CHARTER SCHOOLS: Today
CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

THE Center for Education Reform

2008

AMERICA'S ATTITUDES
TOWARD CHARTER SCHOOLS

The Center for Education Reform (CER) drives the creation of better educational opportunities for all children by leading parents, policymakers and the media in boldly advocating for school choice, advancing the charter school movement, and challenging the education establishment.

Through its storehouse of data and unique insights into American communities, CER uses information to turn parents into activists, policymakers into advocates, and educators into reform leaders.

The Center for Education Reform changes laws, minds and cultures to allow good schools to flourish.

The Center for Education Reform

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2008

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THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

INTRODUCTION

Short of voting, the assessment of public opinion through scientific polling is one of the best ways we have of gauging the needs, wants and demands of America's citizenry.

In fact, given that in national elections only about half of all eligible voters voice their views via the ballot (since 1986, turnout for presidential elections has ranged from 50-55 percent, and for non-presidential elections from 36-44 percent of the voting-age public) it can be argued that polling surpasses voting as a means of accurately measuring public sentiment since its use of scientific sampling reveals the views of voters and non-voters alike.

This has been, and remains, an important point as it relates to education reform in America. Many of the parents who are most desperate for the options offered by reform are those who remain silent on the subject by not voting. Some would say that those who fail to vote cede their right to be heard. But that is akin to arguing that if parents don't vote we have no obligation to recognize their hunger or their cries for food, and that they and their children therefore can be left to starve.

Granted, not voting may be a failure of civic responsibility, but it is not an offense punishable by the forfeiture of one's rights as a citizen to life, liberty and legislative redress.

Beyond giving voice to the many who are silent in the electoral process, polling also provides insights into issues that cannot be defined in the simple win-loss equation of a ballot initiative. Well-funded campaigns by anti-school reformers to "Save Our Schools" often lead voters to reject such reforms as charter schools. This, in turn, allows reform opponents to tout the results as a clear, public repudiation of the schools. But post-election surveys can — and have — revealed that when the concept is explained fairly and without bias, a majority of voters actually support the formation of charter schools.

Hence polling has become an important tool in the education reform movement; by finding truths obscured by the raw numbers of an election and opponents of reform, survey results give us the understanding and insight needed to develop and adopt legislation and policies that nourish those in America who, left without options or opportunities, are starved for quality education.

Over the years CER has commissioned polls to test the knowledge we have gained on the ground and in the trenches, to better understand the challenges — old and new — that we face, and to refine our efforts in meeting those challenges. Following is a brief synopsis of some of what we've found.

Jeanne

Jeanne Allen
President

Within the education reform community, charter schools are well understood and widely supported. But what are the opinions of average Americans and what drives the public's perceptions, understanding and motivations for decision-making?

CER commissioned a poll to find answers to those important fundamental questions and found that while Americans lack a clear understanding about the nature, purpose and "charter" of charter schools, they solidly support several of the key principles that govern charters, such as:

- allowing communities to come together to form schools to meet the needs of their children;

- linking teacher pay to student performance;

- granting schools flexibility to set their own educational standards (so long as they meet government standards); and

- giving parents the option of sending their children to a number of different public schools, not just the one to which they are assigned.

What would drive families to leave an existing school? The survey found that, if they could, parents would consider pulling their children out of existing public schools if:

- their child felt unsafe at school;

- they were unable regularly to communicate with teachers; and

- the school's facilities were ill-maintained or in need of repair.

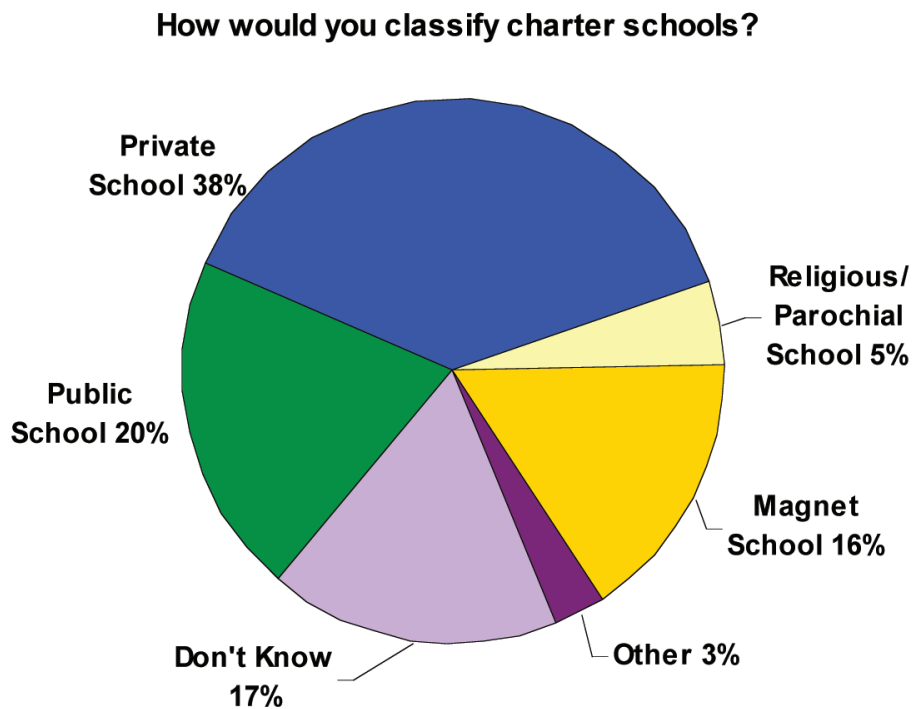Words are critical in any debate. What are the most powerful words in the debate over quality education? The survey found that:

- Accountability

- Standards

- Innovation

were the top three words that summarized the findings that respondents demand meaningful and measurable change to the current education system and are open to new ideas — but insist that schools produce results and comply with reasonable rules and guidelines.

The numbers

◎ Only 20 percent of respondents correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.

How would you classify charter schools?

Private
School 38%

Religious/
Parochial
School 5%

Public
School 20%

Magnet
School 16%

Don't Know
17%

Other 3%

◎ More than 78 percent supported "allowing communities to create new public schools — called charter schools — that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."

◎ Fifty-nine percent of respondents supported the concept of "considering student performance when deciding how to compensate teachers" and agreed with the idea that "a teacher whose students actually perform well would receive a higher salary and additional financial rewards."

