



**For Immediate Release:** August 31, 2009

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## **“Obama Effect” Strongly Influences Public Attitudes on Controversial Education Topics, according to *Education Next*–PEPG 2009 National Survey**

### *Findings Show Research Evidence Can Be Equally Significant in Shaping Public Opinion*

CAMBRIDGE – President Barack Obama has the potential to be an extremely influential opinion maker on controversial education policy issues, according to findings from the 2009 national survey on American attitudes about public education by *Education Next* and the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) at Harvard University.

The survey’s findings suggest that a well-publicized stance on an education issue taken by a popular president can shift the opinions of a substantial segment of the American public -- a surprising fact considering how stable aggregate public opinion on these issues has been over time.

The *Education Next*–PEPG findings also show that research evidence can exert a strong influence on public opinion -- in some cases as much as that of a popular president.

The 2009 survey was undertaken in March when President Obama’s public approval ratings were above 60 percent, providing a unique opportunity to measure his impact. Several simple experiments were embedded in poll questions on merit pay, charter schools, and school vouchers. Recognizing that attitudes on education issues are remarkably constant over time, these experiments were designed to discover what kinds of factors change public opinion. Because the public pays little attention in general to policy issues, the experiments and the timing of the survey provided an avenue for assessing how people update their views when presented with new information. This dynamic view of public opinion recognizes the importance of understanding the various forces that can push it in one direction and another.

One randomly selected group of survey respondents was told the president’s position before being asked for its own; another group was told about research on the reform’s effects on student learning that coincided with the President’s stated position. A final control group was asked its opinion without any special prompt.

The survey’s findings show that the “Obama effect” can move overall public opinion by anywhere from 11 percentage points (in the case of charters) to 13 percentage points (in the case of merit pay). This responsiveness is not uniform, however. Presidential appeals are more persuasive to fellow partisans than to those who identify with the opposition party. Research has a comparable impact, ranging from 6 percentage points (in the case of merit pay) to 10 percentage points (in the case of vouchers) to 14 percentage points (in the case of charters). Research evidence appears particularly influential among Democrats and when the general public is undecided on an issue.

### **Charter Schools**

According to the 2009 survey, 39 percent of Americans support charter schools and 17 percent oppose them. Forty-four percent, however, remain undecided. Again, these numbers are similar to those in 2007 and 2008.

When told of President Obama’s pro-charter stance, however, support increased by 11 percentage points overall. Support increased among every subgroup polled -- African Americans, Hispanics, whites, public school teachers, Democrats and Republicans.

With 44 percent of the public undecided about charter schools, research evidence appears as influential as President Obama in persuading the public. Support increased by 14 percentage points among those who were told of research showing that charters

were raising test scores. Among African Americans, the percentage that completely support charter schools rose by 23 percentage points.

### Merit Pay

When asked for an opinion straight out, 43 percent of Americans support the idea of basing a teacher's salary in part on his or her students' academic progress on state tests; 27 percent oppose the idea; 30 percent are undecided. These numbers remain relatively unchanged since 2007 when *Education Next*–PEPG first began undertaking its annual national survey.

When informed of President Obama's support for merit pay, 13 percent more of the public favor the idea.

- Support increased among African Americans by 23 percentage points (to 55 percent).
- Support among Democrats increased by 15 percentage points (to 56 percent).
- Among teachers, support rose 19 percentage points (to 31 percent).

Notably, every subgroup in the survey except for public school teachers increased their support of merit pay to a majority of at least 55 percent.

By comparison, policy research on this topic had a relatively modest impact. Support for merit pay climbed by just 6 percent when respondents were exposed to positive research evidence on the issue. Among African Americans, however, that support jumped 28 percentage points.

### School Vouchers

When asked outright, 40 percent of the public support school vouchers; 34 percent do not; and 27 percent are undecided. However, public opinion can change depending on how the survey question is posed. When informed of the President's opposition to school vouchers, public support dropped to 24 percent.

- African Americans show greater support for school vouchers (57 percent) than the population as a whole. However, their support dropped by 12 percentage points when told of the President's opposition.
- Thirty percent of Democrats oppose school vouchers. After learning Obama's opinion, that number rose by 22 percentage points to 52 percent opposed.

When presented with research evidence that claims "students learn no more in private schools than in public schools," support for school vouchers dropped by 10 percentage points, an impact almost as large as the President's.

### **Learn what Americans think about today's important education issues in the 2009 *Education Next*–PEPG National Education Survey, including:**

- **The State of American Schools** – When Americans learn the truth about the international standing of U.S. students (our 15-year-olds rank 24th out of 29 of the leading industrialized countries in math), the number who give their schools an "A" or "B" drops from 18 to 13 percent and those giving a "D" or "F" rises by 10 percent.
- **Graduation Rates** – When asked to estimate the percent of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who graduate within 4 years of entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Americans on average offer a pessimistic guess of 66 percent, 9 percent below the U.S. Department of Education's official national estimate.
- **National Standards** – 72 percent of Americans support having the same set of educational standards and giving all students the same tests in math, science and reading.
- **Teacher Pay** – When told how much teachers in their state earn, the number of Americans who support pay increases for teachers drops 16 percentage points. With accurate information about salaries, the majority believe teacher pay shouldn't change.
- **Teacher Tenure** – 51 percent of Americans support requiring teachers to demonstrate that their students are making adequate progress on state tests in order to receive tenure.
- **School Spending** – Support for increased spending on schools drops 8 percentage points (from 46 to 38 percent) when Americans are told what is actually spent in their own district.
- **Virtual Schooling** – 51 percent of Americans support the idea of high schoolers taking some academic courses over the internet.

- **Single-Sex Schools** – 45 percent of public school teachers support single-sex schooling; 28 percent neither oppose nor support it.
- **Mayoral Control** – Americans remain divided on the issue with nearly equal support for (32 percent) and against (36 percent) mayors controlling public schools in their community.
- **Teacher Unions** – As many or more Americans believe teacher unions are blocking school reform (31 percent) rather than helping it (28 percent).
- **No Child Left Behind (NCLB)** – More Americans (49 percent) believe NCLB should be renewed with little or no change than believe the law should be done away with (20 percent).

Read “**The Persuadable Public: Changing Minds about School Reform**” and view the results of the 2009 *Education Next*–PEPG Survey of Public Opinion online at [www.EducationNext.org](http://www.EducationNext.org).

The *Education Next*–PEPG survey was conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks between February 25 and March 13, 2009. The findings are based on a nationally representative stratified sample of U.S. adults (age 18 years and older) and oversamples of Hispanics, non-Hispanic blacks and public school teachers. The sample consists of 2,153 non-Hispanic whites, 434 non-Hispanic blacks, 481 Hispanics, and 183 members of other ethnic groups; 709 public school teachers and 948 residents of Florida; and 1,694 self-identified Democrats and 1,265 self-identified Republicans. With 3,200 total respondents, the margin of error for responses given by the full sample in the *Education Next*–PEPG survey is roughly 1 percentage point.

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*Education Next* is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, part of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

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