

Date: July 27, 2012
To: Partners
From: Paul DiPerna, Friedman Foundation
RE: Draft | Findings from the North Carolina K-12 Survey

Overview

The “North Carolina K-12 & School Choice Survey” project, commissioned by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and conducted by Braun Research, Inc. (BRI), measures North Carolina 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 responses.

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

A randomly selected and statistically representative sample of North Carolina voters recently responded to 20 substantive questions and 11 demographic questions. A total of 601 telephone interviews were conducted in English from June 18 to 24, 2012, 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 ± 4.0 percentage points.

In this project we included several split-sample experiments. 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 particular wording, or providing a new piece of information, can significantly influence opinion on a given topic. We were particularly interested in how wording can affect responses to questions on education spending, taxes, and school choice policies—all salient issues in North Carolina state politics and policy discussions.

Our polling paper has four sections. The first section summarizes key findings. We call the second section “Survey Snapshots,” which offers charts highlighting the core findings of the project. The third section describes the survey’s methodology, summarizes response statistics, and presents additional technical information on call dispositions for landline and cell phone interviews. The fourth section presents our questionnaire and results (“topline numbers”), essentially allowing the reader to follow the actual interview as it was conducted, with respect to question wording and ordering.

Key Findings:

- ▶ **Nearly four out of five registered voters in North Carolina (78%) are paying attention to issues in K-12 education. About one-fifth of voters (21%) said they pay “very little” or no attention.**

See Question 1

Voters who said they pay “a lot” of attention (46%) to K-12 education issues outnumber those who said they pay no attention (6%) by more than seven-to-one.

Middle-age and older voters (ages 30 to 49, and 50 and older, respectively) clearly pay closer attention to these issues than younger voters. Almost half of voters 30 and older (48%) are engaged on K-12 education issues, saying they pay “a lot” of attention. By comparison, about one-third of younger voters (34%), age 18 to 29, said the same.

- ▶ **North Carolinians are more likely to think that K-12 education is on the “wrong track” (55%) compared to heading in the “right direction” (29%).**

See Question 2

Several demographics stand out. Parents (35%) are more likely than non-parents (25%) to see things going in the right direction, thought the levels are still very

low.¹ Suburban and small-town voters (32% each group) are more positive than rural voters (22%). Democrats (34%) are significantly more likely to think things are going in the right direction compared to Republicans (23%). African Americans (36%) are more upbeat than whites (24%).

- ▶ **Voters give relatively low marks to the state’s public school system (45% said “good” or “excellent”; 52% said “fair” or “poor”).**

See Question 3

Parents are more likely to express positive ratings (51%) when compared to non-parents. The eastern region of the state (33%) is significantly less likely to give “good” or “excellent” marks for public schools, compared to the Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham regions (48% in each region).

Republican responses are significantly different than both Democrats and Independents. About half of Democrats (50%) and Independents (53%) gave positive ratings to the state’s public school system, which is much greater than the proportion of Republicans (32%) saying the same. Conversely, 47% of Democrats and 44% of Independents described the public school system as “fair” or “poor.” But nearly two-thirds of Republicans (65%) offered negative ratings.

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

See Question 4

Approximately \$8,518 is spent on each student in North Carolina’s public schools, and only 8% of respondents could estimate the correct per-student spending range for the state (this dollar figure reflects “current expenditures” per student). More than one-fourth of all respondents (26%) thought that less than \$4,000 is being

¹ 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.

spent per student in the state’s public schools. Another 45% of voters said they “don’t know” and did not offer a spending number.²

When considering “total expenditures” per student (\$9,729 in 2008-2009), which is another definition for educational spending, voter estimates are still off-target.

Of the 334 respondents who offered an estimate or guess to this question, approximately 8 of 10 voters (80%) either underestimated “total” educational spending per student, or they could not give an answer or guess. No matter how one defines expenditures (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 North Carolina. On version 5A, 66% 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 North Carolina (\$8,518), the proportion of voters saying “too low” shrank by 16 percentage points, effectively a 24% reduction.

Voters 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

² “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

important for political sound bites that focus on aggregate levels of public spending rather than how the money is allocated and spent per student.

