

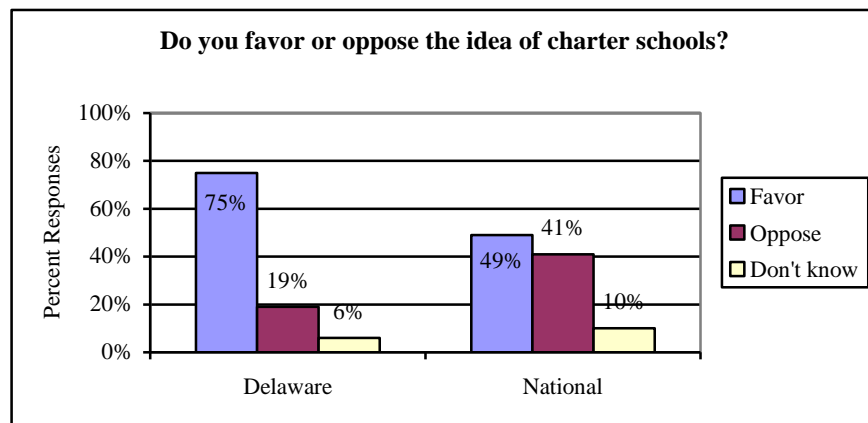


PUBLIC OPINION OF EDUCATION: CHARTER SCHOOLS AND EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

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

April 2007

National and local trends indicate Americans favor the autonomy charter schools are granted under state law. According to recent public polls, Delawareans are more accepting of charter school autonomy than the national respondents. The 2005 National PDK/Gallup Poll reported 49% of respondents favor the idea of charter schools,¹ compared to 75% of Delaware respondents.



In addition to discussing charter schools, this issue of Public Opinion of Education addresses financing and social-emotional development in early care and education.

For more information or questions regarding the Public Poll, contact:

Dariel Janerette, J.D. and Cheryl M. Ackerman, Ph.D.

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE EDUCATION RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Phone: 302-831-4433 E-mail: rdc@udel.edu

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For more information on the 2006 Public Poll, please contact the staff of the R&D Center by email at ud-rdc@udel.edu or by phone at (302) 831-4433. The briefs and full report will also be available on the web as they are produced at <http://www.rdc.udel.edu>

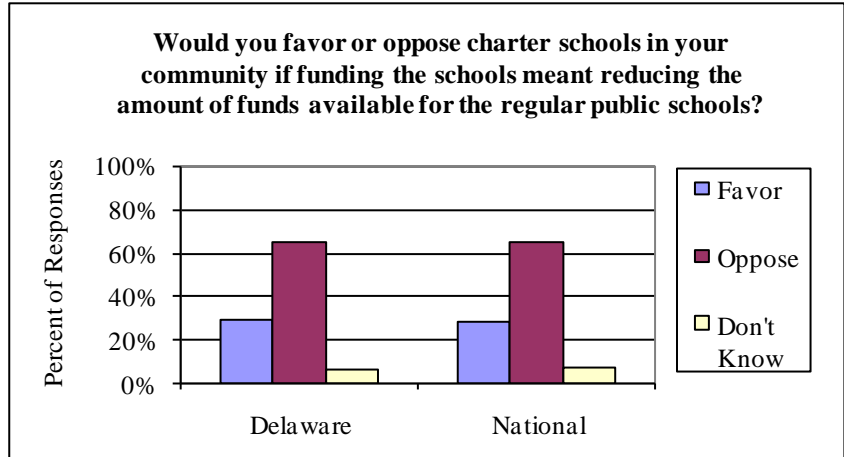
General Opinion of Charter Schools

Poll Results

Delaware citizens were asked three general questions about their opinions of charter schools in Delaware. Respondents were asked their familiarity with Delaware charter schools, their beliefs about charter schools, and their opinions on charter school funding. Seventy-three percent of Delaware respondents have heard or read about Delaware charter schools.

