

Public Opinion in Perspective: Wisconsin's Mind on Education

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Americans are notoriously ill informed about politics and public policy, in general, and education policy, in particular. But the most striking finding on education from the survey done for the Refocusing Wisconsin project was that that citizens of Wisconsin are paying attention – close attention – and have strong opinions when it comes to education.

Wisconsin residents are much more likely to stake out a clear position on various education policies than is the American public as a whole.

The survey done for the Refocusing Wisconsin project was a comprehensive examination of state attitudes. It permitted us to examine statewide opinion with a much larger and statistically precise sample than is normally available and also allowed us to compare attitudes across different areas of the state and among different demographic groups. Perhaps most importantly, the poll also was designed to permit comparisons of the views of Wisconsin to the rest of the nation when it comes to evaluating schools and potential reforms. Add to that the fact that we are able to compare public attitudes and perceptions with objective facts about the state of education in Wisconsin, and what you have here is a valuable and comprehensive look at Wisconsin's thinking when it comes to educating its young.

Over half of Wisconsinites (51 percent) told us that they were paying either “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of attention to issues involving education. In national surveys, 38

percent of the American public as a whole. When asked about specific education reforms, moreover, Wisconsinites are as much as five times more likely to stake out a clear position either in support or opposition than is the American public. Assuming such differences aren't strictly an artifact of survey methodology, a possibility we will discuss, Wisconsinites seem to pay more attention to educational issues and revealed a greater willingness to offer their opinions on education and potential reforms. In other words, when it comes to education, the people of Wisconsin have strong views and that makes them different from the rest of the country.

Wisconsin residents reported higher levels of support for a variety of reforms—in particular vouchers, charter schools, online education, and merit pay—than does the nation as a whole. That said, opposition levels to these reforms were also as high or higher than the nation as a whole. Though they give their local schools slightly lower grades than does the American public, Wisconsin residents also claimed (correctly) that their students perform as well as or better than students in other states on standardized tests. And Wisconsin residents are just as enthusiastic about student accountability requirements as is the American public. And Wisconsinites have another thing in common with their fellow Americans: they vastly underestimate the actual amount of money that is spent each year on students in public schools.

There is another important element that can be taken from this poll. The divide between residents of Milwaukee and the rest of the state is deep. When asked about the

quality of education in the state, Milwaukee residents offered significantly lower assessments than do residents statewide. In addition, city of Milwaukee residents distinguish themselves from other Wisconsinites for their higher levels of support for various education policy reforms.

Assessments of School Quality – Wisconsin’s Tough Graders

A variety of studies have shown that when asked about the quality of public schools, respondents typically offer higher evaluations of the schools in their communities than they do with the schools in their state or in the nation as whole. For example, respondents nationwide are more than twice as likely to give the schools in their own communities an “A” or “B” than they are the schools elsewhere. Wisconsin residents offer similar assessments, though the differences attenuate somewhat. Whereas about half (48 percent) of Wisconsin residents give the schools in the state as a whole an A or a B, fully 60 percent give the schools in their own communities such high marks.

At the same time, Wisconsin residents offered slightly lower evaluations of their local public schools than do respondents nationwide. Though the two groups are equally likely to give the schools in their communities an A or a B (60 percent for Wisconsin residents, 59 percent nationwide), Wisconsin residents are significantly more likely to offer marks at the very bottom of the grading spectrum. Almost twice as many residents of Wisconsin rate the schools in their communities at D or an F (13 percent), compared to 7 percent nationwide. But Wisconsin residents are roughly 9 percentage points less likely to

give their community schools a C. What is emerging here is that Wisconsin residents are less likely to fall in the middle of the road on these issues ... they are both more positive and more negative than the rest of the country.

When explicitly asked about the relative quality of education systems around the country, however, Wisconsin residents registered higher levels of support for their local schools. Almost four in ten (37 percent) of Wisconsin residents said that “the quality of the K-12 education system in Wisconsin” was higher than that in other states and a similar proportion (42 percent) believed that it was about the same. Only 11 percent thought it was worse than other states. Similarly, most Wisconsin residents thought that students in their states score at least as well on standardized tests as do students in the rest of the country. About one in three (34 percent) of Wisconsin residents thought that Wisconsin students scored better, and a little less than half (47 percent) believed Wisconsin students score about the same. Only 13 percent of Wisconsin residents believed that state students score worse than students nationwide.

