

# Searching for Consensus in Education Reform

By Gary A. Ferguson

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Albert Hunt reported that Americans may be reaching a “consensus for some significant change” in education.<sup>1</sup> Hunt’s conclusion was based on an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll conducted March 6-10, 1997 in which 58% said fundamental changes are needed in our education system while 36% believed that “just some” changes are needed. Hunt also described the Democratic Party’s inherent advantages on the education issue, citing that voters tend to agree more with the Democrats on education issues and support President Clinton’s education initiatives.

Is Hunt’s assessment correct? Have Americans reached a consensus on education reform? Do the Democrats have a “lock” on the education issue? A national survey conducted by American Viewpoint last February provides some evidence of areas where strong to moderate consensus has been reached as well as areas where further public discussion is necessary.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the findings help put the political implications of the education debate into perspective.

## The Basics and Standardized Tests

A clear consensus exists on one approach to education. The American Viewpoint survey found registered voters nearly unanimous (93%) in their desire for better teaching of basic subjects, involving parents more, and putting additional dollars directly into the classroom. Approval of this approach is extremely high regardless of respondents’ age, gender, or voting patterns.

Another area of consensus is the overwhelming support Americans express for requiring students to pass standardized tests before graduating from high school. In all, 86% agree, including 71% who strongly agree, that schools should give standardized tests in core subjects, while just 12% disagree (see Figure 1). The NBC/*WSJ* poll found that 86% believe our public schools would improve if students were required to pass

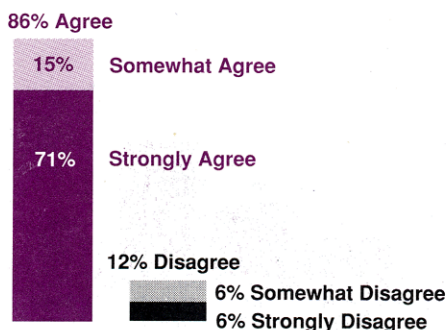
standardized tests before moving to the next grade (see Figure 2).

As the *Wall Street Journal*’s June Kronholz and Hunt point out, however, opinion is divided on whether national tests should be administered, whether a national core curriculum should be required, and how national tests should be developed.<sup>3</sup> They note that when arguments on both sides of the debate are laid out, the public is barely in favor of national testing.

As is often the case, the suggestion of federal involvement polarizes the electorate. In response to the American Viewpoint question, “Should the federal government be involved in establishing a national test for reading and math,” 49% are in favor and 47% are opposed. Our survey found strong support for setting national standards in core subjects but no consensus on who should set those standards. Most voters opt for standards set by a broad-based national commission rather than by Congress and the education establishment, or simply for local autonomy (see Figure 3).

Figure 1

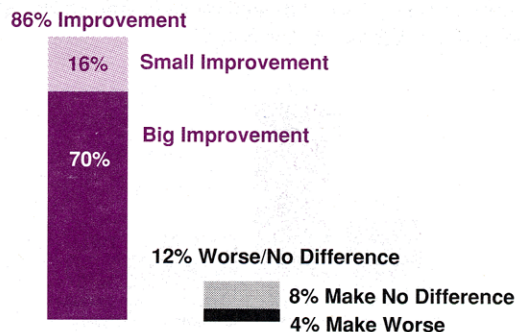
**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following...Schools should administer standardized tests in all core subjects that students must pass before they can graduate?



Source: Survey by American Viewpoint, February 10-13, 1997.

Figure 2

**Question:** For each...[proposal to improve public schools], please tell me whether you think that would be a big improvement, a small improvement, would make no real difference, or would make things worse....Require students to pass standardized tests in order to move on to the next grade?



Source: Survey by NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, March 6-10, 1997.

## Consensus in Education Reform?

Voters, however, are still formulating their opinions on the issue of national education standards as two survey questions illustrate. Using a split-sample, one-half was administered a question that argued for national standards while the other half received an argument in favor of setting standards at the local level. Each statement received majority support.

A penchant for local control is illustrated further by other surveys. The March NBC/WSJ poll found support for the belief that the primary responsibility for improving the quality of education rests with local school boards (47%) rather than state government (25%) or the federal government (13%) (see Figure 4). The 1995 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa survey makes the same point with regard to funding. In that poll, 70% favored changing federal requirements to permit local school authorities to decide how federal funding is spent rather than forcing them to follow federal guidelines.

### Performance-based Incentives

Interestingly, there is broad support for a Republican proposal to reward teachers, administrators, and schools that improve student performance. Sixty-four percent of respondents in the February American Viewpoint survey said we should spend federal education funds on incentive packages—including monetary bonuses or other recognition—for teachers, administrators, and schools that achieve significant improvements in student academic performance.

