

**Date:** March 6, 2013  
**To:** Interested Parties  
**From:** Paul DiPerna, Friedman Foundation ([paul@edchoice.org](mailto:paul@edchoice.org))  
**Re:** Findings from the Maine K-12 & School Choice Survey

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## ***Overview***

The “Maine K-12 & School Choice Survey” project, commissioned by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and conducted by Braun Research, Inc. (BRI), measures Maine registered voters’ familiarity and views on a range of K-12 education topics and school choice reforms. We report response *levels* and *differences* (often using the terms “net” or “spread”) of voter opinion, and the *intensity* of those responses.

Where do Mainers stand on important issues and policy proposals in K-12 education? We try to provide some brief observations and insights in this memo.

A randomly selected and statistically representative sample of Maine voters recently responded to 19 substantive questions and 12 demographic questions. A total of 604 telephone interviews were conducted in English from January 30 to February 6, 2013, by means of both landline and cell phone. Statistical results were weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the statewide sample is  $\pm 4.0$  percentage points.

In this project we also included one split-sample experiment. A split-sample design is a systematic way of comparing the effects of two or more alternative wordings for a given question. The purpose is to see if providing a new piece of information about education spending can significantly influence opinion on that topic — a salient issue in Maine’s state politics and representing an undercurrent in education policy discussions.

## ***Key Findings:***

- ▶ **More than three out of four registered voters in Maine (77%) are paying attention to issues in K-12 education. About one-fifth of voters (22%) said they pay “very little” or no attention.**

*See Question 1*

Voters who said they pay “a lot” of attention (39%) to K-12 education issues outnumber those who said they pay no attention (6%) by nearly seven-to-one.

Parents of school-age children are clearly engaged.<sup>1</sup> Six out of ten (60%) in the survey said they pay “a lot” of attention to education issues, a figure that is twice as large as the proportion of non-parents (31%) giving the same response.

Middle-age and older voters (ages 35 to 54, and 55 and older, respectively) clearly pay closer attention to these issues than younger voters (age 18 to 34). About 42% of middle-age and older voters are engaged on K-12 education issues, saying they pay “a lot” of attention. By comparison, less than three out of ten younger voters (28%) said the same.

- ▶ **Mainers are more likely to think that K-12 education is on the “wrong track” (50%) compared to heading in the “right direction” (31%).**

*See Question 2*

Those living in Cumberland County are relatively less pessimistic than the state as a whole. About two out of five Cumberland voters (40%) said things are on the “wrong track,” whereas half of the state sample gives that same response.

Pluralities of most demographic subgroups see K-12 education on the wrong track. Levels of disapproval range from 43% (suburban and high-income voters)

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper, the term “Parents” refers to those respondents who said they have one or more children in preschool through high school. “Non-Parents” may have children, but none are in this specific grade range.

to 58% (low-income voters). Conservatives (57%) are significantly more likely than Liberals (45%) and Moderates (46%) to see K-12 education on the wrong track. Low-income voters are much more pessimistic (58%) than middle-income (47%) and high-income (43%) voters.<sup>2</sup>

► **Half of voters give positive marks to the state’s public school system (50% said “good” or “excellent”; 45% said “fair” or “poor”).**

*See Question 3*

Counter to the statewide averages, Parents (50%) are more likely than non-parents (43%) to say the system is “fair” or “poor.”

Suburbanites are more likely to express positive ratings (57%), compared to urban voters.

Republican responses are significantly different than both Democrats and Independents. Greater than half of Democrats (54%) and Independents (57%) gave positive ratings to the state’s system for public schools, greater than the proportion of Republicans (42%) saying the same. Conversely, 40% of Democrats and 38% of Independents described the public school system as “fair” or “poor.” But nearly six out of ten Republicans (56%) offered negative ratings.

In terms of ideology, liberal responses differ from conservatives and moderates. Almost six out of ten liberals (59%) gave positive ratings, greater than the proportions of conservatives (46%) and moderates (49%) saying the same. Conversely, 36% of liberals described the public school system as “fair” or “poor.” But significantly higher proportions of conservatives (51%) and moderates (45%) offered negative ratings.

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<sup>2</sup> For this paper, “low-income” refers to respondents with annual household incomes less than \$40,000; “middle-income” refers to respondents with annual household incomes at least equal to \$40,000 but less than \$80,000; “high-income” refers to respondents with annual household incomes at least equal to or greater than \$80,000.

A couple other demographics stand out. Younger voters (54%) are more likely to have a negative view of the public school system, compared to older voters (39%). Middle-age voters (51%) and older voters (54%) are significantly more likely to give positive ratings. Just two-fifths of younger voters (41%) give positive ratings.

Low-income voters have a significantly different opinion compared to middle-income and high-income voters. More than half of low-income voters (55%) give negative ratings for the public school system. However, more than half of middle-income voters (56%) and high-income voters (55%) give positive ratings. Two-fifths of low-income voters (41%) are positive about the state's public schools.

