

**Public Education, Education Funding
and Public Opinion: What do
Pennsylvanians have to say?**

By

Berwood Yost, Director of the Center for Opinion
Research, Franklin and Marshall College

And

G. Terry Madonna, Director of the Center for Politics and
Public Affairs, Millersville University

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Recently, the State House of Representatives passed an education-funding plan that included some of the educational programs that Governor Edward Rendell promoted during his campaign for governor. The major provisions of the legislation include a personal income tax increase that will give local schools block grants for pre-school and full day kindergarten for school districts that choose to participate, more money to improve standardized test scores, and funds to make tutoring programs more widely available. Though not part of the package, he has also urged the passage of legislation permitting slot machines at the state's racetracks to raise additional revenue for property tax relief.

Immediately after House approval of the bill, State Senate Republican leaders criticized the measures, saying they would be too expensive, create too many new government programs, and raise taxes too much.

At the heart of this debate is a difference of opinion among the various caucuses and the Governor about what Pennsylvania voters are willing to accept in terms of new taxes and spending. Virtually everyone involved in the debate has cited public opinion polls in defense of their respective positions, and no one more than the Governor himself. Governor Rendell has said, "I was elected governor by a significant majority. I told people what I would do [about education]. People have supported my plan in the polls." The Governor believes that the public sides with him. Is the Governor correct in his reading of public opinion?

There have been a host of polls dealing with Governor Rendell's agenda. Yet, even though much data exists on public opinion and public education, no one has compiled these data to identify specific trends in public attitudes. To remedy this situation, we have attempted to summarize general themes that emerge from public polls released over the

past few years in four areas: school funding, new education initiatives, taxes, and slot machines. This review only uses data that is publicly available and is not necessarily a comprehensive review of all the polling on the subject. The review does provide a starting point, however, for considering how Pennsylvanians feel about the various components of the legislative stalemate. Readers interested in drawing their own conclusion can review the data we've used at our web site,

http://opinion.fandm.edu/education_funding_and_public_opinion.pdf.

School Funding

School funding itself is a major problem, according to citizens of the Commonwealth. Surveys by Quinnipiac University, Good Schools, and IssuesPA taken over the past few years all show that large majorities of Pennsylvanian citizens think that education funding in the state is unfair, and that the state should increase its share of funding. In October 2002, a Good Schools survey showed that 80 percent of citizens thought the state should pay a greater share of local schools' education expenses. A February 2003 Quinnipiac survey showed that two in three citizens supported increasing the state's share of school funding to 50 percent. In fact, less than one in four Pennsylvanians believe that the current system of funding schools in the state is fair, according to a 2001 Good Schools survey.

As strong as the support is for improving how schools are funded in the state, that support gets even stronger when citizens are asked about state support for specific programs. Tutoring programs, reduced class sizes, and full-day kindergarten should all receive increased funding from the state, according to residents. A September 2002 IssuesPA survey found that three in five citizens believe the state pays too little for public education.

Public opinion about school funding exhibits a consistent theme. The current funding system is unfair and the state needs to increase the amount of funding it provides to local schools, particularly for programs that can improve school performance.

Education Initiatives

The data that we've reviewed reveal that Pennsylvanians favor increased tutoring, reduced class sizes, and enhanced early childhood education. To Pennsylvanians, these initiatives sound like reasonable things to do. Yet, there is not a clear consensus in the data that residents think these programs will help schools improve a great deal. A July 2003 survey by Good Schools indicates that fewer than half of Pennsylvania residents think that tutoring programs will improve public education a great deal. Those numbers get increasingly smaller in regard to the effects of smaller class sizes and full-day kindergarten.

The message here seems to be that Pennsylvanians support new education initiatives that can improve public education, but they are not sure how effective those initiatives might be. In other words, state residents support these education initiatives, but need to see evidence that they will produce positive outcomes. New information about the efficacy of these initiatives could increase or decrease support for them, depending on how much they actually help to improve educational performance.

