

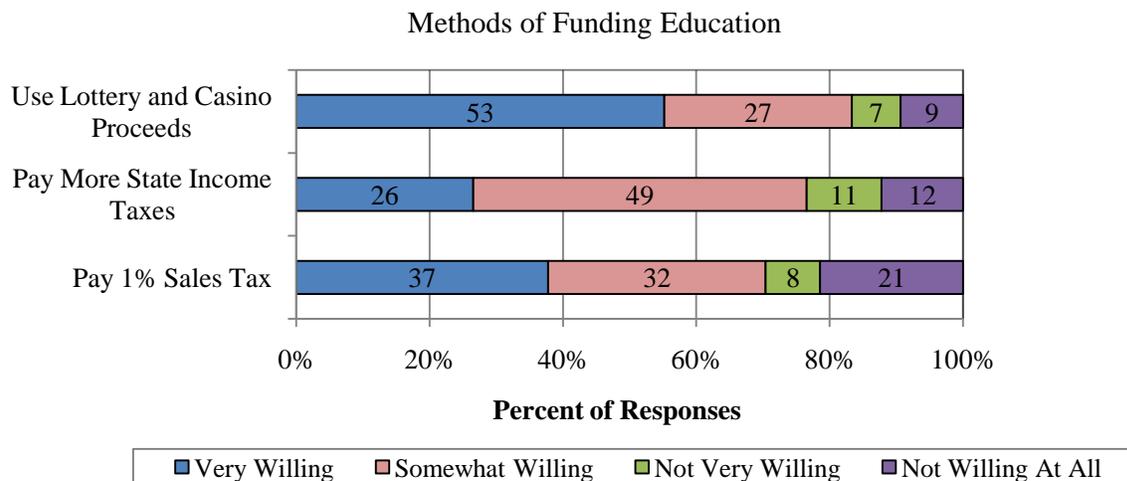


## PUBLIC OPINION OF EDUCATION: FINANCE REFORM

### Highlights of the 2006 Statewide Public Poll on the Condition of Education in Delaware

June 2007

The final brief for the 2006 Public Poll on the Condition of Education in Delaware focuses on education finance issues related to equity, school improvement, and funding resources. While more than one-fourth of Delawareans interviewed were very willing to pay a 1% sales tax, more income taxes, or use gambling proceeds to help fund education, only gambling proceeds were strongly supported by greater than half of Delaware residents polled.



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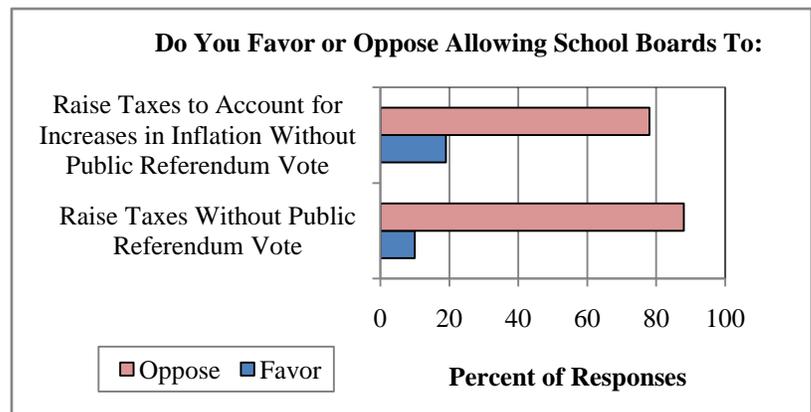
For more information on the 2006 Public Poll, please contact the R&D Center by email at [ud-rcd@udel.edu](mailto:ud-rcd@udel.edu) or by phone at (302) 831-4433. The briefs and full report are available on the web at <http://www.rdc.udel.edu>

## METHODS FOR INCREASING FUNDING

### Poll Results

Five questions in this year's poll addressed Delawareans' beliefs about sources of funding for schools. Three questions were related to new sources of revenues for education: lottery and casino proceeds, increased state income tax and sales tax. Using lottery and casino proceeds to fund education received the most support, with 53% of Delawareans indicating they are very willing to use these sources of revenue for education. Opinions regarding a 1% sales tax were decidedly mixed. While 37% of Delawareans are very willing to pay a 1% sales tax earmarked for education, 21% indicated they are not willing at all. Similarly, while 26% of Delawareans indicated they are very willing to pay more state income taxes, 12% indicated they are not willing at all.

Two questions on the poll were related to the state's current referenda practices. The overwhelming majority of Delawareans (88%) are opposed to allowing school boards to raise taxes without submitting the increase to a public referendum vote and 78% oppose raising taxes to account for increases in inflation without a public referendum vote (78%).



