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42nd Annual PDK/Gallup Poll Shows Slippage in Americans' Support of Obama's Education Agenda

Public approval dips across the partisan spectrum

BLOOMINGTON, Ind.—Despite high levels of agreement with the administration's agenda shown in two previous PDK/Gallup annual polls, Americans are now less supportive of President Barack Obama's education agenda, according to the 2010 annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. While the public favors Obama's support of charter schools and efforts to make a college education available to everyone, only 34 percent would give him an A or B letter grade with regard to his performance in support of public schools—down from 45 percent last year. They also strongly oppose some of the proposed education reform measures, particularly those under which teachers and principals are fired.

When the poll, which is conducted annually by Phi Delta Kappa International (PDK) in conjunction with Gallup, asked Americans about underperforming schools, the public favored keeping a poorly performing school in the community open with existing teachers and principals, while providing comprehensive outside support. Americans do not support firing teachers and principals without cause or closing schools altogether.

The findings also indicate that Americans believe the most important national education program should be improving the quality of teaching. They believe we should recruit the best teacher candidates, provide professional development to help current and prospective teachers use the best teaching practices, and do whatever we can to retain the best teachers while dismissing those who aren't skilled or suited for the job.

“Clearly, support is starting to drift away from some of the administration's strategies for improving education,” said William Bushaw, executive director of PDK International and co-director of the PDK/Gallup poll. “This year's poll shows that while Americans continue to value education and recognize its importance, they have serious concerns about the challenges facing public schools and the increasing role of the federal government in those schools.”

The 2010 poll reveals that Americans continue to view school funding as a major crisis, with 46 percent of public school parents naming this as the biggest problem facing schools in their communities. They were unaware whether any of the economic stimulus funds directed towards

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education were spent locally to support education, though research shows that this money saved more than 300,000 education jobs nationwide.

Additionally, Americans support a revised approach to paying teachers, with almost three out of four Americans believing quality of work should determine salary, rather than using a standard scale. Almost three out of four Americans believe teacher pay should be very closely or somewhat closely tied to student academic achievement, and more than two out of three Americans support paying teachers higher salaries as an incentive to teach in schools identified as needing improvement.

Other Key Findings:

- **Support for charter schools growing.** Americans increasingly embrace public charter schools. Sixty-eight percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of charter schools, and almost two out of three Americans would support a new public charter school in their communities. Sixty percent of Americans say they would support a large increase in the number of public charter schools operating in the United States.
- **Opposed to paying students to learn.** Three out of four Americans oppose the idea of paying students money to read books, attend school, or strive for better grades. Consistent with this finding, only one in four parents said they paid their children to do better in school.
- **Education is not federal issue.** Most Americans believe that education is not a federal issue. Whether it is paying the bills, setting standards, deciding what should be taught, or holding schools accountable, the public believes state government is the agency responsible for public education in the United States. Specifically, four out of five Americans believe the federal government should not have a role in holding schools accountable and that local school boards should not set education standards—these are state responsibilities.
- **College for all.** Americans overwhelmingly agree that a college education is necessary for today's students. Ninety-two percent of parents believe their children will go to college, which will provide more job opportunities and better income. And despite the current recession, three out of four parents believe they are very or somewhat likely to be able to pay for their child's college education.
- **Respect for teachers.** Seventy-one percent of Americans say they have trust and confidence in teachers, with a greater percentage (78 percent) of public school parents registering confidence. Two out of three Americans would support their child's decision to teach in the public schools for a career.
- **Quality of teaching is key to school improvement.** When asked what a school must do to earn an A letter grade, the top three responses—by a considerable margin—were: (1) improve the quality of teaching, (2) implement a challenging curriculum, and (3) help students be more successful.
- **Teachers need more time to learn.** Of the two-thirds of Americans who believe increasing student or teacher learning time would increase student learning, more believe that having teachers spend more time learning new ways to teach would have a greater effect on student learning than having students spend more time in school.

PDK, a global association of education professionals, has conducted this poll with Gallup annually since 1969. The poll serves as an opportunity for parents, educators, and legislators to

assess public opinion about public schools. The 2010 findings are based on telephone interviews conducted in June 2010 with a national sample of 1,008 American adults.

More poll data is available at www.pdkpoll.org. Media personnel should contact Ashley Kincaid, PDK International director of marketing and communications, for a copy of the 2010 PDK/Gallup poll report.

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