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NEW SURVEY REVEALS INFORMATION GAP *Polling experts find survey questions misleading, unrepresentative*

(Washington, DC 8/23/05) – The public displays an enormous “information gap” on various education reform efforts, a conclusion that is borne out by the results of an annual survey conducted by Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) in conjunction with the Gallup Organization. The survey, often quoted for its results on how people grade their schools, shows that members of the public are easily led to conclude negatives about education efforts when questions are designed to elicit specific responses. In addition, a peer review of bi-partisan polling experts finds that the PDK poll lacks the integrity necessary in survey research.

For example, the survey asks about charter schools, “Do you think that charter schools should be accountable to the state in the way regular public schools are accountable,” as if there is any question that charter schools are required to comply with government regulations.

Says David Cantor of The Glover Park Group, a major democratic survey research firm, “Researching public opinions on charter schools is challenging because of the low level of awareness of charter schools. For example, our research in conjunction with the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools found that less than half the public knows that charter schools are public schools. With such low awareness, question wording can make a big difference. People listen closely to the questions trying to pick up any cues to help them understand this new concept of charter schools. Subtle changes in wording can make a big difference. For example, in Table 9, the Gallup survey shows increasing support for charter schools over time (up 5-points since 2002). The question offers respondents a cue – charter schools are given freedom from ‘many of the state regulations.’ Our research shows that unlimited freedom raises concerns for people, holding down support for charter schools. However, when given a specific list of things charter schools are free to do, support increases.”

In fact, there is broad support for things like giving schools more flexibility to design curriculum, giving schools control of their own budgets and allowing schools to require more parental involvement.

When individuals lack concrete information about any education policy, their judgment depends almost entirely on what they hear from the questioners. Ensuring that objective questions are asked – without a hint of bias – uncovers their real sentiments.



Kellyanne Conway of the *polling company/Woman Trend* has found similar conflicts in the data. She argues that the charter school “queries are peppered with biased phrases such as ‘charter schools are *considered* public schools’ and ‘their *supposed* advantage is that...’ (*emphasis added*). This phraseology sets the stage for the analysis to demonstrate a supposed lack of support for charters by leading respondents to the PDK point of view.” This is even more true when you consider how the PDK survey lacks in definitions. “There is no mention that charters are public schools, that they must meet the same academic standards/ testing requirements as traditional public schools, that the schools are held accountable for student results, or that they do not cost taxpayers any additional money. Without a complete and detailed understanding of what a charter school is,” says Conway, “people are less likely to be able to make informed decisions as to whether and to what extent they support such an institution.”

Take a look at two other questions asked by the Gallup organization – first, the annual school choice question asks respondents to respond to whether or not they embrace the notion of “allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense.” Second, the survey asks if the respondent prefers that we reform the “existing public school system or find an alternative to the existing public school system.”

In each case, the people surveyed are given a devils bargain. They are told that school choice comes at someone’s expense (as opposed to being revenue neutral from an individual standpoint or intended to provide a benefit). They are also told that school improvements can result in a different system, something that most people would hardly embrace.

Does a different system exist? Those who believe so are ideologically opposed to charter schools, voucher mechanisms, and accountability measures, which connect testing to consequences.

The Center for Education Reform (CER) in early 2005 commissioned a survey of 2,500 adults, 800 adults nationally and representative samples of people from three states. Questions were asked regarding charter schools, school choice, and the condition of schools, performance pay and more. In virtually every question, CER elicited vastly different responses.

PDK’s authors do not hide their disdain for No Child Left Behind (NCLB). According to *the polling company’s* team, “A significant portion of the report’s analysis relies on the self-reported knowledge level Americans have regarding the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The authors draw the conclusion that “greater familiarity with the law was unlikely to bring approval” (pg 49). However, the public’s knowledge about NCLB is never actually tested in the survey. Understanding is a predicate to having an opinion and the people administering the poll and the people taking the poll may both presume a level of knowledge that otherwise does not exist... Awareness and understanding of specific aspects of NCLB should have been tested to determine whether respondents were, in fact, “knowledgeable.”

Much more can be said about how PDK treats the subject of charters, performance pay or a myriad other issues (*for a full analysis of the PDK poll by the polling company/Women Trends go to www.edreform.com*). However, most interesting was how different the PDK polling audience varies from America. As Conway's *polling company* points out, "it is comprised of 44 percent men and 56 percent women, when men should make up 48 percent and women 52 percent. This is especially important for the subject matter of this poll, as women tend to be more protective of public schools. And finally, slightly more older Americans were interviewed than younger adults."

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The Center for Education Reform (CER) creates opportunities for and challenges obstacles to better education for America's communities. Founded in 1993, CER combines education policy with grassroots advocacy to foster positive and bold education reforms.

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