

Californians Speak  
on Education  
and Reform Options

Uneven Faith in Teachers,  
School Boards, and the  
State as Designers of Change



A PACE - Field Institute Poll  
March 1998

# Policy Analysis for California Education **PACE**

University of California, Berkeley ■ Stanford University

3653 Tolman Hall ■ Berkeley, CA 94720-1670

Telephone: (510) 642-7223

Web Site: <http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/PACE/pace.html>

---

---

# **Californians Speak on Education and Reform Options**

**Uneven Faith in Teachers, School Boards, and the State  
as Designers of Change**

---

---

## **The PACE ■ Field Institute School Reform Poll**

**Bruce Fuller**  
University of California ■ Berkeley

**Gerald Hayward**  
PACE ■ Sacramento

**Michael Kirst**  
Stanford University

With assistance from

**Mark DiCamillo**  
The Field Institute

**March 1998**

*The School Reform Poll* is supported in part by the Stuart Foundation. The Koret Foundation is contributing to PACE's public information initiative and this study. The Hewlett Foundation and the University of California support PACE's infrastructure. Additional copies of this report and complete statistical tabulations are available.

## Summary

Cantankerous debates over the quality of public education -- for nearly two centuries -- have recurrently preoccupied parents, civic activists, and political leaders. Today the future of public schooling is *the* issue that most worries voters in California and nationwide, according to recent polls.

In turn, political leaders and candidates have put forward a variety of school reform proposals. A new election season is underway. Politicians and civic activists are eagerly responding to the public's concern over how schools can be effectively improved.

In February, PACE and the Field Institute completed a statewide *School Reform Poll* to assess (1) how Californians view the quality of public education, (2) who they most trust as architects of reform, and (3) how they are evaluating major reform proposals being advanced.

This report details major findings stemming from a statewide survey of 1,003 Californians:

- *How pressing is the need to reform the public schools?* Only 6% of those interviewed believe that our schools "provide a quality education." Over 61% believe "a major overhaul" of the schools is required. Another 29% believe that "minor changes" are needed. Two years ago when we asked the identical question, 54% of all Californians surveyed reported that a major overhaul was necessary. Confidence in the public schools continues to slip.
- *Who do you trust as architects of school reform?* The majority of Californians express considerable faith in local parents and teachers as the actors that can best motivate and craft school improvements. Teachers are most trusted as the designers of better classroom practices.

When it comes to shaping teaching practices that best aid students with limited English, however, Californians are split evenly between retaining local control versus implementing a uniform pedagogical policy statewide.

Californians endorse more decisive action by Sacramento policy makers when it comes to strengthening training standards that new teachers must meet. Most adults also express the most trust in Sacramento agencies for setting uniform standards for promoting children to higher grade levels or for determining which students graduate.

California citizens express little faith in their local school boards or administrators as effective players in raising school quality. The message voice by the majority of those interviewed is that more decisive action should be taken in Sacramento, while retaining teacher discretion over pedagogical practices. This represents a double-pronged approach to reform that largely leaves school boards and district administrators out of the picture.

■ *How do Californians view the panoply of school reform proposals recently advanced?* The majority of the those surveyed are very supportive of the new state mandates proposed by Governor Wilson, Senator Feinstein, and the Democratic gubernatorial candidates. Even Republicans and self-described conservative voters express strong support for having Sacramento set student promotion and graduation requirements, mandate summer school for low-performing students, tighten curricular standards, create a chief inspector of schools, and lengthen the school year. These measures, which in the aggregate would significantly reduce local control, receive wide bipartisan support among all Californians surveyed, as well as when we look just at likely voters.

President Clinton's proposal to have voluntary national examinations, while supported by a clear majority (64%), is more controversial among different political blocs of Californians. The proposal is supported by a higher share of women, compared to men (67% versus 59%, respectively), Democrats versus Republicans (72% to 51%), and Latinos compared to blacks (71% versus 50%).

