no attention (6%) by more than an 8-to-1 ratio.

Democrats (54%) and Republicans (51%) appear to be a little more engaged (saying they pay “a lot” of attention”) than Independents (42%).

- ▶ **Louisianans are much less likely to think that K-12 education is heading in the “right direction” (34%) compared to being on the “wrong track” (50%).**

See Question 2

Orleans (48%) and St. Tammany (50%) parishes are significantly more positive than other surveyed parishes. By far, East Baton Rouge is most negative about the direction of K-12 education in the state (20% “right direction” vs. 64% “wrong track”).

Suburban and rural voters (56% and 54%, respectively, say “wrong track”) are more negative on this question than urban and small town voters (both groups have 45% proportion of voters saying “wrong track”).

- ▶ **Louisiana voters are much more likely to share negative ratings when assessing the state’s public school system (34% say “good” or “excellent”; 63% say “fair” or “poor”).**

See Question 3

St. Tammany (43%) and Livingston (38%) most frequently give positive ratings to the state's public school system. Voters in East Baton Rouge are overwhelmingly negative in their assessment (19% "good" or "excellent"; 80% "fair" or "poor").

Suburban voters (72%) most frequently offered negative ratings for the public schools, and there is a significant difference between their views and proportionally lower negative opinions of urban and small town voters (60% and 57%, respectively).

Democrats, Republicans, and Independents are all negative on the public school system. Independents (69%) are significantly more negative than Democrats (60%).

► **Generally speaking, Louisiana voters do not know how much is spent per student in public schools. There is a clear lack of information.**

See Question 4

Approximately \$10,625 is spent on each student in Louisiana's public schools, and 11% of respondents could estimate the correct per-student spending range for the state (this dollar figure reflects "current expenditures" per student). Nearly three times the number of respondents (29%) thought that less than \$4,000 is spent per student in the state's public schools. Another 1 of 4 voters said "don't know" to the question and did not offer a number.¹

When considering "total expenditures" per student (\$12,075 in 2008-2009), which is another definition for educational spending, voter estimates look even more off-target. Only 3% of voters estimated the "\$12,001 to \$16,000" spending range. Of the

¹ "Current Expenditures" data include dollars spent on instruction, instruction-related, support services, and other elementary/secondary current expenditures, but exclude expenditures on long-term debt service, facilities and construction, and other programs. "Total Expenditures" includes the latter categories.

See Frank Johnson, Lei Zhou, and Nanae Nakamoto, *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2008-09 (Fiscal Year 2009)* (NCES 2011-329). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics (June 2011).

URL: nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011329.pdf

592 respondents who offered and estimate or guess to this question, more than 9 of 10 (92%) underestimated total educational spending per student.

Louisiana's spending estimates is fairly typical compared to other states where we have polled. But no matter how one defines K-12 educational spending (per student), voters are woefully uninformed about how money is spent in K-12 education.

- ▶ **When given the latest per-student spending information, voters are less likely to say public school funding is at a level that is “too low,” compared to answering without having such information.**

See Questions 5A and 5B

We asked two slightly different questions about the level of public school funding in Louisiana. On version 5A, 57% of voters said that public school funding is “too low.” However on version 5B, which included a sentence referring to data on per-student funding in Louisiana (\$7,992), the proportion of voters saying “too low” shrank by 12 percentage points, effectively a 21% reduction.²

It appears Louisianans are likely to change their views on public school funding – at least when initially saying it is “too low” – if given accurate per-student spending information. The implication that opinion can turn on a single piece of data is important for political sound bites that focus on aggregate levels of public spending rather than how the money is allocated and spent per student.

St. Tammany is more likely than other parishes to say that funding is “about right.” (26% on 5A; 46% on 5B) Orleans is more likely to say that funding is “too low,” when compared to Livingston and Tangipahoa. Democrats (66% on 5A; 52% on 5B) are more likely than Republicans (54% on 5A; 41% on 5B) to say funding is “too low,” but voters across parties will change their opinion given more information on per-student spending.