⦿ Sixty-nine percent agree that "allowing the parent to choose from a number of public schools" was a superior option compared to "assigning children to one public school based solely on where they live."
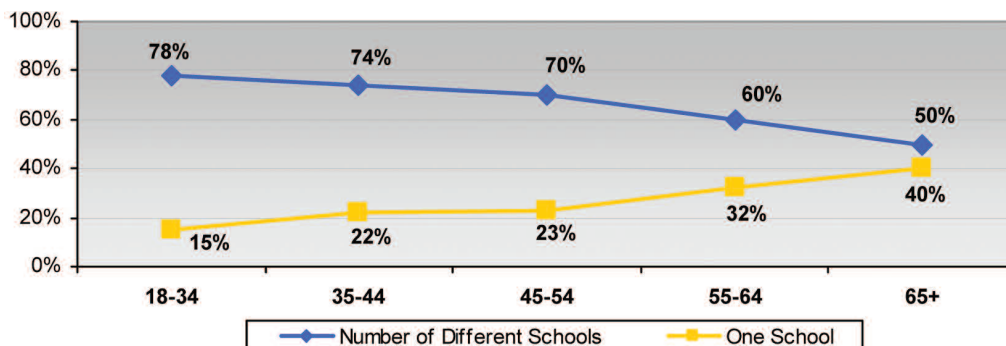
⦿ Seventy-eight percent of respondents said they would be very or somewhat likely to move their child out of a school if the child felt unsafe.

⦿ "Accountability," "Standards," and "Innovation" resonated most with respondents.

Would you feel favorable or unfavorable towards a public school that emphasized...
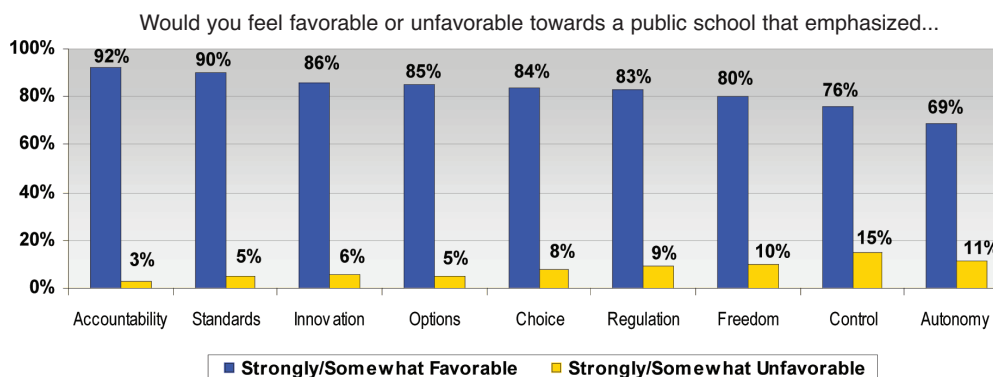
Education reform

is a state-by-state challenge

requiring an understanding

of the unique circumstances

and thinking of a state's residents.

CER's research

targeted several key states

from 2005 through 2008.

◎ Twenty-nine percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.
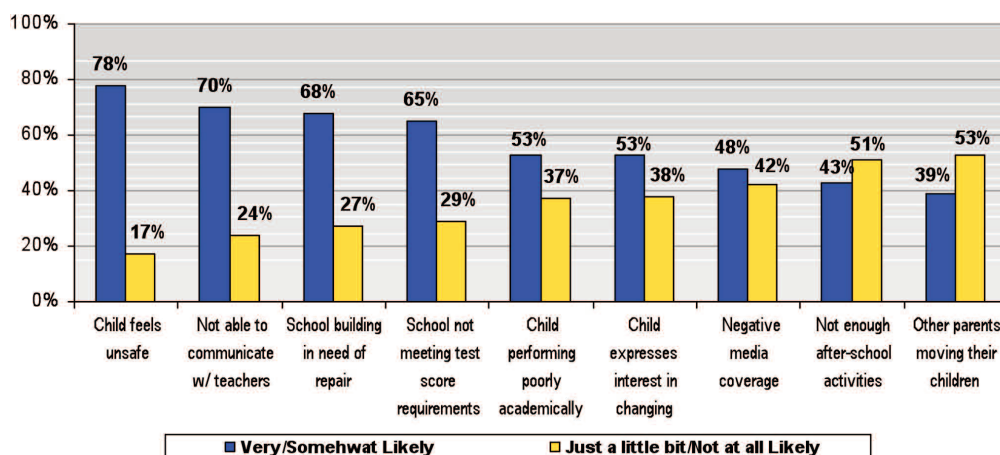
How would you classify charter schools?

Private School 33%
Magnet School 15%
Religious/ Parochial School 4%
Other 2%
Don't Know / Refused 17%
Public School 29%
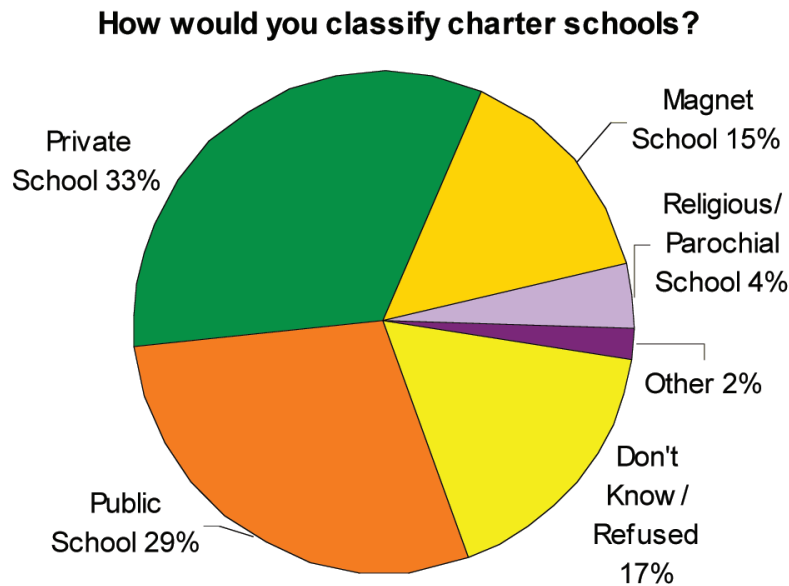
◎ Eighty-one percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) supported "allowing communities to create new public schools - called charter schools - that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."

◎ Fifty-four percent of respondents (vs. 59 percent nationally) supported the concept of "considering student performance when deciding how to compensate teachers" and agreed with the idea that "a teacher whose students actually perform well would receive a higher salary and additional financial rewards."