- ▶ **Although taxes can be a source of public school funding, a plurality of voters (46%) would prefer state taxes to decrease, rather than “stay about the same” or increase. Likewise, a plurality of voters (49%) said they prefer to decrease local taxes.**

See Questions 6A and 6B

In the statewide sample, more than half of voters want taxes to stay the same or decrease at both the state and local levels. That said, some majorities emerge among demographic groups that would like to see increased taxes. Urban and suburban voters are much more likely to want increased state taxes (61% and 53%, respectively) compared to small-town and rural voters (38% and 28%, respectively). A majority of Democrats (53%) want to see higher state taxes, but Republicans clearly do not (26%). Younger voters (64%) also favor higher state taxes, but middle-age (41%) and older (34%) voters do not share their enthusiasm. African Americans (53%) are significantly more likely to want higher states taxes compared to whites (38%).

Comparatively speaking, it is even less popular to want higher local taxes. No majorities exist favoring increased local taxes, but there are some significant relative differences. Urban voters (49%) are more likely to want higher local taxes compared to small-town (29%) and rural (30%) voters. To no surprise, Democrats (48%) are more likely to want higher local taxes than Republicans (26%). In stark contrast to the question on state taxes, we see middle-age (38%) and older (39%) voters more likely to want higher local taxes than younger voters (18%).

- ▶ **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 7A, 7B, and 7C

Approximately 59% of voters give an A or B to private schools, 49% give an A or B to regular public schools, and 53% give an A or B to charter schools. Only 14% 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 (4%).

Voters are more than twice as likely to give an A to private/parochial schools (26%) when compared to the proportion of responses giving an A to public schools (11%).

- ▶ **When asked for a preferred school type, North Carolinians would choose a private school (39%) first. A regular public school option is the second-most frequently cited preference (34%). As a result, there is a major disconnect between voters' school preferences and actual enrollment patterns in the state.**

See Questions 8 and 9

Approximately 6% of North Carolina's K-12 student population attends private schools, but in our survey interviews, 39% of respondents would select a private school as a first option. Approximately 92% of the state's students attend regular public schools, but a substantially lower percentage of voters (34%) would choose a regular public school as their first choice. A sizeable proportion of North Carolina voters (15%) would like to send their child to a charter school. About 11% of voters said he/she would opt to homeschool their child.

In a follow-up question, respondents in our survey prioritize a "better education" (17%) and "individual attention" (15%) as the key attributes they are looking for in the selection of their preferred school. The third-most important attribute, as suggested by about 10% of all respondents, is "class size."

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.

- ▶ **North Carolina voters are much more likely to favor charter schools (65%), rather than oppose such schools (15%). The net support for charter schools is very large (+50 percentage points). Approximately 46% of voters are familiar with charter schools.**

See Questions 10 and 11

North Carolina registered a large positive net support (+50 net) favoring charter schools. The enthusiasm is also very positive (+24 intensity). In other words, voters are more likely to say they “strongly favor” charter schools (29%) compared to those who said they “strongly oppose” (5%) such schools.

Charter schools enjoy majority support across all examined demographic groups. However, where a voter lives can point to some differences in support levels. For example, suburban voters (72%) are significantly more favorable toward charter schools than voters living in small towns (62%) and rural areas (61%).

Democrats significantly differ from Republicans, although both groups overwhelmingly support charter schools (62% and 71%, respectively). Approximately 71% of Parents favor charter schools. About half of lower-income households (less than \$25,000) support charters, but they are significantly less likely to support charters than higher-income households.

Intensity of support for charters is greatest among parents, 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 small-town voters, younger voters (age 18 to 29), and households earning less than \$25,000.

Nearly half of voters (46%) say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with charter schools. There is potential to broaden awareness and possibly expand support for charters. The association between charter school familiarity and favorability is positive in direction, though fairly modest in size ($r=.214, p < .01$).

- ▶ **North Carolinians admitted they are not that familiar with virtual schools (75% unfamiliar), and at least for now, they are less likely to be supportive of these schools (36% favor vs. 46% oppose).**

See Questions 12 and 13

The strongly held negative views exceed the strongly positive views by nearly 15 percentage points, and so intensity is clearly negative. This is understandable though, possibly pointing to a skepticism of the unfamiliar.