When asked if they favor or oppose the idea that charter schools operate under a charter that frees them from many of the state regulations imposed on public schools, 75% of Delawareans responded in favor of charter school freedom. The majority (65%) of Delawareans polled oppose charter schools in their communities if funding the schools reduces the amount of funds available for regular public schools, while 29% favor funding charter schools even if it reduced the amount of funds available

for the public schools in their communities. Similar to Delawareans, 65% of respondents participating in the National 2005 PDK/Gallup Poll opposed funding charter schools in their community if the funding reduced the amount of funds available for regular public schools, while 28% of the respondents favored the funding division.²



Putting it in Context

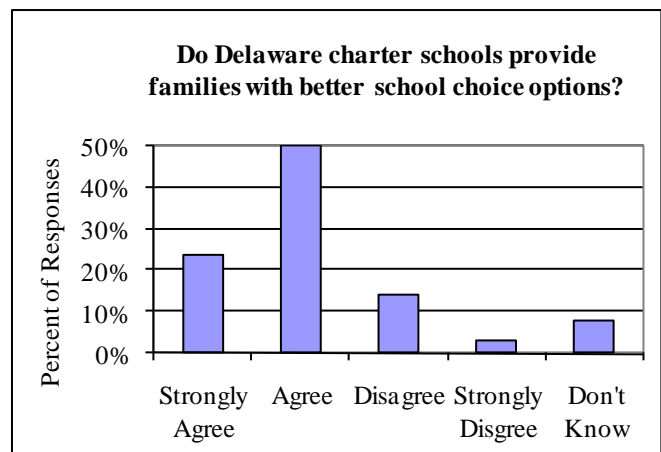
The charter school movement has been a growing phenomenon throughout the nation since 1992.³ In 1995, the Delaware legislature authorized the creation of charter schools.⁴ Delaware's first two charter schools opened in 1996.⁵ Today, Delaware's 17 charter schools enroll over 7,575 students.⁶ The growth of charter schools has increased the public's awareness of these schools.

Charter School Accountability and Impact

Poll Results

There were four questions on the poll about charter school accountability in relation to traditional public schools. Respondents were asked their opinions about school choice options, charter schools' employment rules, enrollment differences between charter schools and public schools, and their concerns about charter schools attracting better performing students in middle and high school. The majority (74%) of Delawareans agree or strongly agree that Delaware charter schools provide families with better choice options. In addition, 71% of Delaware respondents support the autonomy charter schools are afforded in teacher employment practices.

However, 73% of Delaware citizens are concerned about enrollment practices that permit charter schools to turn away students who traditional public schools must accept. Over half of Delawareans polled (59%) were concerned charter schools attract better performing middle and high school students than regular public schools.



Poll Context

Research confirms Delaware respondents' beliefs about school choice options in Delaware. Researchers at The Evaluation Center of Western Michigan University have released three reports on Delaware charter schools. The report entitled *Evaluation of the Delaware Charter School Reform Year 2* found "Delaware residents have a number of options to choose from when selecting a school for their children."⁷ Delaware school choice options include public schools, intra-district and inter-district choice programs, private schools, parochial schools, and home-schooling.⁸ On the issue of charter school employment practices, the researchers determined "charter schools have greater ability to hire and fire teachers; in order to build a more focused learning community, they sometimes have to fire and not rehire teachers that do not fit a school profile."⁹

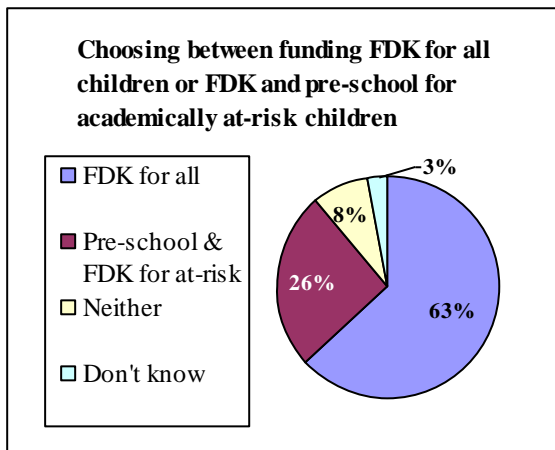
In 2006, Delaware legislators and the Delaware Department of Education questioned the enrollment practices of Delaware charter schools, specifically focusing on selective admission policies. Delaware charter school law permits charter schools to "identify a special focus and seek to attract students with such a special interest."¹⁰ The schools may use admission preferences for siblings of students who attend the school and students who reside within five miles of the school. Delaware charter law states any remaining open seats should be filled through the lottery process.¹¹ The 2004 *Evaluation of the Delaware Charter School Reform* report found "some charter schools also have profiles and marketing practices that help them attract high performing students."¹²