◎ Seventy-one percent of respondents (vs. 69 percent nationally) preferred having choices of schools other than the one to which a child is assigned based on where the child lives.

By Age of Respondent

	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Choose from many schools	79%	75%	68%	63%	58%
Assigned to one school	15%	20%	26%	27%	34%

By Household Income Level

	< $30K	$30-50K	$50-70K	$70-90K	> $90K
Choose from many schools	83%	75%	72%	71%	65%
Assigned to one school	15%	21%	22%	21%	27%

◎ Eighty-three percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) said they would be very or somewhat likely to move their child out of a school if the child felt unsafe.

	Very/Somewhat Likely	Just a little bit/Not at all Likely
I. Child feels unsafe at school	83%	12%
II. Not able to communicate w/ teachers	74%	21%
III. School not meeting gov't test score requirements	71%	25%
IV. School building in need of repair	71%	26%
V. Child expresses interest in changing	57%	35%
VI. Child performing poorly academically	56%	35%
VII. Negative media coverage of school	53%	38%
VIII. Not enough after-school activities	41%	55%
IX. Other parents moving their children	40%	51%

◎ The words "Accountability," "Standards" and "Innovation" resonated most with respondents.

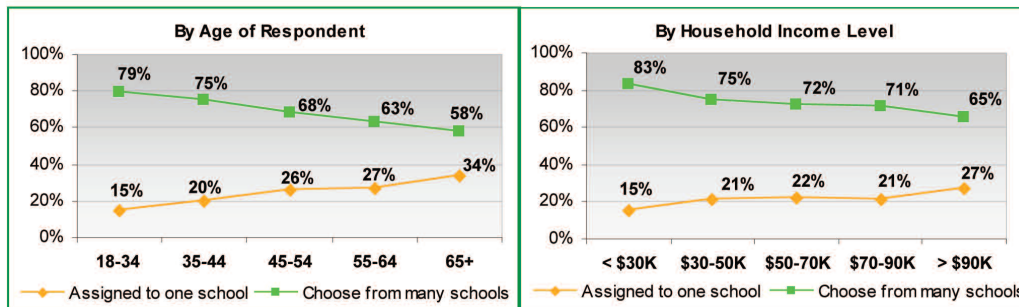|	Strongly/Somewhat Favorable	Strongly/Somewhat Unfavorable
Accountability	92%	4%
Standards	89%	6%
Innovation	87%	6%
Options	86%	6%
Choice	81%	11%
Regulation	78%	12%
Freedom	78%	11%
Control	74%	13%
Autonomy	67%	14%

⦿ Twenty-six percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.
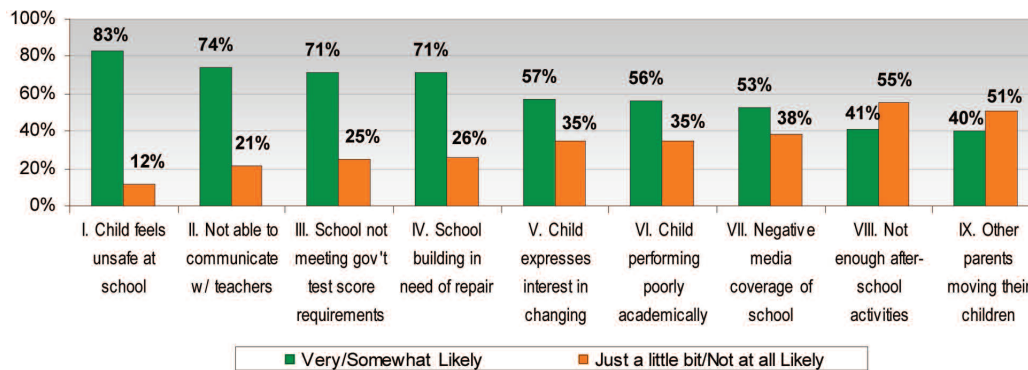
Connecticut Residents More Likely than Respondents Overall to Classify Charter Schools as...

How would you classify charter schools- as public schools, private schools, religious/parochial schools, or magnet schools?

Public Schools
- 45-54 year olds
- 45-64 yr old women
- Hispanics
- New Haven County residents
- HHI $30K-$50K

Private Schools
- 18-34 year olds
- 18-44 yr old women
- Single respondents
- Blacks
- Fairfield Co. residents
- HHI $50K-$70K

"Don't Know"
- Seniors (65+), especially Sr. women
- 18-44 yr old women
- Unmarried adults
- HHI < $30K

Magnet Schools
- 45-54 year olds
- 45-64 yr old women
- Hartford Co. residents
- HHI $50K+

