

Do Americans favor school choice policies?

YES

Numerous polls and surveys find that most Americans support policies allowing school vouchers and tax-credit scholarships.

Since July 2010, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice has conducted statistically representative surveys of registered voters in 18 states. In all of the surveys, when asked, majorities favored school vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), and tax-credit scholarships.

- Voter favorability for vouchers ranged from the low 50 to mid-70 percentiles, depending on the state surveyed. Mississippi and New Jersey recorded the highest support for vouchers, 74 percent and 69 percent, respectively. Montana, Maine, and Washington showed the lowest levels of favorability, 52 percent, 55 percent, and 55 percent, respectively.
- Depending on their state of residence, voters were favorable toward ESAs in the low 50 to low 60 percentile range. Alaska and Texas recorded the highest support for ESAs, both at 61 percent. North Dakota and Idaho voters were overall less favorable at 51 percent and 53 percent, respectively.

- Tax-credit scholarships also garnered voter support. Favorability averaged in the mid-60 percentiles. Texas and New Mexico recorded the highest support for tax-credit scholarships, 72 percent and 71 percent, respectively. Kansas and Alabama voiced the lowest levels of favorability, 56 percent and 60 percent, respectively.

In 2012 and 2013, the Friedman Foundation commissioned nationwide surveys of the general public with a special focus on the views of mothers of school-age children. The surveys, released just ahead of Mother's Day each year, found the majority of the general public, especially "school moms," favored school vouchers, ESAs, and tax-credit scholarships.

- The general public's support of vouchers increased to 60 percent in 2013 from 56 percent in 2012, whereas the support for vouchers from mothers increased to 66 percent in 2013 from 61 percent in 2012.
- The 2013 survey results also show the general public and school moms support tax-credit scholarships, 66 percent and 69 percent, respectively. There were similar support levels for ESAs: 64 percent and 65 percent, respectively.

TABLE 1 Voter Support for School Choice

Friedman Survey	Vouchers	ESAs	Tax-Credit Scholarships	Sample Size (N)	Released
National - General Public	60%	64%	66%	1,000	May-13
National - School Moms	66%	65%	69%	405	May-13
Texas	66%	61%	72%	613	April-13
Maine	55%	57%	62%	604	March-13
North Dakota	58%	51%	61%	605	March-13
North Carolina	57%	56%	65%	601	Sept-12
Montana	52%	55%	60%	604	June-12
Tennessee	59%	56%	69%	606	June-12
National - General Public	56%	-	-	803	May-12
National - School Moms	61%	-	-	401	May-12
Louisiana	63%	-	-	802	March-12
Washington	55%	57%	66%	602	March-12
Idaho	56%	53%	60%	1,202	Jan-12
New Mexico	62%	56%	71%	808	Dec-11
Alaska	64%	61%	64%	1,006	Oct-11
Indiana	66%	-	63%	1,017	Jan-11
Alabama	62%	-	60%	601	Nov-10
Arkansas	60%	-	65%	603	Nov-10
Kansas	57%	-	56%	602	Nov-10
Mississippi	74%	-	65%	603	Nov-10
New Jersey	69%	-	69%	602	Nov-10
New York	66%	-	70%	603	Nov-10

Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,993 American adults in 2012.¹ When asked a "voucher friendly" question noting the improved choices that people have when given publicly funded vouchers, 43 percent of the public were in favor, 28 percent were undecided, and only 29 percent were opposed. When asked about tax credits to support vouchers for any students, 53 percent of the public were in favor, 31 percent had no opinion, and only 16 percent were opposed.

Since 2007, PEPG and the journal *Education Next* have been conducting annual surveys on K-12 education topics and reforms. By asking multiple versions of the same kind of questions on a given reform (e.g., vouchers), Harvard researchers have been

TABLE 2 *Education Next* - PEPG Survey Results²

Questions	Vouchers			Sample Size	Year
	Favored	Undecided	Opposed		
A	36%	27%	38%	2,993	2012
B	39%	30%	31%	2,993	2012
C	43%	28%	29%	2,993	2012
A	39%	22%	38%	2,600	2011
C	47%	26%	27%	2,600	2011
A	31%	27%	43%	2,776	2010
B	39%	29%	32%	2,776	2010
A	35%	24%	42%	3,251	2009
B	40%	27%	34%	3,251	2009
A	40%	20%	40%	3,200	2008
A	45%	20%	34%	2,000	2007