In contrast, Californians express sharply mixed reactions over reform proposals that would further *decentralize* the governance of local schools. For example, respondents are split evenly over Governor Wilson's proposal to make it easier for local voters to raise their taxes to support school construction: 46% favor and 46% oppose his push to require a simple majority vote rather than a two-thirds plurality. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of all Republicans surveyed oppose this proposal; 45% of all Democrats oppose it. Older voters oppose the idea; younger voters support it.

Additional proposals to more radically decentralize the management of local schools also are proving to be controversial. Only 49% support expanding the number of charter schools; many women remain undecided. A majority of Californians continue to oppose school vouchers that would allow using taxpayer dollars for private or parochial schooling (52% opposed overall). Among Democrats, 72% are opposed to vouchers; just 31% of Republicans surveyed oppose the idea. Interestingly, Latino voters are split evenly on the voucher question.

The PACE *School Reform Poll* included questions asked of 1,003 Californians surveyed in early February. For these questions the margin of error equals plus or minus 3 percentage points. Other questions were asked of about half the sample, 510 adults. Here the margin of error is +/- 4.5 points. The graphs that summarize our findings appear at the end of the text and each specifies which confidence interval applies. Complete tabulations for the survey are available from PACE.□

## 1. Aims of the PACE-Field Institute School Reform Poll

Given the public's deepening concern over education, political leaders, candidates, and civic activists are putting forward a variety of school reform proposals. Several have been introduced as legislation in Sacramento; other reforms are being advanced as statewide ballot propositions.

On the June and November election ballots it now appears that Californians will get a chance to vote on several policy options: the virtual elimination of bilingual classrooms, a longer school year, capping spending on school administration, and abolishing the "social promotion" of poorly performing students. The state legislature will judge the wisdom of other proposals put forward by Mr. Wilson, Ms. Feinstein, and individual legislators: mandatory summer school for low achievers, a new chief inspector of schools, lowering the voting requirement to raise local taxes for school construction, and creating a school voucher experiment, allowing parents to use public monies to enroll their children in private schools. Another ballot initiative may qualify to expand the number of charter schools, a proposal that gubernatorial candidate Dan Lungren already has endorsed.<sup>1</sup>

The PACE *School Reform Poll* gauges how Californians are evaluating this array of policy proposals. We set these views in context by taking stock of how citizens presently view the quality of public education, and report on whether public concern is intensifying or subsiding, relative to earlier surveys. Finally, we were curious about who Californians trust most as the architects of mandates or teaching practices that might boost student performance. The debate over how best to reform the public schools involves not only *what* to do, but also *who* will citizens and likely voters entrust to design and implement policy change, from local teachers to Sacramento policy makers.

This latter issue -- Who do you trust? -- cuts to the heart of how public schools are governed. Since the advent of the one-room school house, local communities have largely exercised authority over their own schools. Since the 1960s, however, this tradition has been altered considerably, as federal and state governments have become more involved in public education. Agencies in Sacramento and Washington D.C. have attempted, with some success, to equalize resources available to schools in rich and poor communities; to provide new aid for special education, reading programs, preschooling, and bilingual programs; and to advance statewide policies which increase student graduation requirements or teacher training standards. In the aftermath of Proposition 13, the state government also has raised its proportional share of school financing, relative to the declining share coming from local property taxes.

As education has risen to the top of the domestic policy agenda, presidents, governors, and candidates are putting forward school reform ideas that could -- if approved in 1998 -- *centralize* more authority in Sacramento. These measures include the possibility of mandating one single way of teaching children with limited English skills; standardizing student promotion and graduation requirements in Sacramento; placing a 5% cap on how much local school boards can allocate for school administration; and requiring districts to force low-achieving students to take summer school.