- ▶ **Based on survey responses, Maine voters do not know how much is spent per student in public schools. There is an awareness gap.**

*See Question 4*

Approximately \$12,452 is spent on each student in Maine's public schools, and only 7% of respondents could estimate the correct per-student spending range for the state (this dollar figure reflects "current expenditures" per student). About 39% of respondents thought that less than \$8,000 is being spent per student in the state's public schools. Another 30% of voters said they "don't know" and did not offer a spending number.

When considering "total expenditures" per student (\$13,839 in 2009-2010), which is another definition for educational spending, voter estimates appear even more dramatically off-target.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "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 Stephen Q. Cornman, Jumaane Young, and Kenneth C. Herrell, *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2009–10 (Fiscal Year 2010)* (NCES 2013-305). U.S.

Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics (November 2012).

URL: [nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013305.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013305.pdf)

Approximately 85% of respondents either underestimated educational spending per student (for either definition), or they could not give an answer or guess. No matter how one defines expenditures (per student), voters are poorly uninformed about how money is spent in K-12 education.

- ▶ **When given the latest per-student spending information, voters are significantly 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*

In an experiment, we asked two slightly different questions about the level of public school funding in Maine. On version 5A, 52% 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 Maine (\$12,452), the proportion of voters saying “too low” shrank by 14 percentage points to 38%, effectively a 26% reduction.

It seems that voters are likely to change their views on public school funding—at least for those who believe it is “too low”—if given accurate per-student spending information. This implication that opinion can turn on a single piece of data is important when considering political sound bites that focus on aggregate levels of public spending rather than how the money is allocated and spent per student.

- ▶ **Voters are 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 60% of voters give an A or B to private schools, 45% give an A or B to regular public schools, and 27% give an A or B to charter schools. Only 12% of voters give a D or F grade to their local public schools. Even fewer give low grades to charter schools (6%) and private/parochial schools (3%).

Voters are more than twice as likely to give an A to private/parochial schools (23%) when compared to the proportion of responses giving an A to public schools (10%).

- ▶ **When asked for a preferred school type, Mainers would choose a private school (42%) first. A regular public school option is the second-most frequently cited preference (36%). As a result, there is a major disconnect between voters' school preferences and actual enrollment patterns in the state.**

*See Questions 7 and 8*

Approximately 8% of Maine's K-12 student population attend private schools, but in our survey interviews, 42% of respondents would select a private school as a first option. Nearly 92% of the state's students attend regular public schools, but a substantially lower percentage of voters (36%) would choose a regular public school as a first choice. A sizeable proportion of Maine voters (9%) would like to send their child to a public charter school. About 10% of voters said he/she would opt to homeschool their child. Currently 2% of Maine students homeschool.

In a follow-up question, respondents in our survey prioritize a "better education" (14%) and "individual attention" (13%) as the key attributes they are looking for in the selection of their preferred school. The third-most important attribute, as suggested by about 8% of all respondents, is "socialization/peers."

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.

- ▶ **Maine voters are much more likely to favor charter schools (62%), rather than oppose such schools (20%). The net support for charter schools is very large (+42 percentage points). Approximately 35% of voters say they are familiar with charter schools.**

*See Questions 9 and 10*

Maine registered a large positive net support (+42 net) favoring charter schools. The enthusiasm is also very positive (+15 points). In other words, voters are more likely to say they “strongly favor” charter schools (24%) compared to those who said they “strongly oppose” (9%) such schools.

Charter schools enjoy majority support across all examined demographic groups. However, some relative differences emerge depending on a respondent’s political party or ideology. Republicans significantly differ from Democrats and Independents, although all three groups overwhelmingly support charter schools (73%, 53%, and 62%, respectively). Similarly like a mirror image, conservatives significantly differ from liberals and moderates, but all three groups still support charter schools (73%, 53%, and 60%, respectively).

Intensity of support for charters is greatest among parents, Republicans, conservatives, young voters, and low-income voters. urban and suburban voters, Republicans, middle-age voters, households earning \$50,000 or more, and whites. There is relatively weaker intensity (but still positive) among Democrats, and liberals.

About 18% of voters did not express an opinion regarding charter schools.

- ▶ **Mainers say they are not that familiar with virtual schools (64% unfamiliar), and at least for now, they are less likely to be supportive of these schools (37% favor vs. 50% oppose).**

*See Questions 11 and 12*

The strongly held negative views exceed the strongly positive views by 19 percentage points, and so intensity for now is clearly negative. This is understandable though, possibly pointing to a skepticism of the unknown.

Party identification and political ideology seem to matter, at least on the surface. Republicans (46%) are significantly more likely to favor virtual schools, compared to Democrats (33%) and Independents (35%). Likewise, conservatives (46%) are more likely to support virtual schools than liberals (30%). Conversely,

those who self-identify as Democrats, Independents, and liberals are much more likely to oppose virtual schools.

Approximately 13% of voters did not have an opinion about virtual schools.

