

**A P P E N D I X 1**

**NSBA/Zogby International Poll  
on School Vouchers**



## **NSBA/Zogby International Poll School Vouchers: What the Public Thinks and Why Executive Summary**

*NSBA contracted with Zogby International to conduct a 25-question poll of nationwide opinion on school vouchers. Zogby interviewed 1,211 adults, which included 1,086 likely voters, and an oversample of 301 African-Americans from May 23-30, 2001. The margin of error for adults and likely voters is +/- 3 percent. The margin of error for the African-American oversample is +/- 5.7 percent.*

This poll reveals that few Americans believe vouchers are the way to most improve public schools, but rather, they prefer investing in strategies such as smaller classes and strengthening teacher quality. Nonetheless, *at first glance*, the public seems split in its overall opinion of school vouchers, with many Americans yet to have reached solid decisions on the topic. But upon closer inspection, the poll suggests that the more people know about how voucher programs operate, the less they like them, and most importantly, Americans' expectations of a voucher program sharply contrast with existing programs and proposals. For example, many Americans withdraw support if it means the public schools lose tax dollars. And the poll clearly shows that Americans overwhelmingly expect public accountability of any private or religious school receiving public dollars.

Adults, and African-Americans especially, clearly prefer tax dollars be spent on reducing class sizes, improving teacher quality and adding training for teachers and principals instead of giving parents school vouchers. A mere 12 percent of adults and only 5 percent of African-Americans choose vouchers as the best way to improve public schools. African-Americans are 7 times more likely to pick smaller class sizes as the best strategy. The poll makes clear that vouchers are not seen by those who support them as a way to improve public schools but rather to create choices for parents.

Although the public initially splits in its overall opinion of vouchers, with 48 percent indicating they oppose vouchers and 48 percent indicating they favor them, the support is weak. For example, only half of the supporters (and 24 percent of all adults) indicate they "strongly favor" vouchers. In contrast, two-thirds of those opposed to vouchers (and 32 percent of all adults) say they "strongly oppose" them. Voters, in general, are slightly more opposed, and African-Americans show clear opposition. Fifty-seven (57) percent of African-Americans say they oppose vouchers, including 41 percent who "strongly oppose" vouchers.

The poll also reveals that voucher support fades when certain consequences are posed. For example, even among voucher supporters, 40 percent withdraw their support if it means a loss of

tax dollars to the public schools. African-Americans indicate even more concern about the potential negative financial impact on public schools.

The most distinct finding is that an overwhelming majority of adults, voters and African-Americans expect private and religious schools that accept vouchers to meet several basic accountability standards. These measures include public disclosure of their spending of tax dollars, testing their students and publicly reporting the results, following state academic standards, and admitting all students regardless of abilities. Support for these measures reaches 90 percent among adults and African-Americans, and upwards of 87 percent among even those who “strongly favor” vouchers.

Finally, the poll suggests that existing voucher programs and proposals run counter to what most Americans expect. There is clear opposition (61 percent) to allowing existing private school students to receive vouchers, and for programs targeted exclusively for low-income students, those in urban public schools and those in low-performing public schools. Rather, the public seems to believe that if there is ever to be a taxpayer-supported voucher program, it ought to provide the same guarantees and safeguards for students and taxpayers as the public schools. That is, in addition to meeting basic accountability measures, the private schools ought to be open to any public school student, regardless of family income. To date, voucher programs have not met those expectations.

Overall, the poll indicates that vouchers do not have a groundswell of support, but there is clear consensus that if private and religious schools ever do receive taxpayer-funded vouchers, they should be held to many of the same requirements as the public schools.

## **Key Findings and What They Mean** *an NSBA Analysis*

### **1) Among those with strong opinions, a majority opposes vouchers, but many Americans do not yet have strong opinions on the topic.**

While 48 percent of Americans indicate opposition to vouchers and 48 percent indicate support for vouchers, the number who *firmly* oppose vouchers clearly exceeds those who *firmly* support them. Among all adults, 32 percent “strongly oppose” vouchers, while just 24 percent “strongly favor” vouchers. For a sizable number of Americans (40 percent combined) their opposition or support can fairly be classified as “soft,” since they indicated they only *somewhat* support or oppose vouchers.

#### ***What it Means...***

The burden of convincing the public that vouchers are worth trying rests squarely with voucher advocates. The poll indicates they still have a long way to go since only 24 percent of adults say they *strongly* favor vouchers. The fact that 40 percent of the public say they only *somewhat* oppose or favor vouchers indicates that many Americans still do not know enough about the issue to have formed hardened opinions. This point also favors voucher opponents since history shows that the more the public learns about vouchers and their consequences, the *less* they like them. Voters have made that abundantly clear by overwhelmingly rejecting school vouchers every time the issue has been placed on the ballot.