TABLE 3 *Education Next* - PEPG Survey Results³

Individual Tax Credits / Deductions			Sample Size	Year
Favored	Undecided	Opposed		
51%	31%	17%	2,993	2012*
57%	27%	15%	2,993	2012*
55%	26%	19%	2,600	2011
55%	25%	20%	2,776	2010
60%	24%	15%	3,251	2009
54%	19%	28%	3,200	2008
53%	23%	25%	2,000	2007

*Two randomly assigned groups were asked the same question.

TABLE 4 *Education Next* - PEPG Survey Results⁴

Tax-Credit Scholarships			Sample Size	Year
Favored	Undecided	Opposed		
53%	31%	16%	2,993	2012
50%	29%	21%	2,600	2011
50%	28%	22%	2,776	2010
46%	27%	27%	3,251	2009

testing the effects of wording and phrasing on school choice questions. In the first year of their survey, 45 percent favored and 34 percent opposed, using "government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools." The wording of this particular question changed slightly in the subsequent surveys from 2008 to 2012, dampening support down to 36 percent in the most recent survey. Other wording that has introduced the term "competition" appears to have a positive boost for voucher questions, increasing support. In 2009, PEPG introduced a question asking about tax-credit scholarships, in addition to the preexisting question on individual tax credits/deductions. The annual *Education Next*-PEPG project continues to be an insightful experiment in survey design (*Education Next*/PEPG 2007-2012).

Unfortunately, not all polls and questions are created equal—some use poorly phrased and worded questions that produce biased findings. The annual PDK/Gallup poll has asked a voucher question since 1993 that has been proved to be extremely sensitive to small changes in wording. The methodological problems of this question were documented more than a decade ago by Terry Moe of Stanford University in the academic journal *Education Next*.⁵

In 2004 and 2005, the Friedman Foundation commissioned a poll that asked 500 people the PDK/Gallup question and 500 people the same question with two small changes. The results shifted dramatically both times—by 22 and 23 points, respectively.

Previous national polls—conducted from 2000 to 2005—have documented support for school vouchers or the functional equivalent termed "scholarships":

- 50 percent favored, and 46 percent opposed, the "government giving tax credits or vouchers to help parents send their children to private schools." (University of Pennsylvania, 2004)⁶
- 63 percent supported "allowing poor parents to be given the tax dollars allotted for their child's education and permitting them to use those dollars in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing." (Zogby, 2002)⁷
- 53 percent agreed, and 42 percent disagreed, that "the federal government should set aside public funds for students enrolled in public schools that are considered to be failing; the money will then be used to pay for the students to attend their choice of public, private, or parochial school." (Zogby, 2002)⁸
- 52 percent supported, and 48 percent opposed, the idea of school vouchers to help send children to public, private, or parochial schools. (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies/Research America, 2002)⁹
- 51 percent favored, and 40 percent opposed, the idea of school vouchers to help send children to private or parochial schools. (Associated Press, 2002)¹⁰

- 50 percent supported, and 47 percent opposed, the idea of vouchers to help send children of low-income families to private or parochial schools. (ABC, 2002)¹¹
- 69 percent supported vouchers even if public schools got less money: “What if that meant the public schools in your community would receive less money, then would you agree or disagree that parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools?” (CBS/*New York Times*, 2001)¹²
- 63 percent favored, and 31 percent opposed, the idea of school vouchers to help send children to any public, private, or charter school if they attend a low-performing school. (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research/The Tarrance Group/National Education Association, 2001)¹³
- 55 percent favored, and 39 percent opposed, the idea of “giving parents of school children government-funded vouchers that could be used to pay private or parochial school tuition under some circumstances.” (Bloomberg/Princeton Associates, 2001)¹⁴
- 54 percent said yes, and 38 percent said no, when asked: “Would vouchers improve the public school system?” (CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup, 2001)¹⁵

Five polls using various question wording all found support for vouchers in 2000:

- 64 percent agreed, and 34 percent disagreed, that “parents should have the option of sending their children to religious schools instead of public schools using ‘vouchers’ or ‘credits’ provided by the government that would pay for some or all costs.” (University of Connecticut)¹⁶
- 56 percent preferred the position that “government should give parents more educational choices by providing taxpayer-funded vouchers to help pay for private or religious schools,” compared to 38 percent who preferred the position that “government funding should be limited to public schools.” (NBC/*Wall Street Journal*)¹⁷
- 53 percent favored, and 44 percent opposed, “federal funding for vouchers to help low- and middle-income parents send their children to private and parochial schools.” (Pew/Princeton Associates)¹⁸
- 50 percent favored, and 45 percent opposed, “establishing a school voucher program that would allow parents to use tax funds to send their children to a private school.” (University of Maryland)¹⁹
- 49 percent favored, and 47 percent opposed, “providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools.” (*Washington Post*/Kaiser/Harvard University)²⁰

NOTES

1. See the *Education Next*-PEPG Survey (2012) questions and results here: http://educationnext.org/files/EN_PEPG_Survey_2012_Tables1.pdf.
2. Question A: A proposal has been made that would use government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools. Would you favor or oppose this proposal? Question B: A proposal has been made that would give low-income families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal? Question C: A proposal has been made that would give all families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?
3. Question: Another proposal has been made to offer a tax credit for educational expenses (fees, supplies, computers, and tuition) to all parents who send their children to public and private schools. Would you favor or oppose such a proposal?
4. Question: Another proposal has been made to offer a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools. Would you favor or oppose such a proposal?
5. See Terry M. Moe, “Cooking the Questions,” *Education Next* 2, no.1 (Spring 2002), pp. 71-77, <http://educationnext.org/cooking-the-questions/>; Terry M. Moe, “Dodging the Questions,” *Education Next* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2002), pp. 77-81, <http://educationnext.org/dodging-the-questions/>.
6. See the University of Pennsylvania’s National Annenberg Election Survey (July 2, 2004) question and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2004/issues/04education.htm#2>.
7. See the NSBA/Zogby International Poll “School Vouchers: What the Public Thinks and Why” (2002) questions and results here: http://www.njsba.org/govrel/washington_news/nsba_zogby_vsc_poll.pdf.
8. See note 7 above.
9. See the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies/Research America poll (Oct. 29, 2002) question and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2002/issues/02education.htm#12>.
10. See the Associated Press poll (Aug. 7, 2002) questions and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2002/issues/02education.htm#3>.
11. See the ABC News poll (July 15, 2002) questions and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2002/issues/02education.htm#1>.
12. See the CBS News/*New York Times* poll (June 21, 2001) questions and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2001/issues/01education.htm#7>.
13. See the Greenberg Quinlan Research/The Tarrance Group/National Education Association poll (Mar. 5, 2001) questions and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2001/issues/01education.htm#15>.
14. See the Bloomberg/Princeton Survey Research Associates poll (June 6, 2001) questions and results here: <http://www3.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2001/issues/01education.htm#5>.
15. See the CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll (Jan. 10, 2001) questions and results here: <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/10/cnn.poll/>.
16. See Univ. of Connecticut (Apr. 2000) poll question and results under “Review of Additional Poll Questions on Vouchers Asked Over the Past Year” here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2122/public-consensus-yet-school-voucher-programs.aspx>.
17. See the NBC News/*The Wall Street Journal* poll (Aug. 2000) question and results here: <http://online.wsj.com/documents/poll-20000814.html>, or under “Review of Additional Poll Questions on Vouchers Asked Over the Past Year” here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2122/public-consensus-yet-school-voucher-programs.aspx>.
18. See the Pew Research Center/Princeton Survey Research Associates (Sept. 2000) poll question and results under “Review of Additional Poll Questions on Vouchers Asked Over the Past Year” here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2122/public-consensus-yet-school-voucher-programs.aspx>.
19. See the Univ. of Maryland (July 2000) poll question and results under “Review of Additional Poll Questions on Vouchers Asked Over the Past Year” here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2122/public-consensus-yet-school-voucher-programs.aspx>.
20. See *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Univ. (Sept. 2000) poll question and results under “Review of Additional Poll Questions on Vouchers Asked Over the Past Year” here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2122/public-consensus-yet-school-voucher-programs.aspx>.