Taxes

There have been numerous suggestions made about which taxes should be increased to fund the Governor's education initiatives, but consistent throughout the discussions has been the use of an income tax

increase to both fund those programs and to reduce local property taxes. These caveats are important to residents. Pennsylvanians have consistently told pollsters that they are not interested in an income tax hike—an IssuesPA survey last September showed that less than 20 percent of residents believe that increased income taxes are a good way for the state to raise money. We shouldn't be surprised, since the same poll showed that 60 percent of Pennsylvanians feel they pay too much in state and local taxes.

At the same time, however, the polls do indicate that Pennsylvanians will support increased income taxes if they are used for specific purposes. More than half of citizens in a Good Schools PA survey in July 2003 said they would favor increasing the state income tax to pay for public school improvements. Quinnipiac University found the same pattern of support in five separate polls during 2003—more than half of citizens support raising income taxes to lower property taxes and to increase aid to education. Even more citizens support raising the income tax as a means of making school funding more fair, about two in three citizens support that idea according to an August 2001 Good Schools PA survey.

Interestingly, simply tying an income tax increase to a property tax reduction without linking that increase to higher education funding does not garner as much support from Pennsylvanians—this idea was supported by fewer than half of all Pennsylvanians in two separate Good Schools surveys conducted this year.

This brings us to property taxes. As the previous paragraph suggests, property tax reductions are not as great a motivating factor for Pennsylvanians as increased school funding. A July 2003 Good Schools

survey, in fact, suggests that very few people, only about one in seven, think that making schools rely less on local property taxes for their funding will improve education in the state.

Pennsylvanians' thoughts about income tax increases and property tax reform are understandable only in context. Citizens will not support an income tax hike unless it is tied to specific details about how that tax hike will be used. Specifically, there is majority support for using an income tax hike to pay for education. There is less support for using an income tax hike solely to reduce property taxes. Support for an income tax hike is, therefore, contingent upon its use, and Pennsylvanians seem willing to use an income tax increase to fund better education in the state.

Slot Machines

A key funding component of the Governor's plan for tax reform is the legalization of slot machines in Pennsylvania. It is a major point of contention in the General Assembly, though support exists there for a limited slots bill. Public opinion about the legalization of slot machines is far less dependent on context than are questions about income tax increases. Every survey on the legalization of slot machines shows majority support. If it means simply allowing slots at racetracks, some surveys show about two-thirds of Pennsylvanians support the idea. Adding off-track betting sites in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh still garners support from about three in five citizens. A majority of Pennsylvanians unequivocally supports the legalization of slot machines.

Conclusion

Residents of Pennsylvania are ready for the state’s share of education funding to increase. Most citizens also see the current funding system as inherently unfair. State residents are willing to pay more to improve school funding and develop new educational programs, even if an income tax increase is needed to support these proposals. They also support many of the education initiatives proposed by the governor, although Pennsylvanians need to be convinced that learning will be enhanced by their enactment. If these programs are shown to be effective in producing better outcomes, expect support for them to increase. Finally, Pennsylvanians unabashedly support the use of slots at racetracks as a way of improving the quality of education in the state.

Pennsylvania citizens seem to support most of the Governor’s ideas for re-shaping public education in the state, yet the Governor’s plans remain stalled. The obvious question is, why? Part of the reason is that public opinion does not yet identify a “crisis” in public education. Citizens want change, but they are not yet demanding it. Most people, in fact, believe their own local schools are functioning reasonably well. Another major reason is that public opinion is only one of many factors that may shape the success that Governor Rendell will have in passing his “Agenda for a New Pennsylvania.” Also at the heart of this debate are differences with Republican leaders in the state Senate that are a blend of politics, philosophy, and power sharing—aspects of which are not the subjects of this analysis.

Author’s note: Berwood Yost is the Director of the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin and Marshall College. G. Terry Madonna is Director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Millersville University. Both authors helped design the Good Schools PA surveys mentioned in this report. Berwood Yost designed the IssuesPA surveys discussed herein.