Agreement on this proposal cuts across party and income lines, and is equal among men and women. Only those age 60

and older are more likely to disagree with allowing federal funds to be used for such incentive packages.

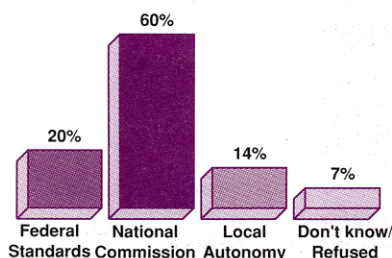
### What Works? What's Wasted?

With over 750 education programs run by more than three dozen different government agencies, voters are generally supportive of Republicans who have undertaken a one-year study to identify and eliminate ineffective, overlapping, and wasteful programs. Overall, 56% support such an effort (39% strongly) while 29% say Republicans are simply trying to cut education. Not surprisingly, men (61%) are more likely to support this approach than women (51%) although majority support among females is an important factor for lawmakers to consider.

Support for this “what works? what’s wasted?” approach is divided along partisan lines. That is, 82% of Republicans are supportive compared to 56% of ticket-splitters and 34% of Democrats. However, the group most likely to say this approach represents a cut in education spending—women ages 18-34 (39%)—is just as likely to support the Republican initiative as older women (18-34, 52%; 60+, 50%). Further, support increases with likelihood of voting. Sixty-one percent of those who say they vote in all elections support this approach. Additionally, a majority (55%) of those who vote in most elections are supportive. Among those who vote in half of all elections or less, just 46% favor the approach while 35% call it an attempt to cut education funding.

**Figure 3**

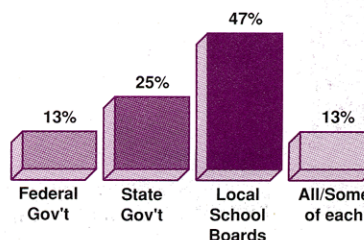
**Question:** Many people agree that we need to set national education standards for teaching and student achievement. Some people say those standards should be set by the Department of Education in conjunction with the Congress and national teacher's unions. Other people say those standards should be set by a commission of people from state and local governments along with representatives of business, parents groups, teachers, and school administrators in all 50 states. Still others say that local schools and parents should be autonomous from national standards of any kind and be allowed to set their own standards. Which of these approaches do you favor?



Source: Survey by American Viewpoint, February 10-13, 1997.

**Figure 4**

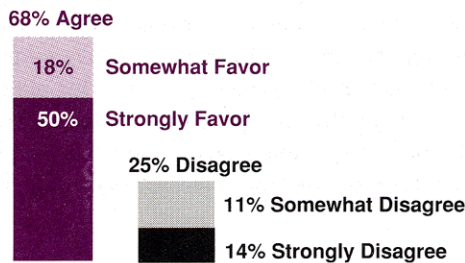
**Question:** Do you think the responsibility for improving the quality of our public schools should be primarily with the federal government, the state government, or local school boards?



Source: Survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal, March 6-10, 1997.

Figure 5

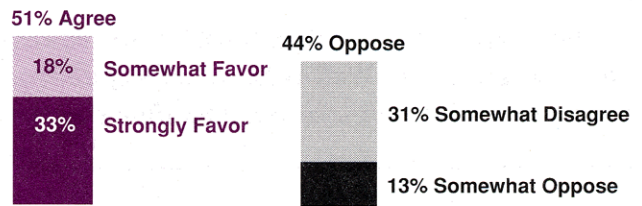
**Question:** Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend regardless of where they live?



Source: Survey by American Viewpoint, February 10-13, 1997.

Figure 6

**Question:** Do you favor or oppose using public education money to provide scholarships to allow low and middle income families to send their children to private or religious schools if they choose?



Source: Survey by American Viewpoint, February 10-13, 1997.

Support for this one-year study is not based on approval of other Republican proposals. In fact, a majority of those who favor *or* oppose vouchers or school choice support the approach outlined in this proposal.

	Vouchers		School Choice	
	Favor	Oppose	Favor	Oppose
Support Study Attempt to Cut Education	57%	53%	60%	53%
	27%	29%	25%	29%

School Choice and Vouchers

Despite the rather heated debate public school choice continues to generate, relative consensus has been reached on the issue. Almost seven in ten favor school choice, that is, "allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend regardless of where they live" (see Figure 5). This finding is consistent with the 1995 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa survey as well as the March NBC/WSJ poll. Although Republicans are the most supportive of school choice (74%), substantial majorities of Democrats (69%) and ticket-splitters (64%) also favor it.