### Putting it in Context

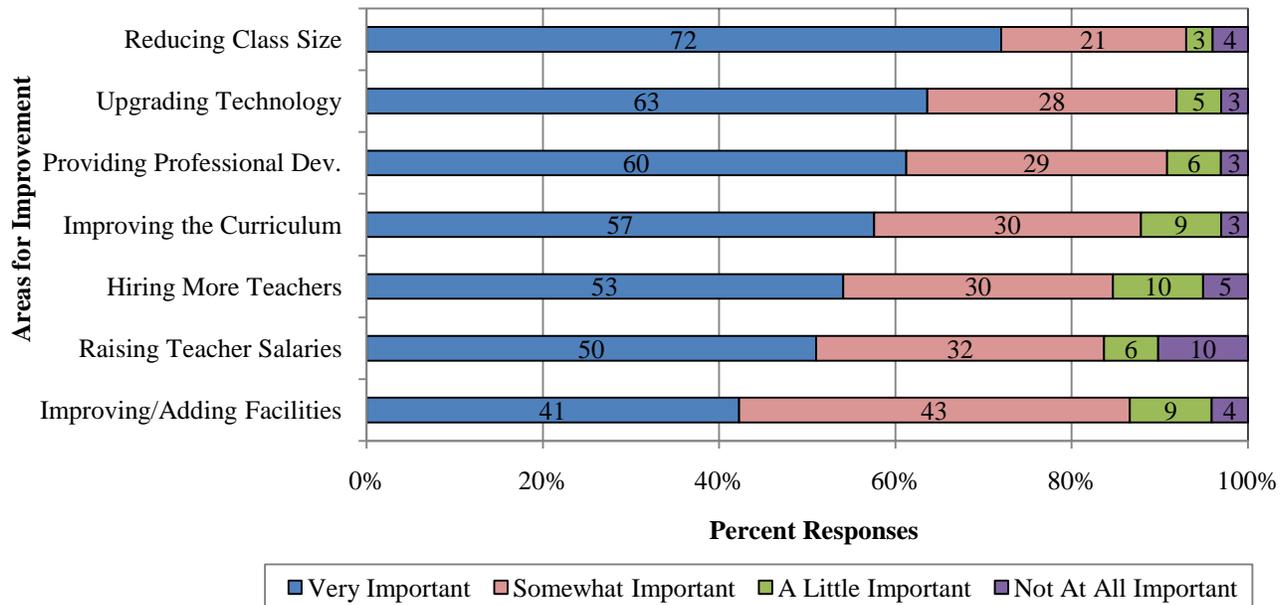
A January 2006 article in the Charlotte Observer noted that shifts in population demographics have made referenda for school funding increasingly difficult to pass.<sup>1</sup> As the population of the United States ages, residents have less direct links to public education and are less likely to endorse measures to increase spending for education.<sup>2</sup> According to a report by Yasser Nakib regarding education funding, this is also a problem in Delaware where local district funds are obtained through property taxes.<sup>3</sup> These funds may be used to pay for current operating expenses, tuition charges, minor capital improvement and debt service. Taxes used for current operating expenses and for debt service to fund school construction or major renovation must be passed through a referendum vote of school district residents. Taxes collected for special program tuition expenses and minor capital improvements do not require a referendum vote.

## FUNDING AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

### Poll Results

A series of questions on the 2006 poll addressed the issue of how Delawareans believe additional funds should be spent for school improvement, should they become available. Respondents were asked to rate each of the following improvements from very important to not at all important: additional resources for improving the curriculum (including purchasing new books), hiring more teachers in order to offer more courses, raising teacher's salaries, providing professional development for teachers or staff, reducing class size, upgrading technology and improving or adding facilities.

Assume that additional money became available to spend on public schools in your community. Please indicate how important you think each would be to bring about the greatest improvement in the public schools.



Reducing class size received the highest percent of ratings as very important (72%), followed by upgrading technology (63%) and providing professional development for teachers or staff (60%). Improving or adding facilities received the lowest percentage of very important ratings (41%).

### Putting it in Context

While reducing class size received the highest rate of endorsement, the research results on reducing class size are decidedly mixed. Reducing class size does seem to lead to academic gains, especially for children at risk for academic failure; but, it is one of the more expensive interventions to increase academic achievement.<sup>4</sup> Concerning technology in the classroom, research results vary widely. John Schacter (1999), in a comprehensive review of the five largest studies on education and technology conducted before 1999, found that students with access to various technologies like computer assisted instruction and simulations and software that teaches higher order thinking, “show positive gains in achievement on researcher constructed tests, standardized tests and national tests”.<sup>5</sup> However, the newly released first-year results of an experimental study examining the use of technology-based products, commissioned by the United States Congress, showed no difference in standardized test scores between students with the technology, and those using other methods.<sup>6</sup>

In their report entitled *A National Plan for Improving Professional Development*, the National Staff Development Council reported that, “improving teacher knowledge and teaching skills are essential to raising student performance.”<sup>7</sup> Based on two questions from earlier poll briefs, Delawareans appear to support professional development in the schools. Specific to early care and education, 77% of Delawareans would support using public funds for tuition reimbursement and apprenticeship programs to help early care providers and teachers take college coursework, a great deal or a fair amount.<sup>8</sup> In addition, 62% of Delawareans indicated that they think raising the salaries of teachers currently teaching in Delaware would improve the quality of education in our schools a great deal or a fair amount.<sup>9</sup>

## FUNDING EQUITY

### Poll Results

Delawareans were asked to consider two questions about the equity of funding among school districts in Delaware. When asked, “Do you think that the amount of money that goes to education in your state should or should not be the same for all students, even if it means taking funding from some wealthy school districts, and giving it to poor districts,” 81% of Delawareans polled indicated they thought that funding should be equitable across districts. Additionally, when asked, “Should wealthy school districts be allowed to spend as much as they want on their schools, or should their spending be capped so that poor districts are not left behind,” 64% of Delawareans indicated that school districts should have spending caps.