- 2) Few Americans support vouchers if it means a loss of tax dollars to the public schools.** Nearly 40 percent of adults who initially say they *support* the idea of vouchers, change their minds if it means the public schools will lose tax dollars. Among African-Americans who initially support vouchers, 57 percent withdraw their support if public schools lose money. When combined with those adults who *initially* said they opposed vouchers (48 percent), the poll makes it clear that the voucher movement is plagued by a small base of support.

***What it Means...***

This continues to be one of the Achilles' Heels of vouchers. Put simply, few Americans support a policy in which tax dollars are transferred out of the public schools and into private schools. Americans understand that draining the public schools of public money only limits their ability to make ongoing improvements, and therefore shortchanges too many students. Existing programs make it clear that vouchers do drain money from the public schools. The Milwaukee program cost state taxpayers \$49 million last year and actually resulted in 237 Wisconsin school districts (plus Milwaukee) losing tax dollars, while the Cleveland program cost \$13.9 million that otherwise would have been spent educating disadvantaged public school students.

- 3) African-Americans clearly oppose vouchers, and even the minority who indicate support do so with qualifications.**

The oversample of African-Americans finds that 57 percent oppose vouchers, including 41 percent who "strongly oppose" them. However, the poll suggests that a generational divide exists. Although older African-Americans staunchly oppose vouchers, 57 percent of African-Americans who have children under the age of 17 support vouchers *at first glance*. However, as is the case with African-Americans overall, more than half of those (55 percent) who have children *withdraw* their support if it means the public schools lose tax dollars.

***What it Means...***

Older African-Americans, who are more likely to vote than younger African-Americans, clearly disapprove of school vouchers. And, although younger African-Americans with children show some support for the idea, that support is tempered by their concerns that the public schools will lose money and be harmed. Although voucher advocates have made a recent push to sway African-American opinion, many African-Americans remain opposed and skeptical.

- 4) The public sees other reform strategies, not vouchers, as more promising ways to improve public schools.**

When asked to choose from among several ways to most improve public schools, only 12 percent of adults choose vouchers. On the contrary, other strategies such as reducing class sizes, improving teacher quality and increasing training for principals and teachers register far more support. Among African-Americans, only 5 percent believe vouchers are the best strategy.

***What it Means...***

The public views vouchers as a marginal strategy at best, and thinks public resources ought to be invested in other areas to generate the most improvement in public schools and to impact the largest number of students. African-American opinion is particularly telling. According to the poll, African-Americans are 7 times more likely to believe reducing class sizes, 5 times more likely to believe improving training for teachers and principals, and 4 times more likely to believe improving teacher quality will most improve public schools compared to giving out vouchers.

**5) Broad support exists for private voucher schools to be held publicly accountable.**

Americans of all backgrounds overwhelmingly expect schools that receive tax dollars via vouchers to meet certain accountability measures:

- 90 percent of adults want public disclosure of spending of tax dollars.
- 89 percent of adults want voucher schools to test and publicly report scores just as the public schools do.
- 89 percent of adults want voucher schools to be held to the same academic standards as public schools.
- 80 percent of adults want voucher schools to admit all students who apply.

***What it Means...***

The public overwhelmingly believes that public dollars demand public oversight. No matter what one's party affiliation, ideology, or views on vouchers, Americans clearly expect private schools receiving vouchers to be held *publicly* accountable. For example, 90 percent of Republican *and* Democrats agree that students in voucher schools should take the same state tests as public school students, with the results made public. Ninety (90) percent of Republicans *and* 88 percent of Democrats agree that students in voucher schools should have to meet the same academic standards as students in public schools. Likewise, 91 percent of Democrats *and* 88 percent of Republicans agree that private schools taking vouchers should publicly disclose how they spend those dollars.

Importantly, Americans' perceptions of a voucher program are starkly different from existing programs and proposals, which frequently do not contain the basic accountability measures that the public so clearly expects. For example, the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs do not require students in voucher schools to meet state academic standards. Neither of those programs, nor the Florida one, reports student test scores. And, evidence from Milwaukee and Cleveland indicate that costlier and harder to educate students are often excluded from the voucher programs because few private schools can serve them.

**6) The public opposes giving vouchers to students already attending private schools.**

Sixty-one (61) percent of all adults and 74 percent of African-Americans oppose vouchers for existing private school students. Worth noting however, is that 66 percent of those who *strongly* support vouchers do think current private school students should get a voucher.