- ▶ **Voters strongly support “tax-credit scholarships.” The percentage of those who favor (62%) is more than double the number of people who said they oppose such a school choice policy (24%).**

*See Question 13*

The net support is considerable, roughly +38 percentage points. Similarly, the intensity of support is strong. Nearly twice as many respondents (26%) say they “strongly favor” tax-credit scholarships, compared to those who “strongly oppose” (14%). The observed demographic groups who are most likely to favor the policy include parents (69%), rural voters (67%), Republicans (72%), conservatives (72%), as well as younger and middle age voters (76% and 62%, respectively). Those groups most likely to oppose include liberals (31%), older voters (34%), and high-income voters (30%).

Nearly 14% of voters statewide did not express an opinion.

- ▶ **Maine voters support an “education savings account” system (called an “ESA”). The percentage of those who favor ESAs (57%) is considerably greater than the proportion who say they oppose (32%) the policy. The net support is large (+25 net) with some intensity (+10 points).**

*See Question 14*

Among the examined demographic groups, net support is highest among parents (+40 net), rural voters (+35 net), Republicans (+40 net), conservatives (+42 net), young voters (+51 net), middle-age voters (+34 net), and low-income voters (+36 net). By far, older voters show the greatest net opposition to ESAs (44% favor vs. 45% oppose).

The intensity of support for ESAs is highest among parents (+19 points), urban voters (+22 points), Republicans (+22 points), conservatives (+23 points), younger voters (+24 points), and low-income voters (+20 points). Two groups show the most intense opposition: liberals (-5 points) and older voters (-3 points).

Ten percent of respondents did not share an opinion on ESAs.

- ▶ **A majority of Mainers (55%) said they support school vouchers, compared to 38% of voters who said they oppose such a school choice system. The margin of support is more than four times the survey's margin of error: +17 percentage points. About 45% of respondents said they were familiar with school vouchers.**

*See Questions 15, 16, and 17*

Since 1873, Maine has had a voucher system for school districts that do not have public high schools. This could explain why Maine is a little more familiar with vouchers than most other states where we have polled.<sup>4</sup>

The levels of support for vouchers vary quite a bit among demographic groups. Vouchers appear most attractive to parents (+38 net), Republicans (+42 net), conservatives (+44 net), younger voters (+30 net), middle-age voters (+25 net), and low-income voters (+33 net). Despite general positive support, there are two groups that are significantly more inclined to oppose vouchers, including self-identified Democrats (-9 net) and liberals (-13 net). Voters in Cumberland County also show a significantly different view of vouchers, compared to the state average (45% favor vs. 48% oppose).

Positive intensity for vouchers is highest among parents (+16 points), Republicans (+26 points), conservatives (+24 points), younger voters (+10 points), middle-age voters (+11 points), and low-income voters (+15 points). Negative intensity is

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<sup>4</sup> To browse the Friedman Foundation's archive of state polls, go to: [www.edchoice.org/research](http://www.edchoice.org/research)

greatest among Cumberland voters (-13 points), Democrats (-15 points), and liberals (-18 points).

In a follow-up and open-ended question, we asked for the reason why a respondent chose his/her view regarding school vouchers. Most frequently, he/she said some combination of “choice,” “freedom,” or “flexibility.” Nearly one-third of the respondents (32%) mentioned one or more of these terms.

Close to 7% of Maine voters had no opinion on school vouchers.

▶ **Voters clearly prefer universal access to school vouchers, compared to eligibility that is based solely on financial need.**

*See Questions 18 and 19*

Two out of three voters (67%) said they agree with the statement that “school vouchers should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs.” About 4 of 10 respondents (44%) “strongly agree” with this statement. Almost three out of ten (29%) disagree with this statement; 19% said they “strongly disagree.”

Only 29% of Maine voters said they agree with the statement that “school vouchers should only be available to families based on financial need.” Only 13% of all respondents “strongly agree” with this statement. Well more than half (67%) said they disagree with means-testing school vouchers, and 47% said they “strongly disagree.”

# **Survey Project & Profile**

<b>Title:</b>	Maine K-12 & School Choice Survey
<b>Survey Organization:</b>	Braun Research, Inc. (BRI)
<b>Survey Sponsor:</b>	The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
<b>Release Partner:</b>	Maine Heritage Policy Center
<b>Interview Dates:</b>	January 30 to February 6, 2013
<b>Interview Method:</b>	Live Telephone   68% landline and 32% cell phone
<b>Interview Length:</b>	12 minutes (average)
<b>Language(s):</b>	English
<b>Sample Frame:</b>	Registered Voters
<b>Sampling Method:</b>	Dual Frame; Probability Sampling; Random Digit Dial (RDD)
<b>Sample Sizes:</b>	MAINE = 604
<b>Split Sample Sizes:</b>	“Split A” = 302; “Split B” = 302
<b>Margin of Error:</b>	MAINE = $\pm$ 4.0 percentage points
<b>Response Rates:</b>	Landline (LL) = 14.4% Cell Phone = 11.5%
<b>Weighting?</b>	Yes (Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Region)
<b>Oversampling?</b>	No

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