

Montana State Legislature

2011 Session

Exhibit

3

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SCHOOL CHOICE

SURVEY
IN THE STATE

MONTANA



Many agree with the concept. Some disagree. And some simply want more information. As the public debate continues to grow louder about how best to provide a quality education to all Montana children, it is critical to know the facts and to have a good understanding of public opinion.

This statistically representative poll of 1,200 likely Montana voters measures public opinion on a range of K-12 education issues including school choice.

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EXHIBIT
DATE 9/14/11
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Montana's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice

Prepared by:
Paul DiPerna

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice

October 2008

This poll released jointly by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Montana Family Foundation, American Legislative Exchange Council, Black Alliance for Educational Options, Central Montana Homeschool Association, Diocese of Great Falls-Billings Catholic Schools, Diocese of Helena Catholic Schools, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Montana Federation of Independent Schools, and National Catholic Educational Association

A MESSAGE FROM THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION:

COMMITMENT TO METHODS & TRANSPARENCY

The Friedman Foundation is committed to research that adheres to high scientific standards. Matters of methodology and transparency are taken seriously.

All individuals have opinions, and many organizations (like our own) have philosophical or mission orientations. Scientific methods, if designed well and followed closely, should neutralize these opinions and orientations. Research rules and methods minimize bias. We believe rigorous procedural rules of science prevent a researcher's motives, and an organization's particular orientation, from pre-determining results.

If research adheres to scientific standards, its findings can be relied upon no matter who has conducted it. If rules and methods are neither specified nor followed, then the biases of the researcher or an organization may become relevant, because a lack of rigor opens the door for those biases to affect the results.

We are committed to sound research and to provide quality information in a transparent and efficient manner. We welcome any and all questions related to our methodology and work.

Montana's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice

Prepared by:

Paul DiPerna

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice

Poll conducted by:

Strategic Vision

October 2008

About the Author



Paul DiPerna (paul@friedmanfoundation.org) is director of partner services for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an organization dedicated to educating the public on the issue of school choice. He joined the Friedman Foundation in September 2006. DiPerna directs the organization's state polling series and leads grantmaking and direct service activities in more than a dozen states. He previously served as assistant director for the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, working there for more than six years. DiPerna was a research analyst for the first five issues of the Brown Center Report on American Education (2000-2004), and managed the activities of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education (2001-2005).

DiPerna takes a special interest in Internet activity, particularly in terms of discovering and coordinating information, mobilizing people, building social networks, improving organization and management, and amplifying fundraising activities. He has presented research at the American Sociological Association annual conference, and has published articles in *Education Next*, *First Monday*, the *Washington Examiner*, and the *Journal of Information Technology Impact*. DiPerna recently authored a chapter in the *Handbook of Research on Web Log Analysis*, published by Idea Group Publishing.

About Strategic Vision



STRATEGIC VISION, LLC
CORPORATE, LITERARY, POLITICAL

Strategic Vision is an Atlanta-headquartered public relations and public affairs agency with a division that specializes in polling. The public affairs team is knowledgeable about politics, issues, and current events throughout the nation. Strategic Vision operates nationally, and its polls have been used by MSNBC, FOX News Channel, *Newsweek*, Bloomberg News, *Time Magazine*, BBC, ABC News, Scripps Howard, the *Washington Times*, and *USA Today*. The company's polls have been cited as some of the most accurate by National Journal's Hotline and Survey USA.

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Executive Summary

This scientifically representative poll of 1,200 likely Montana voters measures public opinion on a wide range of K-12 education issues. The purpose of the Friedman Foundation's *Survey in the State* series is to measure voter attitudes toward public institutions, leaders, innovative ideas, and the current K-12 power and priority structure. Engaged citizens have shared with us their views about "school choice" in the form of tax-credit scholarships, school vouchers, charter schools and virtual schools. Montana is the seventh state to be surveyed in the last twelve months.

Two findings stand out in this polling project. First, considerable popular support exists for school choice policies and particularly creating a tax-credit scholarship system. Generally speaking, more than three of out five respondents support tax-credit scholarships—this level sustains across such demographics as geographic location, race/ethnicity, political ideology, religion, household income level, among others. There is also majority support for policies creating school vouchers and charter schools.

Second, there is a glaring disconnect between schooling preferences and enrollments. Ninety percent of Montana parents told us they prefer sending their child to a private school, charter school, virtual school, or provide homeschooling. In reality, approximately 7 percent of Montana's K-12 students attend private schools. Charter schools do not exist. In our poll, 37 percent of K-12 parents said they prefer private schools. Ten percent of Montana parents said they prefer a regular public school. In reality, approximately 93 percent of Montana's students attend regular public schools.¹ This disconnect is consistent with what we have seen in other states. States do not have sufficient school choice systems in place to match parents' schooling preferences.