² The author made an error when constructing this question. The actual 2008-2009 per-student “current” spending figure for Louisiana is \$10,625. The state’s per-student “total” spending figure is \$12,075 for 2008-2009. The general finding here is likely to understate the shift in opinion.

- ▶ **Voters are much more likely to give grades “A” or “B” to private/parochial schools in their areas, compared to other types of schools.**

See Questions 6A, 6B, and 6C

Approximately 64% of voters give an A or B to private schools, 34% give an A or B to regular public schools, and 34% give an A or B to charter schools. More than 3 of 10 voters (31%) give a D or F grade to their local public schools. About 7% give low grades to charter schools. Similarly, about 5% give low grades to private/parochial schools.

Livingston and St. Tammany give the highest grades to their local public schools. East Baton Rouge, Orleans, and Tangipahoa are more likely to give lower grades.

Orleans gave higher marks to charter schools than the other parishes. This makes a lot of sense considering the prominent role of charter schools in the region’s educational recovery after Hurricane Katrina.

Like the statewide average, four of the five surveyed parishes give high grades to private/parochial schools. Livingston stands out though and appears least likely to give high grades. Voters from that parish were also most likely to skip the question and say “don’t know.”

- ▶ **When asked for a preferred school type, Louisiana voters demonstrate a serious disconnect between their preferred school types and actual enrollment patterns in the state. Nearly half of the state’s voters (49%) would first choose a private school over other school types. About 3 of 10 voters (31%) would select a regular public school.**

See Question 7

Less than 15% of Louisiana’s K-12 student population attends private schools, but in our survey interviews, half of voters (49%) would select a private school as a first

option. Approximately 82% of the state's students attend regular public schools, but a much lower percentage of voters (31%) would choose a regular public school as their first choice. Roughly 30,000 students in the state attend charter schools (close to 4% of the state's K-12 student population), but 10% of Louisiana voters would like to send their child to a charter school. About 7% of voters said he/she would opt to homeschool their child. The results suggest the capability to choose a preferred school type is highly constrained in Louisiana.

Orleans residents clearly would like to see more charter school options, and are more apt than other parishes to want charters. About one-fourth of Orleans respondents (26%) say they would choose a charter school. East Baton Rouge residents (60%) tend to favor private schools, above the state average. Livingston and St. Tammany differ from other parishes by being more preferential to regular public schools, though respondents still would choose private schools first.

Majorities or pluralities of voters across all community types first prefer private schools. Urban voters (17%) are more likely to say they want to send their child to a charter school. Residents in small towns (37%) tend to be more favorable toward regular public schools. Rural voters (12%) are more likely to say they would want to homeschool their children.

Compared to Democrats, Republicans and Independents are more likely to want to send their children to private schools and less likely to choose regular public schools. Though a plurality of Democrats (44%) would still first choose a private school.

- ▶ **Roughly equal numbers of respondents in our survey prioritize a “better education” and “individual attention” (14% each impression) as the key attribute they are looking for in the selection of his/her preferred school. The next most important attributes, each suggested by 8% of all respondents, are “teachers” and “discipline or structure.”**

See Question 8

Some caution. These characteristics appear to be a higher priority over others on the list. However, any of these qualities may or may not attract more urgency as a second or third priority, which we do not explore in our survey.

- ▶ **Louisiana voters are much more likely to favor charter schools (61%), rather than oppose such schools (22%). Nearly 4 of 10 voters (37%) say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with charter schools.**

See Questions 9 and 10

Orleans Parish respondents stand out. Almost 4 of 5 voters in Orleans (77%) say they favor charter schools. Livingston and St. Tammany were more likely than the other three parishes to decline a response, saying “don’t know.” A majority of Livingston voters (55%) support charter schools, but the negative reactions (22%) were significantly higher than responses detected among voters in St. Tammany and Tangipahoa.