Public 26%
Private 25%
Magnet 22%
Religious 2%
Don't Know 25%

⦿ Seventy-eight percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) supported "allowing communities to create new public schools - called charter schools - that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."
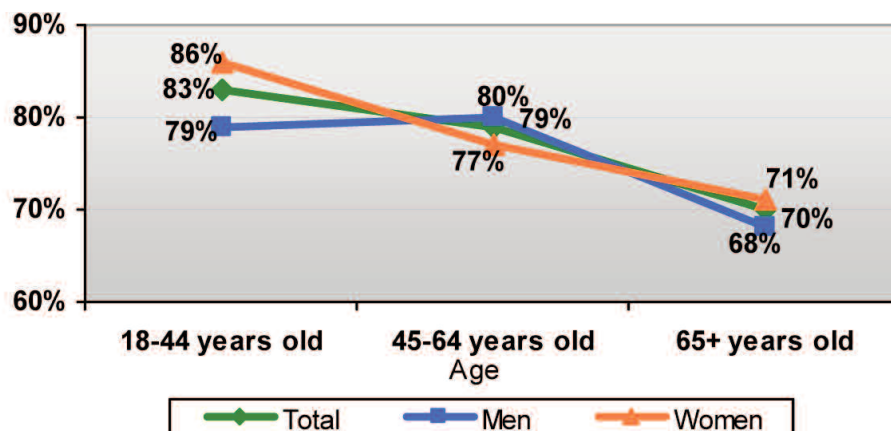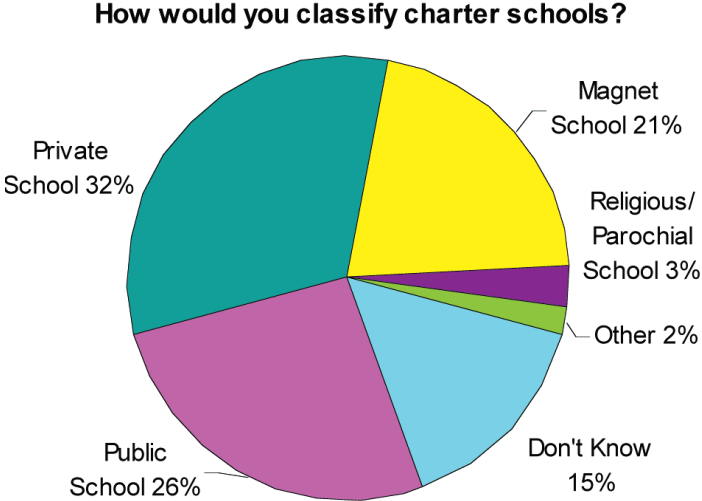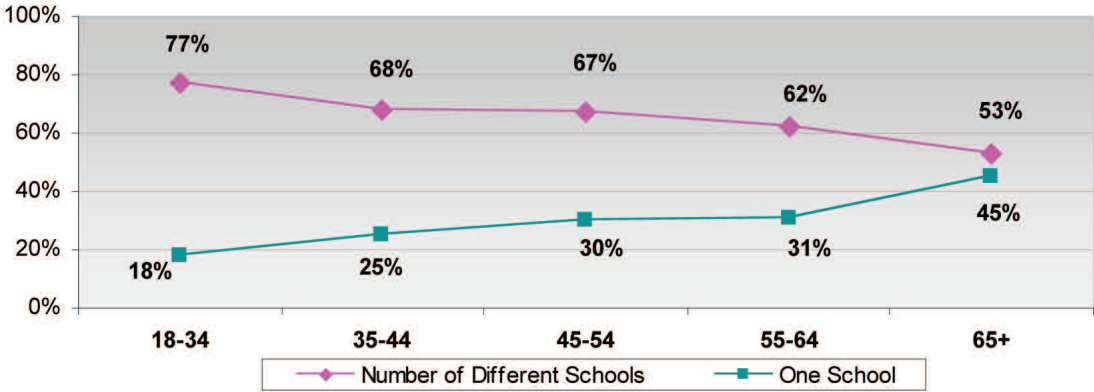
⊘ Twenty-six percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.

How would you classify charter schools?

- Private School 32%
- Magnet School 21%
- Religious/Parochial School 3%
- Other 2%
- Don't Know 15%
- Public School 26%

⊘ Eighty-seven percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) supported "allowing communities to create new public schools - called charter schools - that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."

⊘ Sixty-two percent of respondents (vs. 59 percent nationally) supported the concept of "considering student performance when deciding how to compensate teachers" and agreed with the idea that "a teacher whose students actually perform well would receive a higher salary and additional financial rewards."

⊘ Sixty-eight percent of respondents (vs. 69 percent nationally) preferred having choices of schools other than the one to which a child is assigned based on where the child lives.


	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Number of Different Schools	77%	68%	67%	62%	53%
One School	18%	25%	30%	31%	45%

Georgia Statewide Education Survey - December 2007

Q. How satisfied are you with public schools in the state of Georgia?

A. Very/Somewhat satisfied: 48 percent   Not very/Not at all satisfied: 52 percent

**Q.** Where should the authority to approve charter schools lie?

A. Only local school boards: 28 percent   Other groups: 72 percent
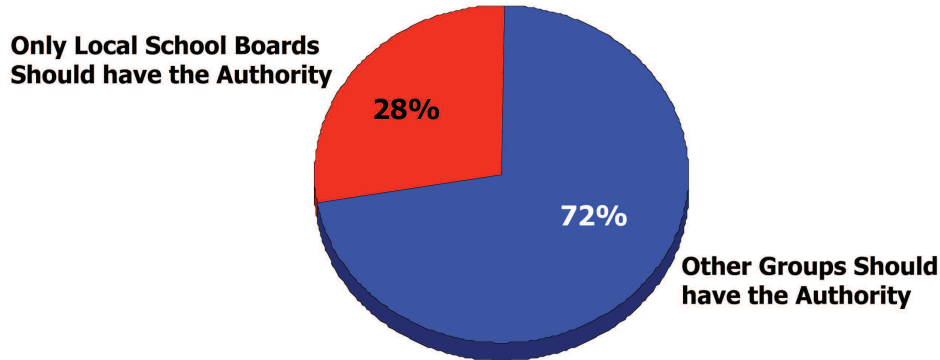
Only Local School Boards Should have the Authority

28%

72%

Other Groups Should have the Authority

	Children Under Age 18 in Household		Political Party Affiliation			Race			
	Yes %	No %	Republican %	Democrat %	Independent %	White %	Black %	Hispanic %	Other %
Only Local School Boards	30	27	28	28	28	31	18	17	21
Other Groups	70	73	72	72	72	69	82	83	79

Q. Given that charter schools are funded with money that would otherwise go to regular public schools, do you think that local school boards would be more likely to vote for or against approving a charter school in their district?

A. More likely to vote for: 22 percent   More likely to vote against: 78 percent
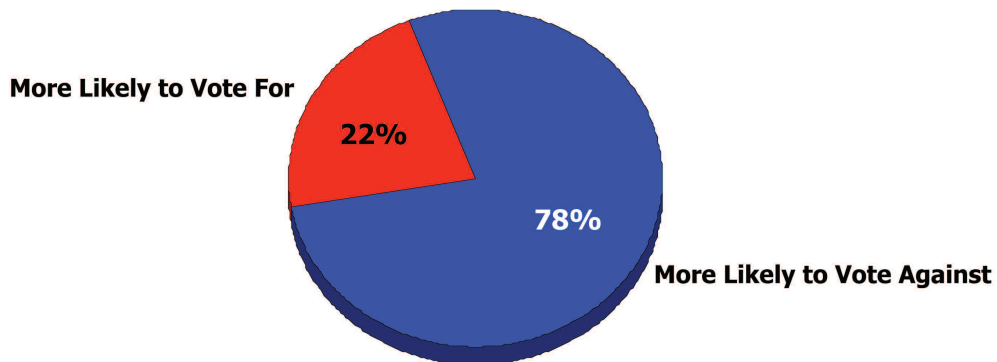
More Likely to Vote For

22%

78%

More Likely to Vote Against

	Children Under Age 18 in Household		Political Party Affiliation			Race			
	Yes %	No %	Republican %	Democrat %	Independent %	White %	Black %	Hispanic %	Other %
More likely to vote for	21	22	21	23	19	20	24	33	28
More likely to vote against	79	78	79	77	81	80	76	67	72

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Focus Groups: Vidalia and Alpharetta, Georgia - December 2007

◎ Georgians ranked the nation's moral values as "extremely poor," and their view of the public education system is not far behind.