At the same time, a subset of the reform proposals would further *decentralize* school governance and budgetary control. Rather than enacting universal statewide mandates, these options award greater control to each individual school, even directly to parents through market-oriented reforms. Here decentralization is the silver bullet aimed at raising student achievement, rather than vesting more authority in Sacramento. For example, Governor Wilson has proposed that school budgets and personnel decisions be moved from school boards and district



administrators down to each individual school, controlled by a council comprised of parents and teachers. This is a decentralizing reform that has been largely implemented in England and, on a more limited scale, within the Chicago city schools. Other education activists are seeking to lift the lid on the number of charter schools that can operate free of the education code, revisited by local school boards just every five years. Mr. Wilson and gubernatorial candidate Dan Lungren, along with the national Republican leadership, have renewed their push for school vouchers. This would allow the use of taxpayer monies by parents who enroll their child in a private or parochial school.

Do Californians view centralizing reforms differently from those proposals that push to further decentralize public education? Or, perhaps citizens are just so worried about the state of public education that they are willing to embark on a set of contradictory reforms? If the voters want to “get tough on education,” maybe they just want action, no matter which actors take up the charge.

### **Organization of the Report**

We begin by reporting basic findings for each major question that was posed to a statewide random sample of California adults. These details are organized around the three major topics: (1) How Californians view the quality of public education, (2) who they most trust as designers of effective reforms, and (3) how they are evaluating the major reform proposals being advanced by political leaders and candidates.

For each major question, a graphic is provided to illustrate major patterns. The text provides further details. Complete tabulations for each question, broken down for various population groups, are available from PACE.

## **II. Californians Assess the Quality of Public Education**

In 1996, we asked California citizens, "*Which comes closer to your own view... of the public schools -- that it currently provides quality education, that it needs minor changes, or that it needs a major overhaul?*" Two years ago, 54% of all respondents indicated that it needs a major overall.<sup>2</sup> In the February *School Reform Poll*, this share had risen significantly to 61%.

Earlier surveys -- in California and nationwide -- show that 10% to 20% of all citizens have a significantly higher assessment of their own neighborhood schools, relative to the school system overall. For both, Californians' assessments actually improved somewhat over the 1980s. Since the early 1990s, however, overall evaluations of public education appear to have slipped again.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 details how this assessment differs only slightly among the diverse Californians who participated in the February PACE survey. Women are a bit more concerned, with 64% desiring a major overhaul, relative to 58% of men. Latino respondents are slightly less worried, 55% desiring a major overhaul, compared to 65% of black respondents. Older Californians are more concerned: 70% of respondents over age 50, express the need for a major overhaul, versus 53% of all respondents, age 18-24.

## **III. Who Do You Trust as the Architects of School Reform?**

Most school reform proposals empower a particular level of government -- or teachers and local educators -- to craft improvements aimed at boosting children's achievement. Political leaders and candidates have been advancing reform ideas that would vest greater authority in Sacramento agencies, such as the state legislature or the Department of Education. Other proposals would further

decentralize governance and budgetary control to the school level, via school-site councils, charter schools, and vouchers.

Before asking respondents about their views of specific proposals, we sought to better understand the actors that they would most trust with the task of school reform. We first asked who they generally trusted the most, from parents and teachers to Sacramento policy makers. Then, we explored whether they would entrust different actors, depending on the type of reform being advanced. For instance, do Californians want teachers to retain certain authority over pedagogical practices? Whereas, raising teacher training requirements is viewed as a legitimate task for state agencies to tackle?

The question put to respondents: *“Various people and government agencies play a role in improving our schools. From the following list, please tell me who you trust the most in shaping policies or practices that will most effectively raise our children’s school achievement.”*

Figure 2 details the overall findings. Among all 1,003 respondents, 33% express the most trust in parents as architects of reform. They are followed closely by teachers, for whom 32% of the respondents express the most trust. Support for school boards is slight, just 12%. Just over 10% indicate that they trust the superintendent of schools in Sacramento and her Department of Education. Only 6% report that they most trust the governor and the legislature (in total 16% most trusting Sacramento based agencies). The remainder are unsure or have no opinion.

