

POLICY BRIEF

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Pennsylvania's Education Blind Spot

A recent survey of Pennsylvanians by the Lincoln Institute of Public Opinion Research, Inc. showed a very strong free market/small government inclination by the electorate on most issues. And while there were some fully expected differences by region and by political ideology, the overall results are supportive of the notion that a significant majority of Pennsylvanians want greater control of government spending and taxes and do not want workers to be required to join a union or pay dues as a condition of employment.

Very large majorities want tax increases by school districts and the state government to be subject to voter referendum. And, Pennsylvanians are virtually unanimous in their opinion that sports stadiums and arenas should be financed by the private sector and not by taxpayers. A substantial majority of Pennsylvanians want public works projects to go to the lowest bidder rather than having to pay union or prevailing wages. These results taken together point to a great disconnect between current state policies and what citizens believe. Obviously, powerful interest groups have been able to exert influence far beyond their support by the public.

However, when it comes to education issues, Pennsylvanians' opinions appear to be at odds with facts. For example, on the question of whether Pennsylvania spends too little, too much, or the right amount on education, the majority of survey respondents say we are not spending enough. The facts are that the average per-student expenditure in Pennsylvania--adjusted for the cost of living-- is the nation's third highest while adjusted teacher salaries are the highest in the country.

On the question of educational quality in Pennsylvania's schools, survey responses show that Pennsylvanians are generally happy with almost half ranking educational quality as excellent or good. Only 16 percent think quality is poor. The fact is that Pennsylvania's SAT scores have fallen to 45th in the nation and have showed no relative improvement in decades. Meanwhile, large percentages of Pennsylvania's students are performing well below proficiency levels in reading and math.

Granted, there are several school districts whose students score well on achievement tests and SATs, but they are a minority. And in almost all schools there will be outstanding students. Still, the point is that overall, Pennsylvania schools are spending at a very high

level compared to other states and are getting a poor return based on average student achievements.

How can one explain such a disparity between what Pennsylvanians believe about educational issues and the actual facts about education? Undoubtedly, part of the answer lies in the fact that most people want to believe their local schools are good. It's probably much like the well known phenomenon of surveys that indicate people have little respect for Congress but think their own representative or senator is pretty good--or, people who respond that economic conditions are bad but their own financial situation is okay.

Unfortunately, many parents seem to be taken in by the high grades children are receiving and the numbers of students on Honor Rolls. Massive and continuing grade inflation has given the illusion of gains in achievement when in fact educational attainment levels are not improving. It is all too easy for parents to believe that schools are doing a far better job than is actually the case.

Another possible explanation is that the educational establishment has complained about inadequate funding for so long that it has become conventional wisdom. The drumbeat is incessant and goes on nationally as well as in the state. Slogans such as "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance," seem to resonate despite the fact that they are devoid of meaningful content. Too many states outperform Pennsylvania in terms of educational quality while spending far less per student (both adjusted for cost of living and unadjusted) for that statement to have any validity.

The good news is that the majority of Pennsylvanians have demonstrated in their responses to other questions that they will come to sound and reasonable conclusions when they have the true facts. It is crucially important for the future of the state's budgetary problems and the future of educational quality that Pennsylvanians get the facts and begin to demand policies that increase accountability for real academic achievement without calling for more spending.

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