Majorities in all community types favor charter schools. Suburbanites are more likely than small town and rural voters to support charter schools. The greatest enthusiasm, though, can be found among urban voters (37% “strongly favor” vs. 10% “strongly oppose”).

Regardless of political party affiliation, more than 6 of 10 partisan voters support charter schools. Independents (15%) are significantly less likely than Democrats (24%) to state opposition to charter schools.

- ▶ **Louisiana voters solidly support school vouchers—63% say they favor the school choice policy compared to 29% who say they oppose such a voucher system. Almost 4 of 10 voters (39%) say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with school vouchers.**

See Questions 11 and 12

Despite at least 60% support across the five oversampled parishes, some regional differences emerge in the data. Voters in Orleans are more likely to say they favor school vouchers than voters in Livingston or St. Tammany. Tangipahoa clearly registers the highest positive intensity favoring school vouchers (47% “strongly favor” vs. 14% “strongly oppose”). East Baton Rouge and St. Tammany voters (about 1 of 5 in each parish) are more likely than Orleans and Tangipahoa to state strong opposition.

Voters across all community types and party affiliations favor school vouchers. Nearly a quarter of Republicans (23%) suggested strong opposition, which is significantly different from Democrat and Independent levels.

- ▶ **Voters from across the state, and across many demographics, support the Student Scholarships Program. Nearly 2 of 3 voters (63%) say they favor the program, versus 26% of respondents who say they oppose it. Almost one-fourth of voters (23%) say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with the voucher program.**

See Questions 13 and 14

Voters in Orleans (70%) and Tangipahoa (68%) clearly favor the Student Scholarships Program. The latter two parishes, along with St. Tammany (64%), register significantly different responses when compared to Livingston. A smaller majority in Livingston (55%) favor the program, and a larger proportion (21%) are more likely to say they “strongly oppose” the program.

Democrats (71%) and Independents (68%) are more likely than Republicans (54%) to support the current school voucher program.

- ▶ **More than 17% of respondents say they support the Student Scholarships Program because it offers a “better education,” doubling the number of responses given for the second-most frequently cited reason. Almost 9% of voters said the program afforded “choice, freedom, or flexibility.”**

See Question 15

- ▶ **By a two-to-one margin, Louisiana voters support expanding school voucher eligibility—statewide; low and middle income families; and low-rated C, D, and F schools (60% favor vs. 30% oppose).**

See Question 16

Majorities in all five of the oversampled parishes favor the plan to expand school vouchers in Louisiana. Orleans and Tangipahoa parishes show areas of greatest support for the plan (61% and 67%, respectively). Even in Livingston there is still majority support (53%) for the plan. More Livingston voters expressed strong favorability (30%) than strong opposition (22%). Tangipahoa voters are most likely to express strong support (38% “strongly favor”).

Like the oversampled parishes, the expansion proposal garners majority support across all types of communities and party affiliations. The margin of support is at least + 22 percentage points for each of the four examined community types. Net intensity scores – the difference between proportions saying “strongly favor” and “strongly oppose” – are also positive for all community types (urban = +24; suburban = +1; small town = +16; rural = +12). Likewise, the margin of support is at least + 19 percentage points for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Net intensity scores are positive regardless of political leanings (Democrats = +23; Republicans = +6; Independents = +9). Solid support reaches across party lines.

- ▶ **A plurality of voters (47%) say they favor allowing tenure for public school teachers. There is about equal intensity, positive versus negative, on both sides of the issue (23% “strongly favor” vs. 24% “strongly oppose”).**

See Question 17

In terms of intensity, St. Tammany stands out. Voters there are less likely than Orleans and Tangipahoa to support tenure, and less likely than all oversampled parishes to say they “strongly support” tenure. Conversely, St. Tammany is more likely to “strongly oppose” tenure. Orleans is least likely to “strongly oppose.”

Suburban and rural voters are more likely than urban and small town voters to “strongly oppose” tenure policies.