Several demographic groups stand out in their views on virtual schools. Parents are evenly split on virtual schools (41% favor vs. 40% oppose). Suburban voters are also divided (43% favor vs. 43% oppose), but are more likely to support virtual schools than voters in other kinds of communities. Democrats (43%) are significantly more likely to support these schools than Republicans (30%) or Independents (38%). Conversely, those who self-identify in the latter two political categories are also much more likely to oppose virtual schools.

- ▶ **Voters strongly support “tax-credit scholarships.” The percentage of those who favor (63% or 65%, depending on the question version) is more than double the number of people who said they oppose the policy (25% and 23%, respectively). No matter the wording of the question, we measure very positive reactions (+38 net and +42 net).**

See Questions 14A and 14B

Based on our split-sample experiment results, it appears adding definition and context for voters does not affect the view of the average North Carolina voter.

On Q14A, parents, suburban, and middle-age voters overwhelmingly support tax-credit scholarships (76%, 78%, and 73%, respectively). Of all observed demographic groups, older voters and rural voters are relatively most likely to oppose tax-credit scholarships (33% each oppose). However, even these groups

still support tax-credit scholarships by wide margins (older voters: +21 percentage points; rural voters: +15 percentage points).

- ▶ **North Carolina voters support an “education savings account” system (called an “ESA”). The percentage of those who favor ESAs (56%) is much larger than the proportion who said they oppose (28%) the policy. The net support is large (+28 net) with some enthusiasm (+18 intensity). Similar results occur for the alternative question describing “empowerment scholarship accounts.” However the intensity goes down by 11 percentage points in the alternative question (+5 intensity).**

See Question 15A, 15B, and 16

Intense positive support is pretty strong for version A—about 32% said they “strongly favor” ESAs while 14% said they “strongly oppose” (+17 intensity). By contrast, the different wording for version B—describing “empowerment scholarship accounts”—produced more negative reactions (28% “strongly favor” vs. 23% “strongly oppose”). Still, the overall intensity remained positive (+5 intensity) for version B.

Among observed demographic groups on version A, net support is highest among parents (+55 net), Republicans (+41 net), and middle-age voters (+50 net). These same demographic groups also stand out on their responses to version B. For example, about 72% of parents favor such a policy on version A, and similarly 69% said they favor the ESA definition provided in version B.

Enthusiasm for ESAs is highest among:

Parents (+34 intensity for version A; +20 intensity for version B);

Charlotte residents (+23 intensity for version A; +12 intensity for version B);

Suburbanites (+28 intensity for version A; +10 intensity for version B);

Middle-age voters (+24 intensity for version A; +20 intensity for version B);

African Americans (+23 intensity for version A; +16 intensity for version B).

In a follow-up and open-ended question, we asked for the reason why a respondent chose his/her view regarding ESAs. Most frequently, he/she said some combination of “choice,” “freedom,” or “flexibility.” More than one-fifth of the respondents (21%) would said one or more of these terms.

- ▶ **Voters clearly prefer universal access to ESAs, compared to access that is based solely on financial need.**

See Questions 17 and 18

Nearly two of three voters (65%) said they agree with the statement that “ESAs should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs.” About 4 of 10 respondents (42%) “strongly agree” with this statement. Almost 3 of 10 (28%) disagree with this statement; 18% said they “strongly disagree.”

More than one-third of North Carolinians (35%) said they agree with the statement that “ESAs should only be available to families based on financial need.” Only 17% of all respondents “strongly agree” with this statement. More than half (59%) said they disagree with means-testing ESAs, and 36% said they “strongly disagree.”

- ▶ **Nearly 6 of 10 North Carolina voters (57%) said they support school vouchers, compared to 32% of voters who said they oppose such a school choice system. The margin of support is more than six times the survey’s margin of error: + 25 percentage points. About one-third of respondents (36%) said they were familiar with school vouchers.**

See Questions 19 and 20

The levels of support for vouchers vary a bit among demographic groups, but with the exception of a few groups, net favorability is in double digits.

Net support for school vouchers is highest among parents (+37 net), Charlotte residents (+29 net), urban voters (+41 net), Republicans (+39 net), young voters (+48 net), middle-age voters (+35 net), households earning less than \$50,000 (+41 net), and African Americans (+41 net). Despite positive net support, there are some groups that are significantly less inclined than others to support vouchers, including parents whose children are past high school age (+9 net), rural voters (+6 net), older voters (+11 net), and households earning more than \$125,000 (+3 net).