### ***What it Means...***

Existing voucher programs and most voucher proposals do allow for the grandfathering of current private school students. During the 1998-99 school year in which the Milwaukee program experienced its greatest growth, nearly half of the new vouchers went to students who already had been attending a private school without government assistance. Such a policy represents a new expense to all taxpayers and drains money from the public schools to subsidize a cost already being paid by individuals who made a private choice.

The poll's findings also suggest a battle occurring within the voucher movement. Although the current spin is to sell vouchers as a way for some students to "escape" the public schools, it should not go unnoticed that those individuals who said they *strongly* favor vouchers also favor giving vouchers to existing private school students. This suggests that for some voucher advocates the movement's ultimate goal is not so much about helping students leave the public schools as it is about having taxpayers subsidize the private choices some parents already have made.

### ***Other Key Findings:***

- ◆ *If vouchers are to be awarded*, the public opposes targeted programs.
  - Eighty-nine (89) percent of adults and 90 percent of African-Americans oppose targeting vouchers only to students in urban public schools.
  - Seventy-seven (77) percent of adults and 75 percent of African-Americans oppose targeting vouchers only to students in failing public schools.
  - Only 14 percent of adults and 17 percent of African-Americans favor vouchers only for students from low-income families. In contrast, 54 percent of adults and 49 percent of African-Americans prefer vouchers to be available to students regardless of family income.
  - In contrast to the opposition for targeted programs, 73 percent of adults and 75 percent of African-Americans would prefer vouchers for any public school student.



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Numbers are the Percentage of Respondents Giving that Answer

<u>Question</u>	<u>Adults</u>	<u>Voters</u>	<u>African-Americans</u>
1) Of the following ways to use public tax dollars, which is the best approach to improving public schools?			
Reducing Class Sizes	28	27	36
Improving Teacher Quality	25	27	23
Increasing Training for Teachers/Principals	23	23	26
<b>Providing Parents with School Vouchers</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>
Renovating or Building New Schools	6	6	6
None of the Above	3	3	2
2) Congress and some states are considering using tax dollars to provide vouchers for students to send their children to a private or religious school if they wish. Would you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose such a measure?			
Strongly Favor	24	24	19
Somewhat Favor	24	23	22
<b>Total Favor</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>41</b>
Strongly Oppose	32	33	41
Somewhat Oppose	16	16	16
<b>Total Oppose</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>57</b>
3) If using tax dollars to provide vouchers for private schools will mean a loss of tax dollars for public schools, would you still support the idea of vouchers? <i>(question asked only to voucher supporters)</i>			
Yes	56	57	37
No	39	38	57
I will now read you a series of statements. Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with each statement.			
4) Vouchers should be used to pay for children already enrolled in a private or a religious school?			
Agree	35	33	23
Disagree	61	63	74

<u>Question</u>	<u>Adults</u>	<u>Voters</u>	<u>African-Americans</u>
5) If a school accepts public tax dollars in the form of a tuition voucher, its students should be required to meet the same academic standards as students in public schools.			
Agree	89	89	89
Disagree	9	8	9
6) If a school accepts public tax dollars in the form of a tuition voucher, it should be required to admit all students, regardless of academic or physical abilities.			
Agree	80	80	87
Disagree	17	17	11
7) If a school accepts tuition vouchers, it should be required to publicly disclose how it spends public tax dollars?			
Agree	90	90	86
Disagree	8	8	13
8) Schools that accept vouchers should be required to give their students the same state tests as public school students, and report those test results so that parents can compare the schools.			
Agree	89	90	93
Disagree	8	8	5
9) Vouchers should be available to any public school student.			
Agree	73	70	75
Disagree	24	25	22
10) Vouchers should be available only to students from urban public schools.			
Agree	7	7	6
Disagree	89	89	90
11) Vouchers should be available only to students from public schools that fail to meet state academic standards.			
Agree	19	19	19
Disagree	77	77	75
12) If vouchers are used, should they be used to pay for part of the tuition or the full tuition at private and religious schools?			
Part Tuition	56	56	39
Full Tuition	27	27	47
Not Sure	17	17	14
13) Should vouchers be used to pay tuition only for children from families whose income is low (at or below the poverty level), for children from both low and middle-income families, or for all children, regardless of family income?			
All Incomes	54	54	49
Low and Middle	27	26	28
Low Income	14	16	17

**Question**

14) Now I will read you two statements. Please tell me which one, A or B, comes closer to your opinion?

Statement A: If vouchers were used in your school district, it would improve public schools by creating competition with private schools.

Statement B: If vouchers were used in your school district, it would hurt public schools by taking tax dollars from those schools.

**Adults**      **Voters**      **African-Americans**

Help Public Schools	43	42	34
Hurt Public Schools	49	49	60