What the Public Thinks About Your Work

As the Presidential campaigns heat up, comments about public education have been completely absent from the two campaigns. The Obama campaign even had Vice President Biden substitute for President Obama as speaker at the national conventions of the two big teacher unions, the NEA and AFT. So with almost nothing happening on the education agenda at the national level it is a good thing for people who like to think and write about education that every September, the Gallup organization along with Phi Delta Kappa releases their annual survey on the public's opinion about the public schools https://www.pdkintl.org/poll/docs/2012-Gallup-poll-full-report.pdf.

The editors of this year's survey note that the public is narrowly divided over a number of key education issues including:

- Basing teacher evaluations on student test scores;
- Giving parents vouchers to help them pay private school tuition;
- Providing a free education to children of illegal immigrants;
- Whether high school prepares graduates adequately for college; and
- The political party and Presidential candidate most likely to improve the schools.

There is relatively strong public agreement around the following ideas:

- Teachers should be rigorously prepared and screened.
- Teachers are worthy of public trust and confidence.
- Common Core academic standards will be good for education.
- We must close the achievement gap.
- Urban schools need more support.

The poll also indicates that over the past decade there has been growing concern regarding lack of financial support for the public schools with the number rating this as the number one problem facing the schools increasing from 23% to 35%. "Lack of discipline" came in second as the number one problem dropping from 17% ten years ago to just 8%.

Also of interest, over the past year the percent of the public supporting charter schools has dropped from 70% to 66% while support for school vouchers has jumped upward form 34% to 44%.

As has been true for a number of years, the public tends to give high marks to their "local" public schools (48% A or B), particularly if they have children in the schools (77% A or B) and

considerably lower marks (only 19%% A or B) to public schools, "nationally." This major disparity between the rankings of schools "locally, "and "nationally," remains one of the most constant and remarkable findings of this annual poll.

Public school teachers should be encouraged that in spite of the many challenges facing the schools the public still strongly believes that educators are worthy of their trust and that parents who have children in school give their local school remarkably high grades. It is people like you who work with and support their children every day that are the strongest asset of our schools. And whenever and wherever the public gets to experience the good work you do in their local schools they walk away impressed.

It is the general label of "public schools nationally" that the public tends to struggle with. This is quite understandable as the public schools have been the subject of polarizing political debate for decades. Politicians from both sides of the political divide use the schools as a political tool to advance their agendas. So when asked about the state of the "public schools nationally" the public thinks of the schools that politicians and the media deride and the fact that our rankings have lagged nationally on some international assessments.

Public education in our country has always been a more viable issue at the local level than the national level and indeed many believe that the best thing the Federal Government could do is to loosen regulation and back off from believing that schools can be improved from the US Congress or the US Department of Education. Education and changing the lives of children has always been about one-on-one interactions between people which can only happen at the local level. For Christian's who are called to the teaching profession the empowerment of the Holy Spirit makes the teaching relationship particularly effective and worthy of a lifetime of commitment. So as you move beyond the opening days of the school year into the long stretch of teaching days ahead take heart. The Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll bears out that your work makes a difference to the public, and through the power of Christ the impact on some of your students may be eternal.

If you have thoughts or comments on this issue or other Federal education issues please share them with us. You can address your thoughts and comments to JMitchell@ceai.org.

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