"People just don't care about other people anymore. It's all about me, me, me."
- focus group participant

◎ Many small-town residents fear that they, or their children, will be labeled "trouble-makers" if they try to interfere with what they call school-board politics.

"You have to pick and choose your battles when you talk to [the school board]. And then you have to talk guardedly. It's more of a political arena than an educational one."
- Bruce

◎ Parental involvement and accountability are extremely important.

"It goes back to the parent again. If you have a class full of students whose parents don't care, no matter how good that teacher is, it's not going to make an impact."
- Marcie

◎ Charter school awareness is very low in the state.

"I don't really know much about [charter schools]. I always thought they were over-achieving type students."
- David

◎ Many feared that an expansion of parental choice in education could create a segregation of sorts, with students who have involved parents at one school and the remainder at another.

"I think that will force some schools to be bad schools. I think kids would get left behind. It would be another segregation. These are the kids with the parents that care, and these are the kids with the parents that don't. That school is going to have behavior problems and just be a bad school."
- Levonne

◎ The performance contract did not appeal to participants.

"Some students will do well, some won't. You can't close down the whole school because of that."
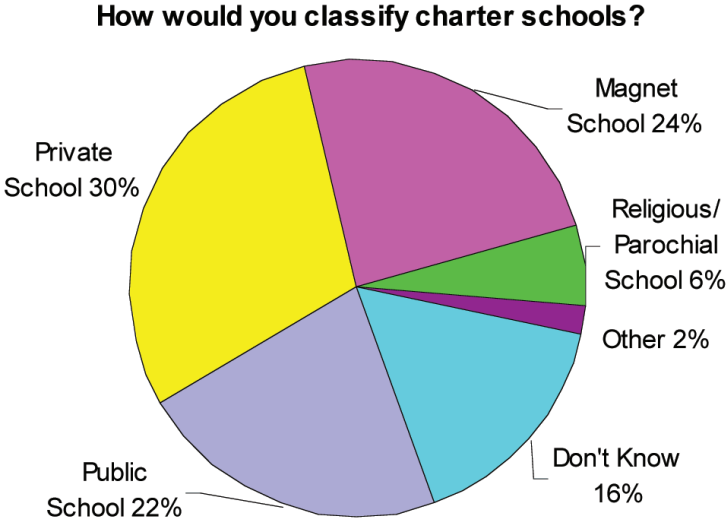*- Roman*

◎ The concept that "tax dollars follow the child" resonated strongly.

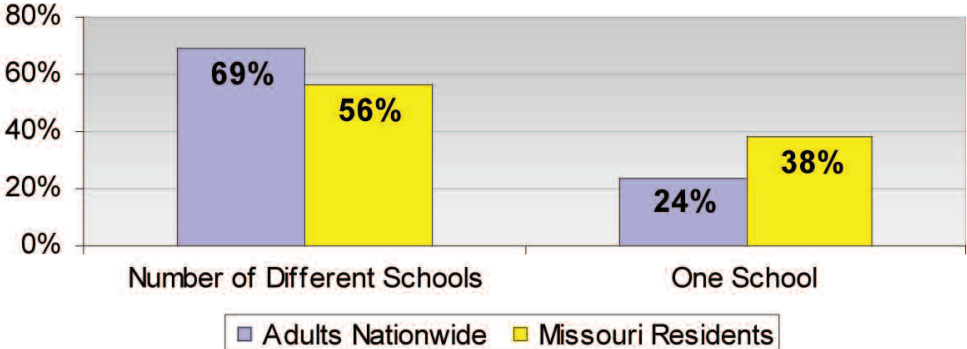*"If the child is going, all 100 percent of that money should go with him."*
- Brenda

◎ Twenty-two percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.

How would you classify charter schools?

Magnet School 24%

Private School 30%

Religious/ Parochial School 6%

Other 2%

Don't Know 16%

Public School 22%

◎ Seventy-three percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) supported "allowing communities to create new public schools - called charter schools - that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."

◎ Fifty-three percent of respondents (vs. 59 percent nationally) supported the concept of "considering student performance when deciding how to compensate teachers" and agreed with the idea that "a teacher whose students actually perform well would receive a higher salary and additional financial rewards."

◎ Fifty-six percent of respondents (vs. 69 percent nationally) preferred having choices of schools other than the one to which a child is assigned based on where the child lives.

69% | 56%
24% | 38%

Number of Different Schools | One School

☐ Adults Nationwide ☐ Missouri Residents

NEW JERSEY

◉ Twenty-seven percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.
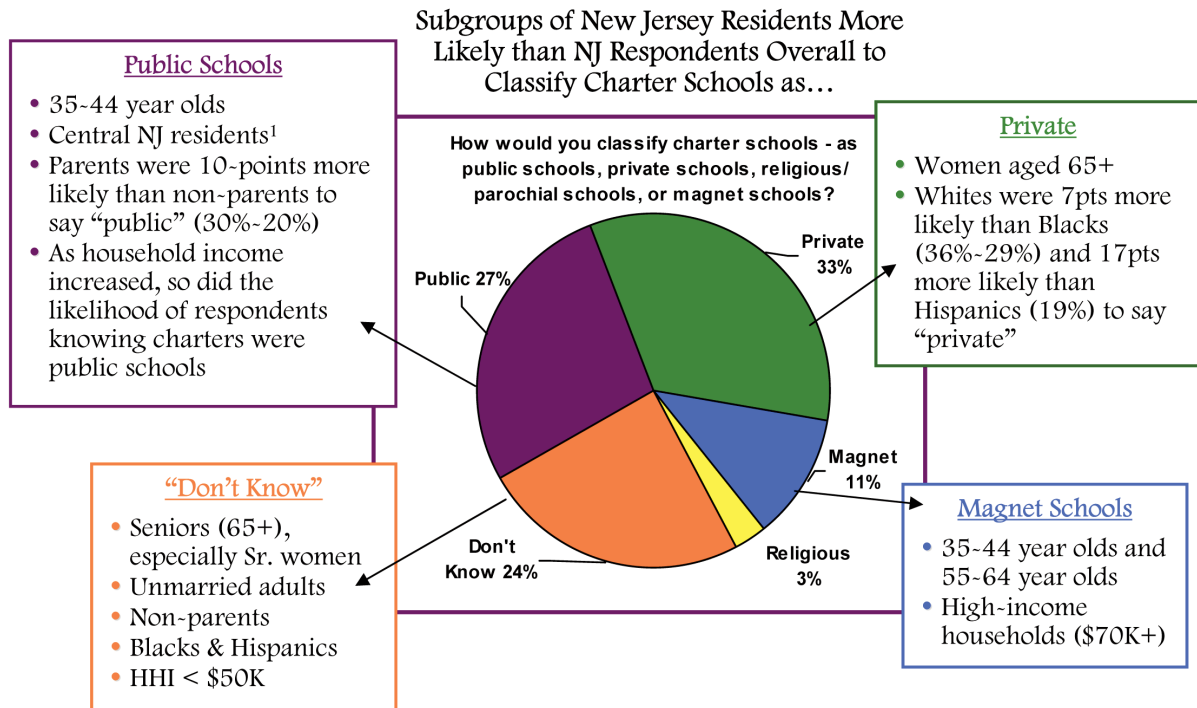
Subgroups of New Jersey Residents More Likely than NJ Respondents Overall to Classify Charter Schools as…