These assessments are roughly consistent with the facts. In the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, Wisconsin students consistently performed above the national average but below the most elite states (e.g. Massachusetts, which ranks at the very top). Fourth grade students in Wisconsin ranked 15th in math, with a statewide average scale score that was statistically significantly different from the national average of 239. In reading, fourth graders ranked 30th, generating scores that

were no different from the national average. Wisconsin students in eighth grade scored higher than the national average in both subjects, placing 14th in math and 21st in reading.

As noted above, most studies show that people tend to be more enthusiastic about their local schools than those found in their state or the country as a whole. Milwaukee residents, however, buck this trend, giving schools in the state higher grades than schools in their own community. Over one in five (21 percent) of Milwaukee residents gave their local schools a failing grade. In the rest of the state, only one percent of residents gave their local schools a failing grade. Residents of the city of Milwaukee also were much more likely to see their schools as a major problem. Nearly half of city of Milwaukee residents (47 percent) gave Milwaukee Public Schools a poor rating and only three percent rated MPS as doing an excellent job. Finally, while 37 percent of Wisconsin residents said that “the quality of the K-12 education system in Wisconsin” was higher than that in other states, only 17 percent of city of city of Milwaukee residents rated Wisconsin’s system higher than other states. And, whereas 34 percent of state residents thought that Wisconsin students did better on standardized tests than students in other parts of the country, only 14 percent of Milwaukee residents thought so.

These differences and the grading of local life or conditions more harshly than state or national conditions, moreover, carry over into other domains of life. For example, while only one in three Wisconsinites (34 percent) think the state is on the right track, 40 percent believe the country is headed in the right direction. Additionally, Milwaukeeans are less

likely to believe the quality of life in Wisconsin is higher than other states (19 percent). More than the rest of the state, Milwaukeeans also tend to see the best and brightest as leaving Wisconsin for employment reasons and are more likely to anticipate their own departures.

Choice in Education: Vouchers, Charter Schools, and Online Education

Wisconsin has had as much or more experience with school choice as nearly any other state in the union. Milwaukee continues to operate the nation's oldest voucher program. Wisconsin was among the early adopters of charter schools and has enacted reasonably strong charter legislation. And a vibrant community of virtual schools operates in Wisconsin. It is no surprise, then, that Wisconsin residents were much more likely to stake out clear positions on vouchers, charter schools, and online education, no matter how these proposals are formulated. And for the most part, Wisconsin residents expressed higher levels of support for these choice initiatives than does the broader American public. Within Milwaukee, moreover, support for school choice reaches its apex.

When asked in the Education Next-PEPG surveys about a proposal “that would give low-income families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition,” 40 percent of the American public professes support, 34 percent expresses opposition, and 27 percent claims to neither support nor oppose. Using the exact same question wording, among Wisconsin residents, support jumps to 48 percent and opposition

to 42 percent, and the middling category drops to just 10 percent. Among residents of the city of Milwaukee, support for vouchers is even higher. There, nearly six in ten (59 percent) residents support vouchers, whereas just 28 percent oppose them. Again, there are fewer people with no opinions.

Though they often function much like tuition-assisted voucher programs, tax credit programs tend to attract higher public support than do voucher programs. Whereas 40 percent of the American public supports vouchers for low-income families, 60 percent of the American public supports programs that “offer a tax credit for educational expenses (fees, supplies, computers, and tuition to low- and moderate-income parents who send their children to public and private schools.” Moreover, 46 percent of the American public supports tax credits “for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools.” In Wisconsin, support for both of these kinds of tax credits is even higher. Sixty four percent of Wisconsin residents supported the former kind of tax credit, and 62 percent supported the latter. In the city of Milwaukee, support for these proposals is even stronger, with 64 percent of residents supporting the tax credit program for low and moderate-income parents, and more than three in four (76 percent) supporting a program in which individuals and corporations would receive a tax break for contributing to scholarships for low-income parents to send their children to public school.