A total of 1,200 phone interviews were conducted by Strategic Vision on September 5 and 6, 2008. The margin of error for the full sample of likely voters is ± 3 percentage points; the margin of error is higher when considering the number of respondents for a given demographic subgroup.

Key findings include:

- **School choice is not a partisan issue among Montana's likely voters.** Responses to several questions highlight the potential for Democrats (D), Republicans (R), and Independents (I) to work together on systemic reforms. Voters who identify themselves differently in terms of political affiliation are likely to share common views on school choice policies. High levels of support exist for tax-credit scholarships (D: 64 percent | R: 65 percent | I: 64 percent), school vouchers (D: 55 percent | R: 53 percent | I: 53 percent), charter schools (D: 51 percent | R: 54 percent | I: 65 percent), and personal-use tax credits and deductions for education expenses (D: 56 percent | R: 53 percent | I: 50 percent).
- **About two out of five Montana voters (42 percent) rate Montana's public school system as "good" or "excellent."** This figure is indicative of a state-level trend that is becoming more clear as the Friedman state polling series moves forward. Satisfaction levels with state public school systems tend to be mediocre throughout the nation.
- **Montanans are content with current levels of public school funding.** More than two-thirds of voters (68 percent) say Montana's level of public school funding is either "about right" or "too high." A third of the respondents (32 percent) said funding is "too low." At least 72 percent of the poll's respondents underestimate the actual per-pupil funding in Montana public schools (\$9,464), which suggests that the previously stated 68 percent statistic is probably a conservative figure.

- **Three out of five voters support a merit pay system for teachers, one that is based on “measurable outcomes.”** Sixty-two percent of respondents said they would favor “financially rewarding teachers whose students make more academic progress... when compared to similar students taught by other teachers.” This feeling is shared across political ideologies (D: 64 percent | R: 62 percent | I: 60 percent).
- **Thirty-four percent of voters say poor student discipline and school safety represent major challenges for Montana’s public school system.** Nearly one-third of the respondents (32 percent) also say “lack of accountability” is a significant issue.
- **Nine out of ten Montanans (90 percent) would choose a school for their child among options that include private schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and homeschooling.** Alternatives to regular public schools appear very desirable. This high figure is consistent in previous state polls, most recently in Maryland (82 percent), Oklahoma (83 percent), Idaho (88 percent), Tennessee (85 percent), and Nevada (89 percent).
- **Montana voters recognize the value of private schools.** When asked “what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child,” 38 percent of respondents selected private schools. This finding is consistent with other recent state polls: Maryland (45 percent), Oklahoma (41 percent), Idaho (39 percent), Tennessee (37 percent), and Nevada (48 percent).
- **Voters show diverse preferences when it comes to schooling options.** Along with regular public schools and private schools, Montanans are open to different kinds of schooling models, such as charter schools (28 percent); homeschooling (18 percent); and virtual schools (5 percent). Despite low public visibility, many respondents are favorable to charter schools (55 percent) and virtual schools (28 percent).
- **Sixty-four percent of Montanans are favorable to a tax-credit scholarship system.** When asked if they would support a proposal to create a tax-credit scholarship system, more than three out of five voters said they favor a scholarship system funded by individual and business charitable donations. Comparable strong levels of support were observed across demographic groups spanning state regions, race/ethnicity, religious identity, age, and family income.
- **Voters show more support (63 percent) for universal eligibility of tax-credit scholarships.** This is true regardless of respondents’ income levels. For example, Montanans with household incomes under \$25,000 preferred universal eligibility over financial need-based eligibility, 65 percent to 40 percent.
- **Montana voters exhibited relatively higher levels of awareness for school choice reforms when compared to other states, however, all these levels are moderate.** We asked three “awareness” questions about charter schools, virtual schools, and school vouchers. A slight majority of Montanans are familiar with charter schools (52 percent), and so there is potential for growth. Montana registered the highest statewide awareness for school vouchers (65 percent) so far in our polling series. By comparison, lower levels of awareness exist in other states such as Maryland (57 percent), Oklahoma (55 percent), Idaho (59 percent), Tennessee (45 percent), Nevada (55 percent), and Illinois (51 percent). As in other states, the concept of virtual schooling is still largely unknown in Montana (25 percent).

¹ Montana public school and private school enrollments obtained using the Common Core of Data (CCD) and Private School Universe Survey (PSS) table-building tools found on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) web site: <http://nces.ed.gov>.

Methodology

This survey provides a valid representation of the views of likely voters in Montana. A total of 1,200 completed interviews were obtained. This provides statistical significance and probability that is sufficient for decision-making purposes. The statistical margin of error at the conventional 95 percent confidence level is ± 3 percentage points.

Strategic Vision conducted phone interviews using a random sample of registered Montana voters from its call center. Random Digit Dial samples were produced by Survey Sampling International (SSI) using a sampling frame that includes all active telephone area codes and exchanges in the United States.