Financing Early Care & Education

Poll Results

Delawareans were asked two questions regarding financial support for early care programming. First, for the second year in a row, more than three-fourths of Delaware residents strongly support a proposal providing financial support for early care workers to increase their knowledge and skills through tuition reimbursement and apprenticeship programs (78% in 2005 and 77% in 2006).¹³

Delawareans were also asked to choose between one of two funding priorities regarding kindergarten and pre-school: whether funds should be allocated to full-day-kindergarten (FDK) for all children or to support FDK and pre-school for academically at-risk children. Sixty-three percent of respondents chose to support FDK for all children.



Putting it in Context

In Delaware, 47,000 children are in some form of licensed childcare. In a publication by the Delaware Early Care and Education Council, 27% of the licensed child care programs in Delaware are characterized by their poor quality.¹⁴ This report makes several recommendations to improve conditions in Delaware that are consistent with research in this area. For

example, a majority of Delaware early care and education providers have educational backgrounds that are limited to high school diplomas and, at times, a few college courses. A study conducted by the National Federation of Teachers (2002) examining early care recommended requiring higher levels of education and training for individuals working in early child care and establishing and enforcing standards for all early care programs.¹⁵

Additionally, a rigorous review of studies evaluating diverse early intervention programs found that "early childhood interventions are designed to provide protective influence to compensate for the various risk factors that potentially compromise healthy child development in the years before school entry."¹⁶ This work by Karoly, Kilburn, and Cannon (2005) also detailed the results of research in education and economics that have shown initial investments in early care and education result in savings and benefits for individuals and society and that these programs may be most beneficial to disadvantaged children.

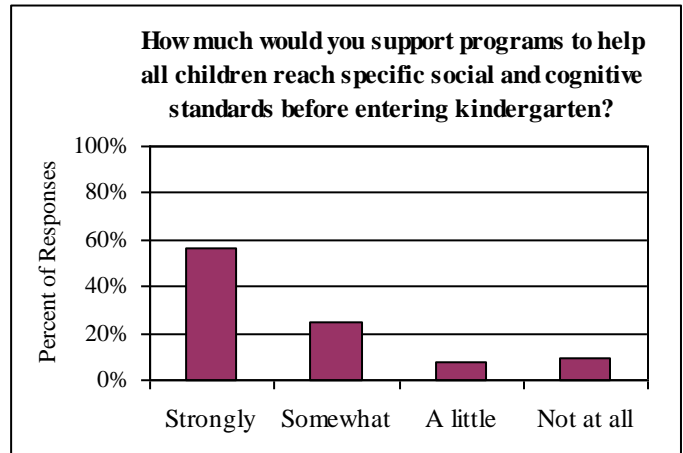
Social-Emotional Development & Academic Success in Young Children

Poll Results

While most conversations about high quality early care and education include only cognitive factors, what is often left out are the social and emotional issues. One question on this year's poll asked Delawareans how much they support programs that would help all children reach specific social and cognitive standards before entering kindergarten. A strong majority (81%) strongly or somewhat support this type of programming.

Putting it in Context

School readiness has implications for initial success in kindergarten as well as future success in elementary school and beyond. It "includes not only cognitive skills but also those associated with socialization, self-regulatory behavior, and learning approaches".¹⁷ Children enter kindergarten with widely varying skill levels that are strongly associated with home environment factors and participation in formal early care and education programs, and these differences appear to have long-term effects.¹⁸ Data from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the Kindergarten class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K) shows that the gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children widens over time.¹⁹



Design, Data Collection, and Sampling Error

From February 13 to April 24, 2006, telephone interviews were conducted with 941 citizens 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.

All surveys using a sample 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 citizens had been surveyed. It is important to remember that small differences may not be statistically significant. The size of the sampling error depends largely on the number of people surveyed.* Therefore, the sampling error for the poll's sample size and for a 95% confidence interval, ranges from approximately 1.9% - 3.2% for the total sample, 2.2% - 3.9% for the non-parent sample and 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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