Public Schools
- 35-44 year olds
- Central NJ residents[1]
- Parents were 10-points more likely than non-parents to say "public" (30%-20%)
- As household income increased, so did the likelihood of respondents knowing charters were public schools

"Don't Know"
- Seniors (65+), especially Sr. women
- Unmarried adults
- Non-parents
- Blacks & Hispanics
- HHI < $50K

Private
- Women aged 65+
- Whites were 7pts more likely than Blacks (36%-29%) and 17pts more likely than Hispanics (19%) to say "private"

Magnet Schools
- 35-44 year olds and 55-64 year olds
- High-income households ($70K+)

How would you classify charter schools - as public schools, private schools, religious/parochial schools, or magnet schools?

Public 27%
Private 33%
Magnet 11%
Religious 3%
Don't Know 24%

◉ Seventy-one percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) supported "allowing communities to create new public schools - called charter schools - that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."

Who Supports Charter Schools — 71 percent overall:

◉ Adults under the age of 55

◉ Households earning more than $30,000 per year

◉ Central New Jersey dwellers (61 percent of whom "strongly" supported charters)

◉ Respondents who knew charters were public schools

◎ Twenty-nine percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.
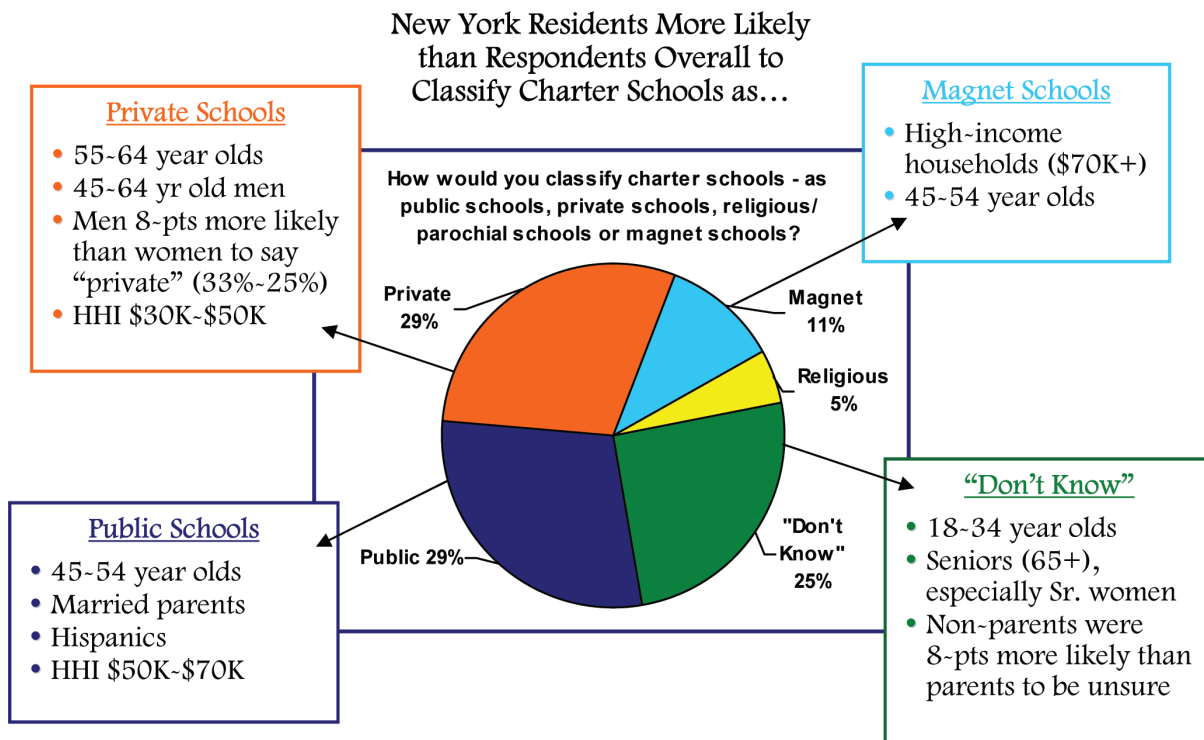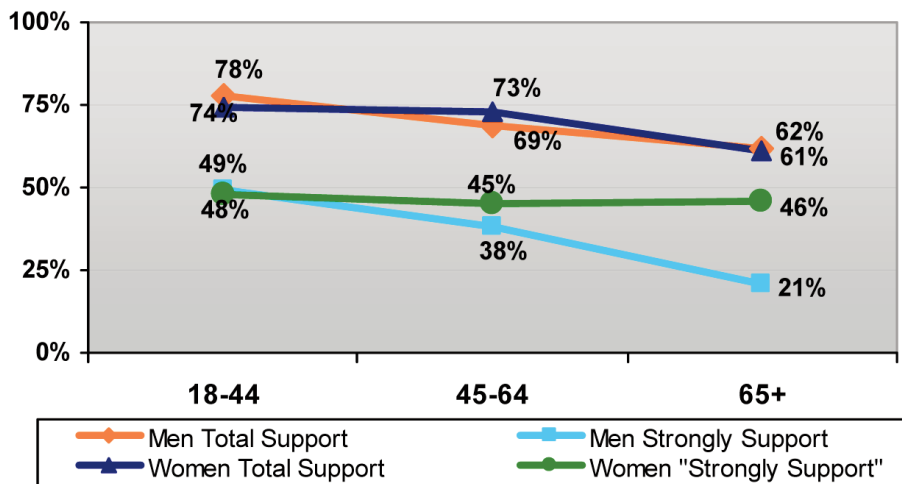
New York Residents More Likely than Respondents Overall to Classify Charter Schools as…

How would you classify charter schools - as public schools, private schools, religious/parochial schools or magnet schools?