Enthusiasm for this kind of policy is highest among parents (+22 intensity), Charlotte residents (+16 intensity), Greensboro residents (+18 intensity), urban voters (+26 intensity), suburban voters (+16 intensity), small-town voters (+17 intensity), Republicans (+25 intensity), young voters (+27 intensity), middle-age voters (+19 intensity), and households earning less than \$50,000 (+23 intensity).

In North Carolina, there does not appear to be an association between familiarity with school vouchers and favorability toward the school choice policy. The correlation between school voucher familiarity and favorability is positive in direction, though weak in size ($r=.082$, $p < .05$).

Survey Project & Profile

Title:	North Carolina K-12 & School Choice Survey
Survey Organization:	Braun Research, Inc. (BRI)
Survey Sponsor:	The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
Release Partner:	Civitas Institute
Interview Dates:	June 18 to 24, 2012
Interview Method:	Live Telephone 70% landline and 30% cell phone
Interview Length:	12 minutes (average)
Language(s):	English
Sample Frame:	Registered Voters
Sampling Method:	Dual Frame; Probability Sampling; Random Digit Dial (RDD)
Sample Sizes:	NORTH CAROLINA = 601 Charlotte = 164; Raleigh-Durham = 183
Split Sample Sizes:	“Split A” = 302; “Split B” = 299
Margins of Error:	NORTH CAROLINA = ± 4.0 percentage points Charlotte = ± 7.6 percentage points Raleigh-Durham = ± 7.2 percentage points Each Split Sample = ± 5.6 percentage points
Response Rates:	Landline (LL) = 17.0% Cell Phone = 16.5%
Weighting?	Yes (Age, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Region)
Oversampling?	No

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North Carolina's K-12 Profile

Average State Rank on NAEP¹	22
High School Graduation Rate²	75%
# Regular Public School Students⁴	1,444,424
# Charter School Students⁴	38,973
# Private School Students⁵	89,518
% Regular Public School Students⁶	91.8%
% Charter School Students⁶	2.5%
% Private School Students⁶	5.7%
# School Districts³	115
# Regular Public Schools³	2,592
# Charter Schools³	96
# Private Schools⁵	569
Online Learning Climate⁷	Weak
% Free and Reduced-Price Lunch³	49%
% Individualized Education Program (IEP)³	12%
% English Language Learners (ELL)³	7%
\$ Revenue Per Student⁸	\$9,101
\$ "Total" Per Student Spending⁸	\$9,729
\$ "Current" Per Student Spending⁸	\$8,518

North Carolina Profile Notes

1. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Average of four rankings (rounded upward to nearest single digit) based on 2011 state scale scores for 4th grade reading (#23); 4th grade math (#12); 8th grade reading (#33); 8th grade math (#21).
URL: nationsreportcard.gov/data_tools.asp
2. Reported high school graduation rates, determined by the Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) on the National Center for Education Statistics section on the U.S. Department of Education website. Data for 2008-2009 school year.
URL: nces.ed.gov/ccd
3. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD). Data for the 2009-2010 school year.
URL: nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states
4. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD). Data for the 2009-2010 school year.
URL: nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch
5. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Private School Universe Survey (PSS). Data for 2009–2010 school year.
URL: nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/index.asp
6. Percentages are meant for general impressions only. State-level data on home-school students are generally unreliable, and this subpopulation of students could not be included in this table. Due to rounding, percentage totals may be slightly greater or less than 100%.
7. Author rating (Weak, Moderate, or Strong), based on John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, Butch Gemin, and Chris Rapp, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of State-Level Policy and Practice*, (Evergreen Education Group, 2011), Table 2.
URL: kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/KeepingPace2011.pdf
8. 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

“Total Expenditures” data include dollars spent on instruction, instruction-related, support services, and other elementary/secondary current expenditures, plus expenditures on long-term debt service, facilities and construction, and other programs. The latter may include expenditures for community services, adult education, community colleges, private schools, and other programs that are not considered expenditures on public K-12 education.

“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.

For this survey and report, when we generally refer to “per student spending,” we refer to the spending definition and subsequent calculations including only “current expenditures.”