



The Blog

LEARNING ON THE EDge

Follow the data to frame new questions

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This article was originally published as part of the special supplement to Kappan magazine's 47th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. See the full results at www.pdkpoll.org

By Joshua P. Starr

This year's PDK/Gallup Poll on the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools marks a shift in both the poll and PDK International. As I assume leadership of the organization, I will build on PDK's legacy while embracing opportunities to keep the organization at the center of the dialogue about how to ensure that every child in every classroom in America has in front of her or him the most qualified and professional teachers.

Realizing this goal requires comprehensive analysis, honest debate, and a willingness to look at old assumptions with new perspectives. And, it requires the kind of trustworthy, independent data about public values that the PDK/Gallup poll provides. The data enable policy makers, leaders, educators, families, and communities to understand the issues before designing and implementing solutions. Toward that end, PDK International will, for the first time, convene thought leaders throughout the year to explore survey results, engage in deep dialogue about the issues, and develop a common understanding of their complexity. We hope our leaders and those who help them craft policy will recognize that the successful solutions we seek can only be the offspring of well-defined data and deeply understood problems.

This year, the PDK/Gallup poll switched to an online facility as a way to reach more people of our

increasing diverse society. The result: For the first time, we are reporting poll opinion results by three race/ethnic demarcations — black, white, and Hispanic Americans. This will allow us to understand and convey more deeply how different groups of Americans experience public education.

This year's results show where most Americans agree and where we have sharp differences. Understand our differences and similarities are key to achieving the equitable public education system that our children and our communities deserve.

Results I find particularly compelling:

- The consistent feeling that our schools are **underfunded**. For 10 years, poll respondents have cited a lack of funding as the biggest problem facing their local schools. Even so, funding has declined at all levels — federal, state, and local — as standards and accountability have increased. We didn't ask whether Americans would be willing to pay higher taxes if they knew the new money went directly to public schools, but that's a line of inquiry worth pursuing at the state level — especially since Americans also indicate that they prefer that states make decisions about school funding.
- Americans like **choice**. We need to take a deeper look at why and when choice appeals to American families, how parents select schools for their children, and how choice influences what they expect from traditional school districts. The marketplace and choice are not panaceas, yet they are a part of the 21st-century landscape. We should start talking about choice not just as procharter v. anticharter but rather as an opportunity to provide children and parents what they want and need to be successful.
- **Testing** may be necessary, but Americans say test scores are not the end-all and be-all of a public education. Most Americans want to move beyond the current testing regime — although there are significant differences between demographic groups. Americans have registered their opinion about standardized testing, but we need to dissect their beliefs: Does their antipathy toward testing concern just state standardized tests or do they also object to national tests such as Advanced Placement, SAT, and/or ACT? What is the role of teacher-created tests? If test scores are not the right evaluation tool, then how do Americans want us to measure each child's progress?
- Americans were consistent in stating that **teacher quality** is of paramount importance. This finding is consistent with research on school improvement and benchmarks to international systems, which portends well for our country. The difficulty is shifting policies to support teacher quality. If teacher quality is the number one issue, then we must engage in nonideological, collaborative debate about policies and practices that increase teacher quality. That also requires that we abandon certain policies and practices that don't increase teacher quality and refocus on our many shared interests. No issue is more important.

This year's results offer many new findings, affirmation of consistent attitudes, and interesting nuggets for further exploration. As always, the 2015 PDK/Gallup poll provides both a unique opportunity to understand how Americans think about public education and a challenge to policy makers to hear and heed what they are saying.

About the author: Joshua P. Starr is CEO of PDK International.

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Phi Delta Kappa International | memberservices@pdkintl.org | 812-339-1156 | 800-766-1156 | Fax: 812-339-0018

International Office: 1525 Wilson Blvd., Suite 705, Arlington, VA 22209

Member Services: 320 W. Eighth Street, Suite 216, Bloomington, IN 47404

Send mail and payments to: P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888

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