Private 29%

Magnet 11%

Religious 5%

"Don't Know" 25%

Public 29%

Private Schools
- 55-64 year olds
- 45-64 yr old men
- Men 8-pts more likely than women to say "private" (33%-25%)
- HHI $30K-$50K

Magnet Schools
- High-income households ($70K+)
- 45-54 year olds

Public Schools
- 45-54 year olds
- Married parents
- Hispanics
- HHI $50K-$70K

"Don't Know"
- 18-34 year olds
- Seniors (65+), especially Sr. women
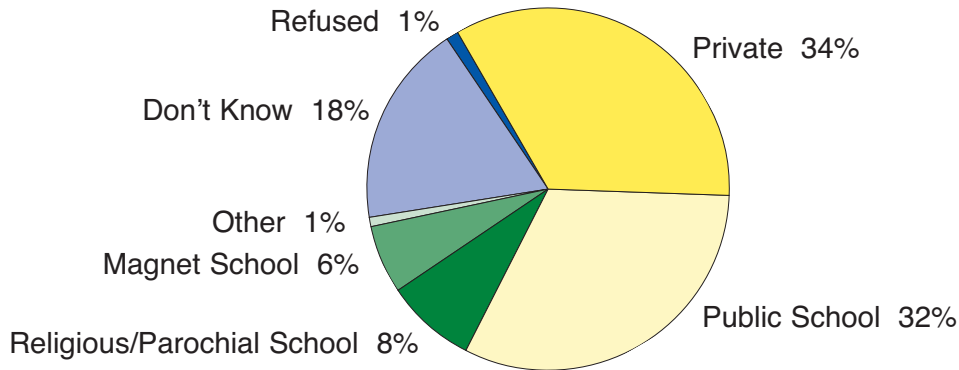- Non-parents were 8-pts more likely than parents to be unsure

◎ Seventy-one percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) supported "allowing communities to create new public schools - called charter schools - that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money."
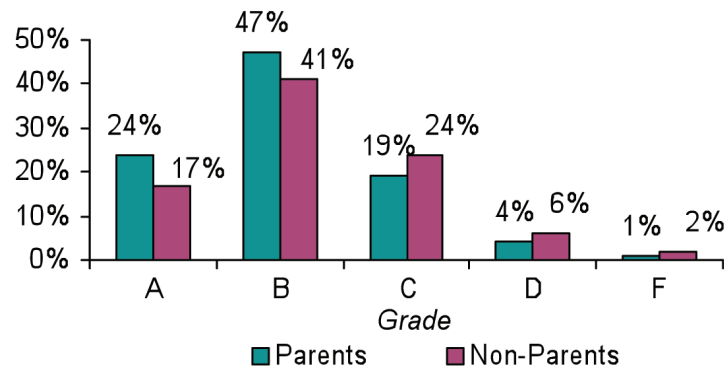
	18-44	45-64	65+
Men Total Support	78%	69%	62%
Women Total Support	74%	73%	61%
Men Strongly Support	48%	38%	21%
Women "Strongly Support"	49%	45%	46%

- Men Total Support
- Men Strongly Support
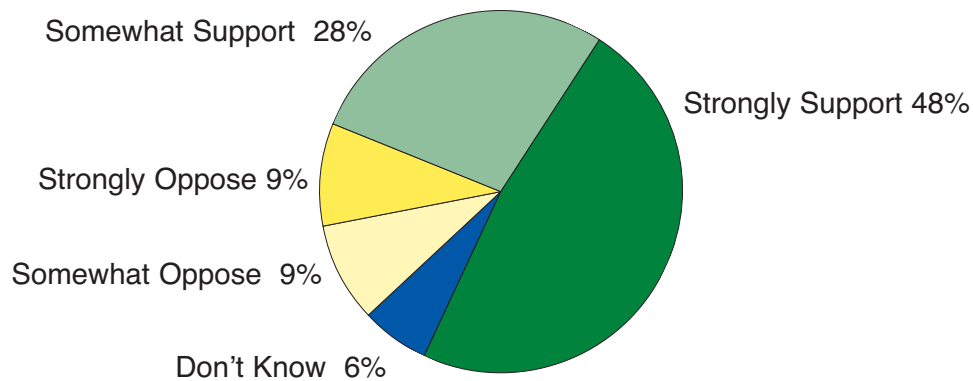- Women Total Support
- Women "Strongly Support"

◎ Thirty-two percent of respondents (vs. 20 percent nationally) correctly identified charter schools as "public" schools when asked to pick from a list that also included private, religious or parochial, and magnet schools.
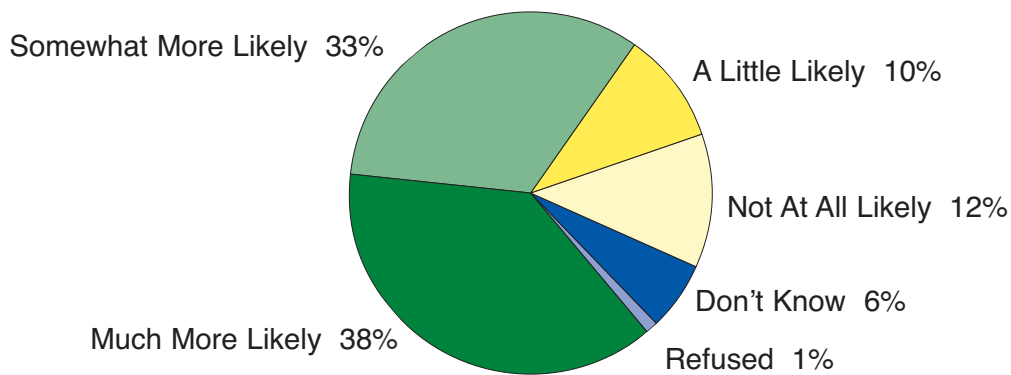
Refused 1%
Private 34%
Don't Know 18%
Other 1%
Magnet School 6%
Public School 32%
Religious/Parochial School 8%

◎ Parents and Non-Parents were asked to grade Wyoming public schools.