Support for charter schools both around the nation and in Wisconsin follows a

similar pattern. Told that “many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board,” and that “these school are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations,” 40 percent of the American public professes support, 14 percent opposition, and 37 percent neither support nor opposition. In Wisconsin, by contrast, there is significantly more support and opposition. By a factor of nearly two, however, supporters of charter schools outnumber opponents in Wisconsin (54 percent to 28 percent). Notably, Wisconsinites are much more likely to have an opinion on the issue, with only 12 percent of residents saying they neither support nor oppose voucher program. Support for charter schools is also high in the city of Milwaukee, where 57 percent of residents support charter schools and 29 percent oppose them. Interestingly, there are no significant differences in attitudes on these measures across other areas of the state.

Online education, at least when it is used to expand the array of course offerings to students in rural communities, enjoys widespread support. In 2008, 64 percent of the American public expressed support for giving credit to students from “communities [that] have access to only a limited number of course offerings in the schools” who take courses over the Internet. Two years later in Wisconsin, a virtually identical 63 percent of residents expressed their support. In Milwaukee, more than two out of three city residents (67 percent) did so. As in previous measures, though, opposition to particular education reforms also appears higher in Wisconsin than in the nation as a whole. Whereas 13

percent of the American public opposed online education for rural schools in 2007, 23 percent of Wisconsin residents do so in 2010. And once again, a greater portion of the American public than the Wisconsin sample selected the middling category of “neither support nor oppose.”

Merit Pay and Teacher Tenure

Debates over merit pay and teacher tenure also appear more engaged and polarized in Wisconsin than they do in the rest of the country. Much of the American public has not yet made up its mind about the value of either merit pay or teacher tenure. That’s not the case in Wisconsin where residents, once again, are perfectly willing to stake out a clear position on these controversial issues. As a result, on both of these issues the Wisconsin public is much more divided than the American public as a whole. Depending upon the question asked, the American public is somewhere between three and nearly five times more likely to “neither support nor oppose” policies involving merit pay and teacher tenure. And in every instance, Wisconsin residents registered higher levels of both support and opposition than the American public.

A majority of Wisconsin residents (53 percent to 33 percent) supported merit pay—that is, the practice of “basing a teacher’s salary, in part, on his or her students’ academic progress.” Among the American public as a whole, there exists a mere plurality of support (43 percent to 27 percent). Again, we find further evidence that Wisconsinites are more

engaged in education policy, as Americans as a whole were three times more likely than Wisconsin residents to select this middling category.

On the issue of teacher tenure, this pattern of findings is even starker. While just over one in three (35 percent) Wisconsin residents support offering tenure to teachers, only one in four in Americans nationwide does so. But Wisconsin residents are also twice as likely to oppose tenure as members of the American public. Fully half of Wisconsin residents oppose tenure, compared to 23 percent of the American public. The reason for this apparent contradiction, again, is the striking difference in the percentage of Wisconsin residents who are willing to stake out a clear position on this issue. While almost half (47 percent) of the American public claimed to “neither favor nor oppose” tenure, only 11 percent of Wisconsin residents did so. There is more support for teacher tenure in the city of Milwaukee with a narrow plurality (43 percent to 41 percent) of city residents supporting tenure.

When asked about a proposal that “would require teachers to demonstrate that their students are making adequate progress on state tests in order to receive tenure,” 56 percent of Wisconsin residents and 51 percent of the American public express support, as compared to 29 percent of Wisconsin residents and 20 percent of the American public who oppose the policy – again showing less middle ground in the state. When asked about a proposal to “offer teachers a higher salary in exchange for giving up tenure,” 36 percent of Wisconsin residents respond affirmatively, as compared to 30 percent of the American

public; on this same item, though, 40 percent of Wisconsin residents also voiced opposition, as compared to 23 percent of the American public. On both questions, the American public as a whole is roughly three times more likely to “neither support nor oppose” the proposed amendment to current tenure practices than are Wisconsin residents.

School Spending

Americans tend to underestimate vastly the amount of money spent on public schools. In 2007, an *Education Next*-PEPG survey asked respondents to estimate how much is spent each year on public school students. The average per-pupil-spending estimate from respondents was \$4,231 dollars, and the median response was just \$2,000. At the time this survey was fielded, actual average spending per pupil exceeded \$10,000.

Wisconsin residents similarly underestimate actual expenditures on public school students. Though actual annual per-pupil expenditures in Wisconsin surpass \$12,000, those Wisconsin residents who were willing to hazard an estimate claimed they thought expenditures amounted to just \$6,400, on average. The median estimate was \$5,000. Moreover, exactly one in four Wisconsin residents thought that less than \$1,500 spent on public school students each year.

Interestingly, Wisconsin residents are just as sanguine as the nation as a whole about the efficacy of increased school spending. A majority of 57 percent of Wisconsin residents, and 53 percent of the nation as a whole, are either very confident or somewhat

confident that “if more money were spent on public schools in your district ... students would learn more.” But once again, staunch critics of increased spending, though, appear in higher proportions in Wisconsin than they do in the rest of the nation. Whereas just 13 percent of the American public is “not confident at all” that increased spending will augment student learning, 19 percent of Wisconsin residents reported such views.

Student Accountability – Where Wisconsin and the Nation Are In Line

Wisconsin residents exhibit just as much support as the rest of the nation for student accountability measures. In 2007, the last time these questions were administered in an *Education Next*-PEPG survey, 81 percent of the American public supported a requirement that “students in certain grades must pass an exam before they are eligible to move on to the next grade level.” Three years later in Wisconsin, 80 percent of residents continued to do so. In 2007, 85 percent of the American public supported another requirement that “students must pass an exam before they are eligible to receive a high school diploma.” In 2010, 85 percent of Wisconsin residents supported the same requirement.

Partisanship and Attitudes

Decades of research in American politics and public opinion have demonstrated that partisanship or party identification is the single most important driver of policy attitudes.

We examined differences in assessments of the education system in the state and various potential reforms by self reported party identification. While there were differences on some questions, there was relatively little variance in attitudes among Democrats and Republicans on most issues.

Republicans were slightly more likely to pay attention to education issues, but there was no difference by party attachment in how Wisconsinites compared the education system in the state to other states overall or by test scores. Furthermore, while Democrats rated schools in the state higher than did Republicans, there was no difference in how Democrats and Republicans graded schools in their own communities.

Republicans were slightly more supportive of charter schools (61 percent for Republicans and 51 percent support from Democrats) but there was majority support from both camps. There was very slight additional support from Republicans for requirements that students pass exams to go to the next grade or to get a high school diploma, but again, it was minimal.

Republicans, however, were more likely than Democrats (62 percent to 51 percent) to support basing teacher salaries on student progress. And Democrats were more likely to support teacher tenure--43 percent of Democrats in support and 30 percent Republicans in support. Republicans were slightly more likely to say that students needed to show adequate progress for teachers to get tenure and thought three years was too little time to get tenure. Again though, there was strong majority opinion by all on these issues.

The two largest differences came on questions about additional spending and a tax credit for educational expenses. Specifically, Democrats by a margin of 22 percentage points (70 percent to 48 percent) were more confident that additional spending would improve schools. More surprisingly, Democrats (72 percent) were more likely than Republicans (57 percent) to support offering a tax credit for educational expenses to low- and moderate-income parents who send their children to public and private schools.

Conclusion

Looking at the entire survey, we find Wisconsin residents have stronger opinions than the nation as a whole. While the margin between supporters and opponents in Wisconsin and across the country is similar on many issues—including vouchers, charter schools, virtual education, merit pay initiatives, accountability provisions, teacher tenure, and increased school spending--levels of support and opposition in Wisconsin are routinely higher than in the nation as a whole. For example, on choice and merit pay policies, in particular, the American public is three to five times more likely to select this middling category than are Wisconsin residents. Consequently, public opinion about education reform in Wisconsin would appear more polarized than in the rest of the country.

What is the source of these differences? Survey methodology may be the culprit. The WPRI Study was conducted over the telephone, whereas the *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys were conducted online. It is possible that when speaking to an actual person on the

telephone, respondents feel a greater compunction to express a clear position of support or opposition to a given policy reform. And some past research has shown this to be true. Our own surveys provide further suggestive evidence of this phenomenon. Though the subsample of Wisconsin residents in the *Education Next*-PEPG 2009 Survey is quite small (n=57), it reveals a much higher proportion of Wisconsin residents claiming to “neither support nor oppose” various policy reforms than is observed in the WPRI telephone survey.