Democrats clearly differ with Republicans and Independents on this issue. A majority of Democrats (55%) favor tenure policies, but significantly fewer Republicans and Independents favor them (both 43%). On the other hand, significantly more Republicans and Independents (32% and 29%, respectively) than Democrats (16%) say they “strongly oppose” teacher tenure.

- ▶ **A solid majority of Louisianans (56%) support a new plan to overhaul the guidelines for tenure, seniority status, and teacher salaries. About 1 of 3 voters (33%) say they oppose the proposal. There is considerable positive intensity regarding the idea. Those who say they “strongly favor” outnumber those who “strongly oppose” by a 2-to-1 margin (36% vs. 18%, respectively).**

See Question 18

Majority support is found across all oversampled parishes, community types, and political party affiliations. Favorability does not dip below 51% for any of these demographic groups.

Survey Project & Profile

Title:	Louisiana K-12 & School Choice Survey
Survey Organization:	Braun Research Incorporated (BRI)
Survey Sponsor:	The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
Release Partner:	Pelican Institute for Public Policy
Interview Dates:	February 14-18, 23-27, 2012
Interview Method:	Live Telephone 70% landline and 30% cell phone
Interview Length:	13 minutes
Language(s):	English
Sample Frame:	Registered Voters
Sampling Method:	Dual Frame; Probability Sampling; Random Digit Dial (RDD)
Sample Sizes:	LOUISIANA=802; East Baton Rouge=326; Livingston=325; Orleans=325; St. Tammany=333; Tangipahoa=325
Split Sample Sizes:	“Split A”=401; “Split B”=401
Margin of Error:	± 3.5 percentage points for the statewide sample; ± 5.4 percentage points (approx.) for each parish sample ± 4.1 percentage points for each split sample
Response Rates:	(LL) LOUISIANA=19.7%; Parish Avg=20.6% (Cell) LOUISIANA=18.9%; Parish Avg=19.8%
Weighting?	Yes (Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity for parishes and statewide; also, Parish for statewide)
Oversampling?	Yes (Five Parishes: East Baton Rouge, Livingston, Orleans, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa)

Survey Demographics

	STATE %	East Baton Rouge %	Livingston %	Orleans %	St. Tammany %	Tangipahoa %
K-12 Parent	37	37	46	38	38	38
Democrat	37	39	20	55	20	33
Republican	29	31	43	18	40	30
Independent	24	20	26	17	30	23
Urban	20	33	6	57	10	5
Suburban	24	36	19	30	39	12
Small Town	30	14	31	8	26	49
Rural	26	14	42	3	23	33
18 - 29	19	25	17	25	15	24
30 - 39	15	17	21	16	16	15
40 - 49	18	17	22	18	20	18
50 - 64	30	25	26	26	30	27
65 & Over	18	15	14	14	18	16
Hispanic	4	5	3	3	4	4
Not Hispanic	94	94	94	91	95	95
Asian	1	2	0	2	1	0
Black	29	41	5	58	9	25
Mixed	1	0	0	1	1	0
Other	2	1	2	2	1	1
White	67	56	93	38	89	74
Catholic	31	20	18	26	42	24
Jewish	0	0	0	1	1	2
Mormon	1	0	1	0	0	1
Muslim	0	1	0	1	1	0
Protestant	58	65	67	58	45	64
None	7	8	11	9	8	6
Under \$25,000	20	14	16	22	8	27
\$25,000 - \$49,999	20	20	25	21	18	26
\$50,000 - \$74,999	17	17	16	21	21	14
\$75,000 - \$124,999	19	22	18	15	16	15
\$125,000 - \$200,000	5	7	7	4	10	3
Over \$200,000	4	3	1	3	5	2
< HS Graduate	8	4	11	5	4	11
HS Graduate	30	27	33	28	22	29
Tech, Trade, Vocational	5	5	6	2	4	9
Some College	23	23	23	23	24	22
≥ College	34	41	25	41	45	30
Male	48	50	51	49	49	47
Female	53	51	49	51	51	53