Grade	Parents	Non-Parents
A	24%	17%
B	47%	41%
C	19%	24%
D	4%	6%
F	1%	2%

■ Parents ■ Non-Parents

◎ Charter schools enjoy support by seventy-six percent of Wyoming residents.

Somewhat Support 28%
Strongly Support 48%
Strongly Oppose 9%
Somewhat Oppose 9%
Don't Know 6%

◎ Performance Pay — Sixty-two percent of respondents (vs. 59 percent nationally) supported the concept of "considering student performance when deciding how to compensate teachers" and agreed with the idea that "a teacher whose students actually perform well would receive a higher salary and additional financial rewards."

◎ Seventy-eight percent of respondents (vs. 78 percent nationally) said they would be very or somewhat likely to move their child out of a school it the child felt unsafe.

◎ Seventy-one percent of respondents said that knowing that charter schools do not require additional state or federal tax revenues would make them more likely to support the schools.

Somewhat More Likely 33%

A Little Likely 10%

Not At All Likely 12%

Don't Know 6%

Much More Likely 38%

Refused 1%

◎ Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed feel that more than one group (beyond local school boards) should have the authority to create charter schools.

Other Groups Should Have The Authority 59%

Only Local School Boards Should Have The Power 33%

Don't Know/Unsure 7%
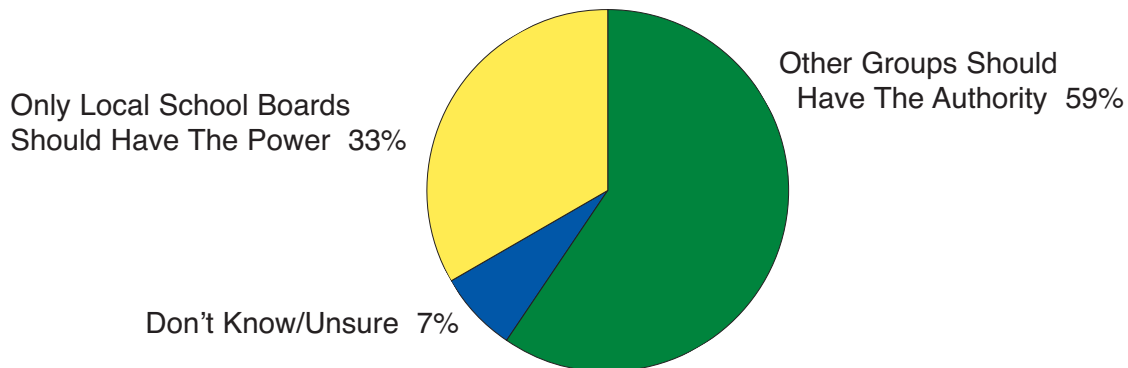
Cheyenne & Jackson, Wyoming Focus Group Findings - 2007

⦿ Parents must be central to the education system.

"I think the parents need to get more involved with their kids and education."
– Richard

⦿ Participants did not see the schools as any different from businesses in the private sector; they expect quality results, efficiency, and innovation at a reasonable cost.

"In business, the managers will be responsible and find different ways to evaluate effectiveness.
In school, the principals and superintendents should sit in on the classes
and be knowledgeable enough to make tough decisions."
– Patricia

⦿ Varying levels of knowledge and enthusiasm over charter schools were expressed.

"The benefit [of charter schools] is that parents have deliberately
chosen the school they want their child to go to."
– Adrienne

⦿ Participants felt that teacher performance should be tied to pay in some way.

"First and foremost, it should be performance. You should measure by periodic reviews,
how she is teaching, and how well her students do on a test. Do they comprehend at all?
How well do they comprehend the knowledge that is being taught?"
– Anthony

⦿ Participants voiced support for school choice.

"I like the idea of parents having a choice in which school they want to send their child to."
– Cindy

CONCLUSION

Although the goals of education reform are not strictly dictated by public opinion, the best courses to follow to reach those goals are often defined, or at least clarified, by what the public tells us.

If only a quarter to a third of Americans can correctly identify a charter school as a public school—let alone describe the basic tenants of the charter school concept or accurately differentiate a charter's operation from that of conventional public, private or parochial school—then simply promoting "charter schools" as educational alternatives is an unpersuasive message that misses the communications and advocacy mark. Consequently the public is unmoved and it becomes very difficult to win the popular support needed to pass charter legislation or establish a viable charter community.

Conversely, if upwards of three-quarters of the public support the concept of "allowing communities to create new public schools—called charter schools—that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money" then that is the message on which to concentrate in order to win support for charters.

That is the kind of critical insight that polling lends to the work we do and the deeper we can delve into the public's opinions and perceptions and the more closely we can track how those views evolve over time, the more successful we can be in effectively communicating our ideas and realizing the changes we seek.

METHODOLOGY

National Survey

CER's nationwide telephone survey of 800 (18+) adults in the United States was conducted by **the polling company™, inc**.

The survey sample was drawn utilizing a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) method where phone numbers were generated by a computer to ensure that every household had an equal chance to be surveyed.

The original survey instrument contained 47 questions, including 2 open-ended and 21 demographic questions.

Sampling controls were used to ensure that a proportional and representative number of people were interviewed from such demographic groups as age, race, and gender.

The margin of error for the national survey is +/-3.5%

State Surveys

The statewide telephone surveys of adults were conducted by **the polling company™, inc.**

The survey samples were drawn utilizing a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) method where phone numbers were generated by a computer to ensure that every household had an equal chance to be surveyed.

Sampling controls were used to ensure that a proportional and representative number of people were interviewed from such demographic groups as age, race, and gender.

Margins of error

- The margin of error for the California survey of 700 (18+) adults is +/- 3.7%

- The margin of error for the Connecticut survey of 500 (18+) adults is +/- 4.38%

- The margin of error for the Georgia survey of 500 (18+) adults is +/- 4.38%

- The margin of error for the Missouri survey of 500 (18+) adults is +/- 4.38%

- The margin of error for the New Jersey survey of 501 (18+) adults is +/- 4.5%

- The margin of error for the New York survey of 500 (18+) adults is +/- 4.38%

- The margin of error for the Wyoming survey of 404 (18+) adults is +/- 4.9%

Additional Georgia Survey

The random telephone survey of 659 registered voters throughout Georgia was conducted by Majority Opinion Research.

Data was weighted for age, race, gender and political party affiliation.

Maximum sampling error is +/- 3.7%

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