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NEW POLL FINDS DECLINING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN UNCLE SAM'S EDUCATION POLICIES

46TH Annual PDK/Gallup Poll Also Shows Big Swing On Issue of Higher Common Education Standards

ARLINGTON, Va., Aug. 20, 2014 – The American public has sharpened its belief that the federal government should not play a dominant role in public education, with a majority saying they simply do not support initiatives that they believe were created or promoted by federal policymakers, a new survey shows.

Moreover, only 27 percent of respondents give President Barack Obama a grade of “A” or “B” for his performance in support of public schools – down from 41 percent in 2011. A majority of those surveyed, 54 percent, do not think standardized tests are helpful to teachers; many do not understand how charter schools work, and the number of Americans saying they are familiar with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has skyrocketed in just one year, with a majority saying they oppose the standards.

Those and other findings are contained in the 46th edition of the PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. Conducted annually by PDK International in conjunction with Gallup, the poll is the longest-running survey of American attitudes toward education and thus provides an extensive and trusted repository of data documenting how the public's viewpoint on public education has changed over the decades.

“These findings present a serious dilemma for public education leaders,” observed William Bushaw, chief executive officer of PDK International and co-director of the PDK/Gallup poll. “Americans are less comfortable with the federal government's role in public education but if the federal government is less involved, who will put pressure on the public schools to close the achievement gap, one of this country's greatest challenges? Do local and state education leaders have the capacity and resources to make this happen?”

The new survey suggests the American public has a lot more confidence in local school systems than in the federal government. Fifty percent gave their local schools a grade of “A” or “B” and 56 percent said their local school board should have the greatest influence in deciding what was taught. Only 15 percent thought the federal government should have the most influence.

Yet when the focus was shifted from the respondents’ own local schools to ask about the performance of the nation’s schools in general, only 17 percent extended a grade of “B” or better to America’s schools.

In another area involving U.S. educational performance, only 30 percent of those questioned said they were familiar with last December’s release of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is used to compare the performance of students around the world. But even without knowing about the latest PISA results, 50 percent of those responding believed that American students were performing below the level of other students around the globe.

When asked a series of questions about standardized testing, the public generally supported various specialized tests such as those used for college entrance and Advanced Placement courses. But 54 percent of those questioned said they simply do not believe standardized testing in the classroom really helps local school teachers decide what to teach. Public school parents are even more negative about the value of standardized testing with 68 percent believing they are not helpful to teachers.

It was in the arena of the Common Core State Standards, however, that public opinion showed the most dramatic change compared to the previous year. The Common Core State Standards are a state-led effort to establish higher learning standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts and mathematics. The standards are intended to prepare more students for college and careers in the globalized 21st century economy. Originally adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia, the standards now are under fire in multiple states across the country as an attack on local school control.

Last year, almost two-thirds of Americans had never heard of the CCSS. This year, 81 percent said they had heard about the CCSS and 47 percent said they had heard a great deal or a fair amount. And what they’re hearing has led to opposition: 60 percent of those questioned said they oppose the CCSS, with the biggest factor being a belief that the standards will limit the flexibility of teachers to teach what they think is best.

Among those respondents who said they supported the CCSS, 74 percent cited the fact the standards would “help more students learn what they need to know regardless of where they go to school.”

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"Given the increased media coverage this year, we were not surprised that an overwhelming majority of Americans have heard about the Common Core State Standards, but we were surprised by the level of opposition," said Bushaw. "Supporters of the standards, and educators in particular, face a growing challenge in explaining why they believe the standards are in the best interest of students in the United States."

More than 60 percent of survey respondents said they favor charter schools and 54 percent said they believe charter schools provide a better education than other public schools. But when asked a series of questions to explore their knowledge of how charter schools operate, large segments of the public got it wrong, saying charter schools are private schools, allowed to teach religion and charge tuition and allowed to select students on the basis of ability.

PDK, a global association of education professionals, has conducted this poll with Gallup every year since 1969. The poll serves as an opportunity for parents, educators and legislators to assess public opinion about public schools. The latest findings are based on telephone interviews conducted in May and June 2014 with a national sample of 1,001 American adults, including a sub-sample of parents.

Additional poll data is available at www.pdkpoll.org. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.6 percent.

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