SSI starts with a database of all listed telephone numbers, updated on a four- to six-week rolling basis, 25 percent of listings at a time. All active blocks—contiguous groups of 100 phone numbers for which more than one residential number is listed—are added to this database. Blocks and exchanges that include only listed business numbers are excluded.

Strategic Vision's live callers conducted all phone interviews on September 5 and 6, 2008. A total of 4,967 calls were made in Montana. Of these calls 755 were disconnected, non-residential, or inactive numbers; 2,389 were refusals; 623 did not qualify as likely voters; 288 did not complete the survey.

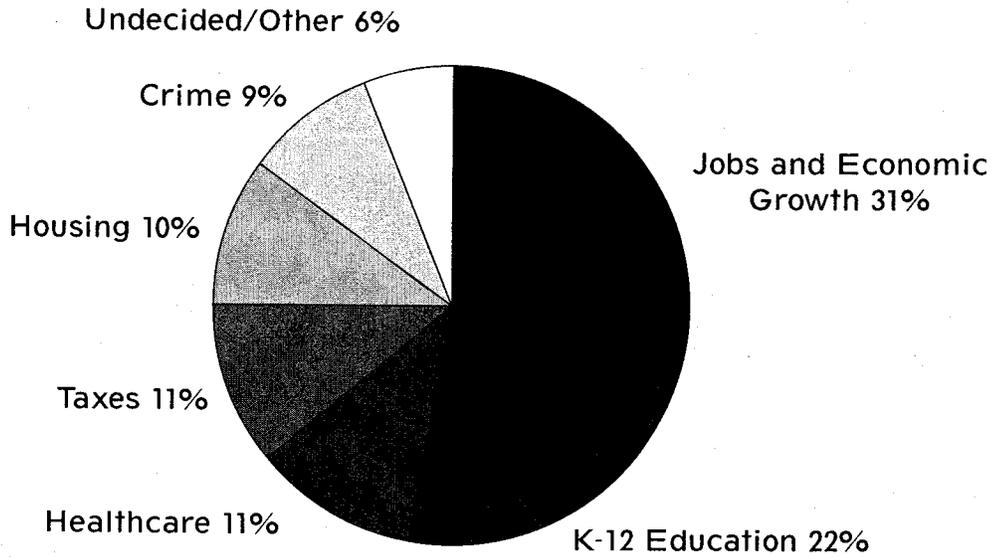
A set of screening questions were used to determine past voting behavior and likely voting in 2008. Respondents were asked whether they had voted in the 2006 election and were planning to vote in the next election in 2008. Respondents who satisfied both these criteria were classified as "likely voters" and were included in the survey. Respondents who either did not vote in 2006 or were not likely to vote in the next election were not included.

The author of this report takes sole responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations.

Findings

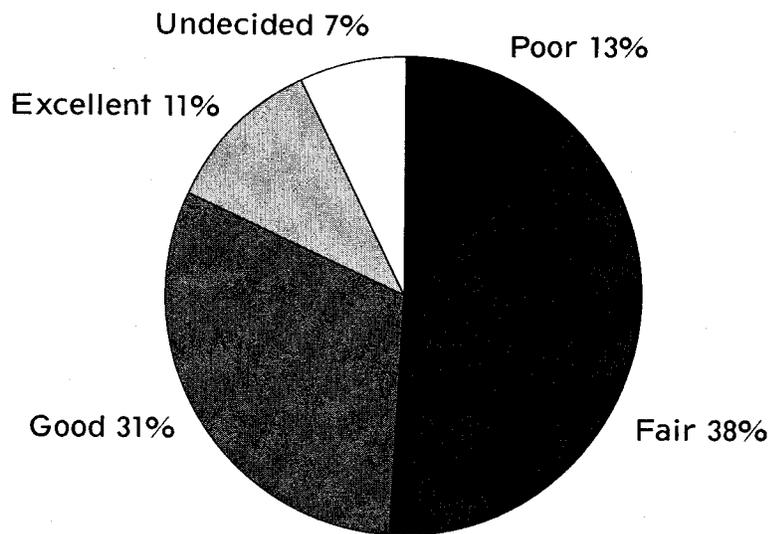
The following are the results of the survey.

1. I am going to name several issues facing the State of Montana, and I would like you to select the one that is most important to you? _____



The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

2. How would you rate Montana's public school system? _____



Demographic Perspectives

K-12 PARENTS (n=1,032)

37% prefer private schools

10% prefer regular public schools

18% prefer homeschooling

52% are familiar with charter schools; 55% favor charter schools

25% are familiar with virtual schools; 28% favor virtual schools

54% favor tax credits and deductions for parents to offset their child's schooling expenses

64% favor tax credits for individuals and businesses funding private school scholarships

63% agree in principle with universal eligibility of scholarships

45% agree in principle with financial need-based eligibility of scholarships

65% are familiar with school vouchers; 54% favor school vouchers

3. Do you believe that public school funding in Montana is at a level that is:

