



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

*Conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute
by the VCU Center for Public Policy*

Public Opinion in Virginia on Schools and Education May 2001

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Virginians are mildly positive about the direction that public schools have moved during the last five years and often agree on the kinds of things that would further improve student achievement. These are results from the new Commonwealth Education Poll conducted with 814 adults in Virginia between April 17-24, 2001. This report presents the full results from the poll.

The following topics are addressed:

- I. Overall School Performance
- II. Opinion on the SOL's
- III. How to Improve Student Achievement: Teachers and Class Size Key
- IV. School Funding
- V. Opinion on School Vouchers
- VI. Problems Facing Local Schools
- VII. Support for Character Education
- VIII. Methodology of the Commonwealth Education Poll
- IX. Questions Asked
- X. Tables of Results by Subgroups of Virginians

Overall School Performance

About three in ten Virginians (29 percent) say schools in their community have improved over the past five years and another thirty-five percent think the schools have held steady. Just 16 percent think the schools have gotten worse. Those with more direct experience in the schools—parents of children attending the schools—are especially positive. A plurality of public school

parents (41 percent) say the schools have gotten better and another third say they have stayed the same, leaving just 17 percent who feel they have gotten worse. Others on or close to the front lines—households with school employees—are also positive about school progress. 45 percent of this group think the schools have gotten better; 28 percent say they have stayed the same and only 16 percent say they have gotten worse.

Views on the quality of education provided by schools in Virginia are also fairly positive. The majority of Virginians say the schools provide an excellent or good education (58 percent) while about three in ten think the education is only fair or poor. Views of the education provided in local schools was similar; 60 percent thought the education was excellent or good while 29 percent thought it only fair or poor.

Parents of school children and households with school employees are even more positive about the quality of education schools provide than the public at large. 27 percent of parents think the local schools provide an excellent education and another 43 percent think it is good—that's a net of 70 percent who rate the local schools positively. Households with school employees are similarly positive; 24 percent consider the local schools excellent and 41 percent good -- a net of 65 percent viewing the schools positively.

One indication of concern over the schools comes from a question asking whether the schools expect kids to learn too much, too little, or whether the expectations are about right. Nearly four in ten (39 percent) thought the expectations were about right, but a sizeable group at 32 percent thought the expectations were too little while seventeen percent thought the expectations were too much.

Parents of public school students were a bit less likely to think the schools expect too little and instead a little more likely to think the schools already expect too much. 26 percent of parents think the schools expect too much, 23 percent say it is too little; 45 percent think it is about right.

Compared to a survey conducted by Public Agenda with a national sample of public school parents last fall, Virginian parents are bit more concerned that the schools are pushing students too hard. In both samples, though, the plurality of parents think that school expectations are about right. Public Agenda found 14% of parents said the schools expect kids to learn too much, 28% thought schools expect too little and 54% think the expectations are about right. (Public Agenda, Sept. 18-26, 2000. Survey of 803 parents of public school students nationwide.

The question read: "In terms of academic achievement do you think that today's public schools generally expect kids to learn too much, too little or are the expectations about right?)

Opinion on the SOL's

The Standards of Learning were designed as a school reform to guarantee that public schools taught a set of basic skills and knowledge appropriate to different subject areas and grade levels. The SOL objectives and the tests to measure whether students are reaching those goals have generated a lot of public debate over how they affect the classroom and the appropriate uses of the tests.

Opinion on whether the SOL's help improve school quality tracks well with overall views of school performance. Sixteen percent of Virginians say the SOL's have helped improve the quality of schools in Virginia a lot and another 36 percent say they have helped a little. Nearly a third of the public are more pessimistic; 31 percent think the SOL's have not helped the schools. The results were similar when asked about the effect of the SOL's on schools in the community. 16 percent think the SOL's have helped improve the quality of local schools a lot, 34 percent think they have helped a little and 31 percent think they have not helped at all.

More concerns surface when it comes to evaluating the tests used to measure achievement of the SOL's. Virginians are about evenly split over the accuracy of the SOL test scores. A net 44 percent of all Virginians are either very or somewhat confident that the SOL test scores are an "accurate indicator of student progress and school achievement" while 46% have either not much or no confidence that the tests are a valid measure.

While the issue of SOL's has often divided elected officials along partisan lines, rank and file partisans hold remarkably similar views of their impact on school quality. Fifteen percent of Democrats and twenty percent of Republicans feel the SOL's have helped a lot in Virginia while 31 percent of Democrats and 34 percent of Republicans feel SOL's have not helped at all.

African-Americans are slightly more positive about the effect of SOL's on Virginia schools, but overall similar portions of whites and blacks view the SOL's as helping or not helping the schools.

Parents of children attending public schools had views similar to those of Virginians as a whole. Forty-three percent of parents think the SOL's have helped Virginia schools a little and

another 17 percent say they have helped a lot. Thirty-four percent of parents feel SOL's have not helped the schools.

Households with school employees are more skeptical about the impact of the SOL's, despite their decidedly positive outlook on the progress schools have made over the last five years. Just 8 percent think the SOL's have helped a lot. School employee households are split 42-41 over whether the SOL's have helped a little or not at all, respectively. This group is also more skeptical about the SOL tests. Only 28 percent are either "very" or "somewhat" confident that the SOL tests are "an accurate indicator of student progress and school achievement" while 66 percent have either not much or no confidence in the tests.

How to Improve Student Achievement: Teachers and Class Size Key

Teachers enjoy strong support among the public at large and clear majorities of the public support measures to help teachers do their jobs. Seventy-six percent of Virginians view teaching as a job or profession in a favorable light. Parents of public school students are equally favorable towards the profession; 79% have a favorable view of teaching. Even those who live in communities they judge to provide only a fair or poor education tend to hold a positive opinion of teaching; 64% of this group have a positive view of the profession.

Public support for teachers is also evident in views of which proposals would help improve student achievement. Virginians strongly endorse smaller class sizes as a way to help improve student achievement. 82 percent thought this would help improve student achievement a lot. Six in ten Virginians endorse the idea that special training for teachers beyond a college degree helps improve student achievement and nearly 3 in ten (28 percent) feel this helps a little. A majority of all Virginians feel that raising teacher salaries will help improve student achievement; 51 percent think this will help a lot and another 26 percent think this will help a little. Of the 4 ideas presented, only one received less than majority support. Only about a third of Virginians (34 percent) view more hours of instruction for students as helping student achievement a lot, another third see this as helping a little, and about that many (30 percent) see this as not much or no help at all.

The focus on reducing class size as a way to improve student achievement suggests that the public sees overcrowded classrooms as a roadblock to teacher effectiveness. If that burden of

trying to teach too many students at once were taken away, a large portion of the public believes that student achievement would rise.

	Will This Improve Student Achievement?				Don't Know/ No Answer
	A lot	A Little	Not Much	Not at all	
Smaller Class Sizes	82%	12%	1%	2%	2%
Special training for teachers	60%	28%	4%	3%	5%
Higher teacher salaries	51%	26%	8%	10%	5%
More hours of student instruction	34%	32%	15%	15%	5%

School Funding

Virginians see a clear need for more money to support the schools, and most would be willing to pay higher taxes to get it. The poll found seven in ten Virginians believe funding for the schools is not enough. Just two in ten (21 percent) think that current funding is enough. The belief that school funding is not enough is widely shared regardless of political party, race, education, income, or region of residence within the state.

Support for school funding appears strong even when costs to taxpayers are made explicit. Fifty-seven percent say they would be willing to pay higher taxes so that school funding could be increased. Sixty-five percent of Democrats are more willing to pay higher taxes for the schools; 54 percent of Republicans are willing to do so as are 56 percent of Independents. Two thirds of those who said funding for the schools was not enough were willing to pay higher taxes for a funding increase as were one third of those who said funds were already enough.

	Willing to Pay More Taxes for School Funds?			Don't know/ Number of
	Willing	Not Willing	No answer	cases
All respondents	57%	36%	7%	814
Democrats	65%	29%	6%	225
Republicans	54%	41%	5%	236
Independents	56%	36%	7%	257
Funding is Enough	33%	63%	4%	158
Funding is Not Enough	66%	28%	6%	581

Among those willing to pay higher taxes for the schools, a plurality (47 percent) reported that a sales tax increase would be best. 16 percent mentioned each of either income tax or real estate property tax, 13 percent said personal property tax.

When asked about the adequacy of funding in specific areas, Virginians saw the greatest need when it comes to teacher salaries. Two thirds of Virginians said funding for teacher salaries was not enough. About half (51 percent) said funding was not enough for school building construction and maintenance costs. The public was split 43-42 over whether funding for “operating costs to keep the schools running” were enough.

Opinion on School Vouchers

School vouchers have been a controversial issue in the national debate on education. But public opinion on vouchers is likely to be fuzzy because it is not yet clear how voucher proposals would be implemented. Recent national poll results on this issue have varied widely, depending on how questions about vouchers were worded. The Commonwealth Education Poll asked, “Do you favor or oppose giving parents education tax credits, or vouchers, to pay for their child’s tuition at a private, or parochial school of their choice?” Half of Virginians favored this idea; four in ten opposed it, with the remainder unsure of their opinion.

Younger adults are considerably more open to the idea of vouchers than older Virginians. Seventy percent of those age 29 and under favored vouchers compared to 39 percent of those 45-64 and 32 percent of those over age 65. “Younger adults have often shown more interest in issues affecting education,” said Cary Funk, director of the Commonwealth Poll. “In this case, it looks like younger adults are also less wedded to the traditional funding arrangements which support public education.”

Republican leaders are increasingly identified with support for voucher proposals while Democratic leaders are more likely to oppose vouchers. The public tends to do the same. Six in ten Republicans favored the idea of vouchers while only about four in ten (41 percent) Democrats did. Though there is widespread agreement between Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of issues affecting the schools, the voucher issue is one of the few that is highly politicized. Public opinion on vouchers is expected to be extremely fluid, however, until vouchers come to have a common meaning in terms of what they would do, where the money would come from, and who would have access to them.

One traditionally Democratic-leaning group is not following Democratic leaders on this issue, however. African-Americans tend to favor vouchers. Fifty-seven percent of African-Americans favor vouchers while 32 percent oppose them. This twenty-five point margin in favor

of vouchers among African-Americans contrasts starkly with the net 7-point margin (49 to 42 percent) among whites.

Problems Facing Local Schools

While the public schools face many kinds of problems, lack of parent involvement is perceived to be chief among them. The poll asked whether a series of possible problems affected schools in the local community. The single most cited problem is a lack of parental involvement; this is more common to the public eye than a host of other concerns including poor quality teachers and student drug use. Second up is overcrowded classrooms.

56 percent of Virginians feel that lack of parent involvement is a major problem for local schools and nearly three in ten (27 percent) feel this is a minor problem. Parents, themselves, are nearly as willing to fault a lack of parent involvement. Nearly half (47 percent) of public school parents say that lack of parent involvement is a major problem for schools in their community. Households with school employees are also concerned about this; 61 percent of this group consider lack of parental involvement to be a major problem for schools.

There are other problems facing the schools too. Overcrowded classrooms are frequently seen as a problem. 51 percent of Virginians cite classroom size as a major problem for local schools and another three in ten say it is a minor problem. For public school parents, overcrowded classrooms nose out other concerns as the most frequently cited problem. 53 percent of public school parents say overcrowded classrooms are a major problem for local schools and another almost three in ten (29 percent) say this is a minor problem.