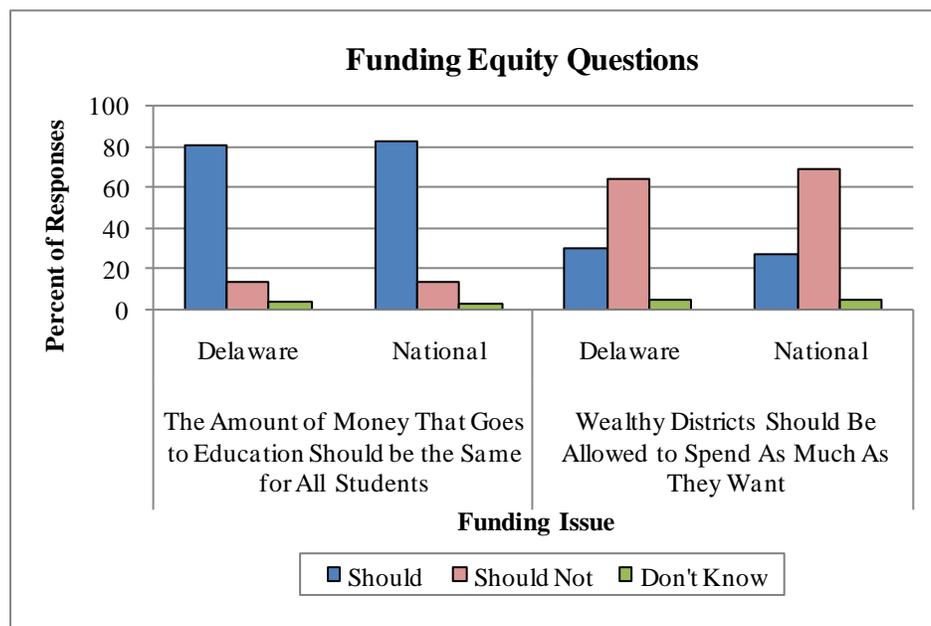
### Putting it in Context

The results from a national survey on education funding mirror those found in Delaware. According to a random telephone survey by National Public Radio, 83% of individuals surveyed believe the amount of money that goes to education in their state should be the same for all students, even if it means taking funding from wealthy school districts and giving it to poor districts.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, 69% of individuals surveyed indicated that they did not think wealthy school districts should be allowed to spend as much as they want on their schools.

Research clearly documents that school funding inequality is a problem across the United States. A 2005 report by the Education Trust revealed that in Delaware there is a \$1,055 difference in the revenues available per student in the highest and lowest minority districts (\$8,821 vs. \$7,766

- dollars adjusted for low income students).<sup>11</sup> This is a difference of 13.6%, which is far better than what is happening in other states across the nation. In some states, the wealthiest school districts spend three to four times as much on education as the poorest districts in the same state, while in other states the wealthiest districts spend more than ten times as much on education as the poorest districts.<sup>12</sup> However, according to Hanushek in his article *Assessing the Effects of School Resources on Student Performance: An Update*, there is no significant or consistent relationship between school resources and academic performance.<sup>13</sup> Thus, equalizing funding gaps may not result in equalizing achievement.

Drawing from earlier Poll Briefs in the 2006 series, Delawareans seem to favor equitable funding, even when it comes to specific programs. The majority of Delawareans polled (63%) favor full day kindergarten for all children, while only 26% of Delawareans favor pre-school or full-day kindergarten only for at-risk children.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while the majority of Delawareans (81%) polled this year favor



equalizing funding across districts, the majority of Delawareans (65%) oppose charter schools, if charter schools reduce the amount of funds available to public schools.<sup>15</sup>

## Design, Data Collection, and Sampling Error

From February 13 to April 24, 2006, telephone interviews were conducted with 941 residents throughout the state, 302 parents or school-age children and 639 non-parents. The data collection procedure for the poll was scientifically developed and random digit dialing was employed to obtain a random sample of citizens. All analyses conducted by the R&D Center for the Public Poll involved weighting the data to reflect the statewide population more accurately.

When using a sample, all measurements are subject to sampling error; that is, the extent to which the results may differ from what would be obtained if the entire population of Delaware residents had been surveyed. It is important to remember that small differences may not be statistically significant. The size of the sampling error primarily depends on the number of people surveyed and the response percentage. The sampling error for the poll\* ranges from approximately  $\pm 1.9\%$  -  $3.2\%$  for the total adult sample,  $\pm 2.3\%$  -  $3.9\%$  for the non-parent sample, and  $\pm 3.4\%$  -  $5.6\%$  for the parent sample.



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\* These error ranges used a 95% confidence interval for response percentages between 5% and 95%.

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- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*