On the other hand, vouchers are clearly more problematic. For one thing, the word "voucher" carries a negative connotation for many. Then, too, the public is uncertain about the impact of vouchers on the public school system. Not the least of the difficulties for policy makers is understanding public opinion on the issue. As we know from other surveys, support for vouchers, as for many new or complex issues, varies considerably depending on question wording.

Earlier work has suggested that differences in support might be due to the inclusion of the phrase "using public education money" rather than "giving education tax credits." Indeed, our current question on vouchers, which makes clear that public education money would provide scholarships to low and middle-income families, shows much less polarization than earlier questions which indicated clear public preferences either for or against vouchers (see Figure 6). What is not clear, of course, is the impact of using the word "vouchers" instead of "scholarships" or what support might be if the phrase "low and middle-income" is removed from the question.

As with school choice, this question finds men (54% favor, 43% oppose) slightly more favorable to the concept than women (49% favor, 46% oppose). However, young men and women express rather strong support for such scholarships (64%). A majority of Republicans (59%) are in favor of vouchers but ticket-splitters (50%-48%) and Democrats (47%-48%) are evenly divided.

Challenges for Congress and the GOP

Our November 1996 post-election research revealed that 31% of all 1996 voters said the first or second priority they would like the new Congress to address is education reform.

Education reform is of particular concern to younger voters and, more interestingly, cuts across party lines. That is, education is the first priority for 18% of all Republicans age 18-29, for 23% of Independents in the same age group, and 27% of all young Democrats.

Nevertheless, the reform process presents challenges to the Republican majority. Their position on education is the number two reservation voiced by 1996 voters (after the environment) about the GOP retaining control of Congress. Our February survey probed this question further and found that the biggest reservations about the education priorities of Republicans in Congress is that they will cut funding.

## Consensus in Education Reform?

Another hurdle for Republican lawmakers is that a majority of voters—including many Republicans—feel that the Democratic Party is closer to their own view on education than the GOP. In part, Democrats have successfully distorted the

“ *The Democrats’ so-called ‘lock’ on the education issue is a myth. Well-articulated Republican reforms can meet with widespread public support.* ”

Republican record on education issues. However, Republicans have failed to focus on education and to articulate their message in a meaningful way.

Despite these perceptions, our post-election research also indicates that the public is receptive to the GOP approach to education reform. That is, when the general party positions on education were outlined, 50% of all voters agreed with the Republicans’ position on education while just 39% chose the Democrats’ position. The question read as follows:

*Some people believe that in order to give parents more control over education, we need to allow them to choose which schools their children attend, to provide families with vouchers that will enable them to select private, religious, or parochial schools instead of public schools, and to reduce the role of the federal Department of Education.*

*Other people oppose school choice and vouchers because they believe such programs will harm the public school system. They say the federal Department of Education should play a major leadership role in setting national standards for education and we need to continue to fund federal education programs. Which of these statements is closer to your own view?*

Fifty percent favor choice, vouchers, and a reduced federal role. Thirty-nine percent oppose choice, vouchers, and want a major federal role and funding for federal education programs. The subgroup findings on this question are interesting particularly because of the public perception that education is a Democratic issue. To the contrary, a majority of men and a plurality of women take the Republican position on this question. Further, a majority of women ages 18-34 (51%) hold

this view. Also, a majority in seven out of nine geographic regions (the exceptions being New England and the West North Central) agree with the Republican position.

More importantly, agreement with the Republican approach to education reform cuts across income lines. A majority of Republicans, a plurality of ticket-splitters, and more than one-third of Democrats agree with the major components of the Republicans’ approach. The Democrats’ so-called “lock” on the education issue is a myth. Well-articulated Republican reforms can meet with widespread public support.

### Summary

Education reform is of keen interest to the public and policy makers alike. Opinion research indicates that consensus has been reached on a number of key issues including public school choice, the need for greater emphasis on basic education and standardized testing, and the need to reward high-performing teachers, schools, and administrators. The public also expresses a clear preference for local rather than federal or state control over school reform and decision-making.

At the same time, no consensus has been reached on whether vouchers are appropriate or who should set national standards or develop standardized tests. Further, Americans offer no clear mandate as to which reforms are the most important to implement.

Currently, education reforms are being discussed in Congress and an active debate is underway in both parties. The jury, however, is still out on the political ramifications of the education reform debate. The Democrats have a “natural” perceptual advantage on the issue. Still, our research shows that Americans have an open mind on approaches to improve our public education system and that there is a sizable amount of support for Republican reform ideas.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Albert Hunt, “Education Becomes Top Issue, And Consensus May Emerge For Significant Change,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 14, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> American Viewpoint Inc., National Monitor Survey, February 10-13, 1996. Survey is of registered voters.

<sup>3</sup> June Kronholz and Albert Hunt, “Clinton’s Initiatives Gain Approval, But People Split on a National Test,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 14, 1997).



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