Is this a problem for public schools in your community?				
	Major problem	Minor problem	No problem	Don't Know/ No Answer
Lack of parent involvement	56%	27%	10%	7%
Overcrowded classrooms	51%	30%	11%	8%
Student use of alcohol/drugs	42%	35%	10%	14%
Violence in the schools	30%	48%	15%	7%
Poor quality teachers	26%	41%	24%	10%
Buildings unsafe/unhealthy	16%	41%	35%	8%

Support for Character Education

There is widespread agreement among Virginians that teaching character and values is an important mission for the schools in addition to teaching more academic subjects. More than seven in ten (72 percent) said this was very important and 22 percent thought it somewhat important. Virginians of all backgrounds and political persuasions endorse the idea that schools teach character and values.

While nearly everyone agrees that parents need a primary role in teaching character and values more than four in ten think responsibility for teaching character and values should be shared between parents and schools. 46 percent of Virginians feel parents and schools should have an equal responsibility and 53 percent feel only parents should have primary responsibility in this regard.

METHODOLOGY OF THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

The Commonwealth Education Poll is a public opinion survey of Virginia residents on education issues. The survey is conducted by telephone with a randomly-selected sample of adult Virginians.

Interviewing for the Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted by telephone from the facilities of the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. The interviewing is conducted by a staff of professionally trained, paid interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interviewing software.

The sample of telephone numbers was prepared by Genesys Sampling Systems of Ft. Washington, Pennsylvania, and was designed so that all residential telephones, including new and unlisted numbers, had a known chance of inclusion. The cooperation rate for the survey was 53%. Using the CASRO response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 45% of the known or assumed residential households in the sample.

The data were weighted to adjust for unequal probabilities of selection due to multiple telephone lines and multiple adults living in the household. In addition, the data were weighted on sex, race, age, and region of residence to reflect the demographic composition of the Virginia adult population. Percentages reported in the text and tables are weighted, while the number of cases shown in the tables for various subgroups is the actual number of respondents.

Questions answered by the full sample of adults are subject to a sampling error of plus or minus approximately 4 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples like the one used here, the results obtained should be no more than 4 percentage points above or below the figure that would be obtained by interviewing all adult Virginians with telephones. Where the answers of subgroups are reported, the sampling error would be higher. Because of nonresponse (refusals to participate, etc.), standard calculations of sampling error are apt to understate the actual extent to which survey results are at variance with the true population values. Surveys are also subject to errors from sources other than sampling. While every effort is made to identify such errors, they are often difficult or impossible to measure. Readers making use of the results are urged to be mindful of the limitations inherent in survey research.

More information on the methodology is available from the Director of the Commonwealth Poll, Dr. Cary Funk, at 804 827 1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu. Other results from the Commonwealth Education Poll can be found at <http://www.edpolicyvcu.org/>.

**Questions asked on the VCU Commonwealth Education Poll
April 17-24, 2001**

1. First, thinking about the public schools in Virginia as a whole, would you say that they provide an excellent, good, fair, or poor education?

Excellent	11%
Good	47
Fair	26
Poor	4
Don't Know/No Answer	11

2. What about the public schools in your community-would you say that they provide an excellent, good, fair, or poor education?

	Apr 2001	Jan 2000
Excellent	18%	15%
Good	42	44
Fair	22	22
Poor	7	6
Don't Know/No Answer	10	12

3. Over the past five years, have the public schools in your community gotten better, worse, or stayed the same?

	Apr 2001	Jan 2000
Better	29%	33%
Worse	16	14
Stayed the same	35	34
Don't Know/No Answer	20	20

4. In terms of academic achievement, do you think the public schools in Virginia expect kids to learn too much, too little, or are the expectations about right?

Too much	17%
Too little	32
About right	39
Don't Know/No Answer	12

5. As you may know, there's been a lot of talk lately about the Standards of Learning tests (or SOL's) in Virginia schools. Overall, do you think the SOL's have helped improve the quality of schools in Virginia--a lot, a little, or not at all?

A lot	16%
A little	36
Not at all	31
Don't Know/No Answer	17

6. What about for the public schools in your community? Overall, do you think the SOL's have helped improve the quality of schools in your community--a lot, a little, or not at all?

A lot	16%
A little	34
Not at all	31
Don't Know/No Answer	18

7. How confident are you that the test scores on the SOLs are an accurate indicator of a student's progress and school achievement--very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not at all confident?

Very confident	9%
Somewhat confident	35
Not too confident	27
Not at all confident	19
Don't Know/No Answer	10

For each of the following, please tell me whether it helps improve student achievement-- a lot, a little, not much, or not at all. (Q. 8-11 asked in randomized order)

8. Smaller class sizes?

A lot	82%
A little	12
Not much	1
Not at all	2
Don't Know/No Answer	2

9. More hours of instruction for students?

A lot	34%
A little	32
Not much	15
Not at all	15
Don't Know/No Answer	5

10. Higher teacher salaries?

A lot	51%
A little	26
Not much	8
Not at all	10
Don't Know/No Answer	5

11. Special training for teachers beyond a college degree?

A lot	60%
A little	28
Not much	4
Not at all	3
Don't Know/No Answer	5

12. To the best of your knowledge, which of these provides the most funding for public schools in Virginia-the federal government, state government, or local city and county governments? (Order of alternatives was randomized)

Federal	13%
State	37
Local city and county	30
Don't Know/No Answer	21

13. Overall, do you think the funding for public schools in Virginia is enough to meet their needs, or not enough to meet their needs?

Enough	21%
Not enough	70
Don't Know/No Answer	10

14. Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that school funding could be increased?

Willing	57%
Not willing	36
Don't Know/No Answer	7

15. IF WILLING: What kind of tax increase do you think would be best-- sales tax, income tax, real estate property tax, or personal property tax?

	Of Those Willing
Sales tax	47%
Income tax	16
Real estate property tax	16
Personal property tax	13
Don't Know/No Answer	9

Is public school funding in Virginia enough or not enough to meet the following needs? (Q16-18 asked in randomized order)

16. Building construction and maintenance?

Enough	32%
Not enough	51
Don't Know/No Answer	17

17. Operating costs to keep the schools running?

Enough	43%
Not enough	42
Don't Know/No Answer	15

18. Teacher salaries?

Enough	22%
Not enough	67
Don't Know/No Answer	11

19. Do you favor or oppose giving parents education tax credits, or vouchers, to pay for their child's tuition at a private, or parochial school of their choice?

Favor	50%
Oppose	40
Don't Know/No Answer	10

Now, I'm going to read a list of problems that schools might face. For each, please tell me whether this is a major problem, a minor problem, or no problem at all for public schools in your community. (Q.20-25 asked in randomized order.)

20. Buildings that are unsafe or unhealthy?

Major problem	16%
Minor problem	41
No problem at all	35
Don't Know/No Answer	8

21. Violence in the schools?

Major problem	30%
Minor problem	48
No problem at all	15
Don't Know/No Answer	7

22. Poor quality teachers?

Major problem	26%
Minor problem	41
No problem at all	24
Don't Know/No Answer	10

23. Overcrowded classrooms?

Major problem	51%
Minor problem	30
No problem at all	11
Don't Know/No Answer	8

24. Student use of alcohol or illegal drugs?

Major problem	42%
Minor problem	35
No problem at all	10
Don't Know/No Answer	14

25. Lack of parent involvement?

Major problem	56%
Minor problem	27
No problem at all	10
Don't Know/No Answer	7

26. Apart from teaching subjects like reading, math, or history, how important do you think it is for the public schools to teach students character and values--Very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important?

Very important	72%
Somewhat important	22
Not very important	3
Not at all important	2
Don't Know/No Answer	2

27. Who should be responsible for teaching character and values--mostly parents, mostly schools, or should both have an equal responsibility for this?

Mostly parents	53%
Mostly schools	1
Both equally	46
Don't Know/No Answer	0

28. On the whole, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of public school teaching as a job or profession?

Favorable	76%
Unfavorable	18
Don't Know/No Answer	7