Still, the differences between the online and telephone samples that we observed, are markedly greater than those observed in past research on “mode effects.” Our own surveys, moreover, suggest that the observed differences are due, at least in part, to differences in the two populations. As previously noted, 38 percent of the American public claimed to pay either “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of attention to issues involving education, 51 percent of Wisconsin residents do so. Note also that the differences between Wisconsin residents and the American public on this dimension are not observed on every policy item. On some items, in fact, few if any differences are observed. Moreover, the observed differences are most acute on items where Wisconsin residents have the most experience, e.g. school choice.

What, then, is the bottom line? Though perhaps not as great as the raw comparisons between the WPRI and *Education Next*-PEPG surveys would suggest, Wisconsin residents appear more informed and engaged about education reform than

people in the rest of the country. Moreover, Wisconsin residents appear just as supportive of, and in some cases more supportive than, Americans nationwide. And where Wisconsin public schools confront the greatest challenges, notably in Milwaukee, support for a wide range of accountability and choice reforms reaches its apex.

See [HYPERLINK "http://www.xxx"](http://www.xxx) www.xxx for a full description of the survey methodology, a full copy of the survey instrument, cross-tabs, and the raw survey data in an SPSS data file.

Except where noted, Wisconsin public opinion data are compared to results from the 2009 Education Next-PEPG Survey (Howell, W., M. West, and P. Peterson. 2009. "The Persuadable Public, Results from the Second Annual Education Next-PEPG Survey." Available online at: <http://educationnext.org/files/pepg2009.pdf>). Findings from the 2010 Education Next-PEPG Survey should be available in the fall of 2010. All Education Next-PEPG surveys were conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks, which maintains a nationally representative panel of adults, obtained via list-assisted random digit—dialing sampling techniques, who agree to participate in a limited number of online surveys. Because Knowledge Networks offers members of its panel free Internet access and a WebTV device that connects to a telephone and television, the sample is not limited to current computer owners or users with Internet access.

Data on the NAEP, commonly recognized as the "nation's report card," are available at: [HYPERLINK "http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/"](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/) <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/> (site accessed July 27, 2010).

Wisconsin first enacted charter legislation in 1993. For the strength of its charter law, the Center for Education Reforms ranks Wisconsin 16th among the 40 states with charter laws. More information is available at: <http://www.charterschoolresearch.com/laws/wisconsin.htm>.

Interestingly, when Wisconsin residents are told that "currently the State of Wisconsin allows low-income families in Milwaukee to send their school-age children to any public or private school they choose," and that "for those parents choosing a private schools, the government helps pay the tuition," support for expanding this program to the rest of the state jumps to 60 percent.

For more on this topic, see William Howell and Mindy Spencer, 2007. "School Choice without Vouchers." Pioneer Institute White Paper #41. Available online at: <http://pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/wp41.pdf>.

Howell and West show that support for more spending decreases by 10 percentage points when respondents are informed about average per-pupil expenditures in their district. Howell, W. and M. West. 2009. "Educating the Public." *Education Next*. 9(3): 40-47. See also Howell, W. and M. West. 2008. "Is the Price Right? Probing Americans' Understanding of Education Spending." *Education Next*. 8(3): 36-41.

Direct comparisons with the national sample, in this instance, are complicated by the fact that the WPRI survey allowed respondents to claim they did not know, an option that was unavailable in the Education Next-PEPG survey. Forty eight percent of Wisconsin respondents selected this option. Additionally, the results for the national sample listed above come from a 2007 survey, whereas the WPRI survey was fielded in 2010.

In 2008-2009, the most recent year for which data are available, per-pupil expenditures in the state of Wisconsin were 12,346, on average. For previous years and district-specific figures, see: [HYPERLINK "http://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/cmpest.html"](http://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/cmpest.html) <http://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/cmpest.html> (site accessed July 27, 2010).

As in the national survey, we dropped from the analysis estimates that exceeded \$50,000.

See, for example, J. Michael Dennis, Cindy Chatt, Rick Li, Alicia Motta-Stanko, and Paul Pulliam, 2005. "Data Collection Mode Effects Controlling for Sample Origins in a Panel Survey: Telephone versus Internet." Knowledge Network Research Paper available online at: <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/docs/Research-0105.pdf>.

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