Partisan differences are important to highlight. Among Republicans, parents are the most trusted sources of reform by 43%, then teachers, by 24% of those

interviewed. Among Democrats, teachers are most trusted by 35%, then parents, by 28%.

We then asked respondents who they most trusted to act effectively on three specific issues:

- *Determining competency standards for teachers.*
- *Establishing student promotion and graduation requirements.*
- *Deciding on what teaching methods to use in the classroom.*

Those interviewed did distinguish between these issues when expressing who they would trust to design effective reforms. For example, 48% of all respondents believe that Sacramento policy makers (the state Department of Education, the legislature, or the governor) could be most trusted *to determine competency standards for teachers*. Just under 20% most trust local school boards. Only 12% most trust teachers to set their own competency standards.

In contrast, 46% of all respondents report the most trust in teachers in *deciding which teaching methods to use in the classroom*. Only 11% trust parents to set pedagogical practices; 18% most trust school boards; 21% trust Sacramento agencies to determine best teaching practices. Faith in teachers may be slipping a bit. We asked a very similar question in 1996 regarding teaching practices. In that survey, 57% of all Californians interviewed reported that they most trusted teachers to have authority over pedagogical practices. The February *School Reform Poll* shows an 11-point decline. Yet overall, Californians retain a strong faith in their local teachers and continue to believe that they should have discretion over pedagogical practices -- even when it comes to teaching non-English speaking students.

Sharp partisan differences arise on this topic of trust in teachers: 52% of all Democrats most trust teachers when it comes to pedagogical improvements; just 33% of all Republicans do so. Fully 60% of black respondents most trust teachers, versus 45% among Latino respondents. Older citizens have the least amount of trust in teachers when it comes to teaching practices. Just 27% of respondents over age 60 express the most faith in teachers, compared to 56% of those interviewed, age 18-24.

### **Thinning-out Administrative Layers**

California citizens express little trust in their local school boards as effective agents of reform. Concern over the quality of education is so intense, that most adults interviewed seem to be looking to Sacramento for strong, statewide action. A few years ago the voters urged political leaders to “get tough on crime.” Our results suggest that now a majority of citizens are looking to Sacramento to “get tough on education.” School boards and administrators may be viewed as part of the problem, not actors who will energize meaningful reforms. A set of universal antidotes, administered to all local patients, appears to be the most effective policy remedy in the minds of most Californians.

An important reminder: While Californians are looking to Sacramento or statewide policy mandates as key sources of reform, their trust level in state agencies clearly depends upon the area of reform being discussed.

Another indication of Californians’ eroding faith in local administrators was revealed in a recent Field Poll finding that 53% of all likely voters favor Proposition 223 (appearing on the June ballot) which would limit local spending on school administrators to just 5% of local education budgets. One in five likely voters remains undecided; 27% oppose the ballot initiative.<sup>4</sup>

## **President Clinton's National Exam Proposal**

This reform idea has become a significant barometer of citizens' willingness to centralize greater authority over public schools within Washington D.C. or state capitals. It is a reform strategy that other nations, Japan and Britain for instance, have adopted. The policy approach vests within central Government the authority to determine what children should learn and at what level of proficiency. Local schools are then given authority over the *means* by which teachers and school staff attempt to raise children's achievement.

Figure 4 shows that Californians strongly support Mr. Clinton's proposal for a national exam which would be utilized voluntarily by states or local school districts. Statewide, 64% of those interviewed favor the proposal. Only 28% oppose the idea, and 8% remain undecided. The identical question was asked of a national sample of Americans last summer in a Gallup Poll. Nationwide 57% of all respondents favored the President's exam proposal; 37% were opposed.<sup>5</sup>

A slim majority of Republicans support the national exam proposal, 51% in favor to 39% opposed. Democrats overwhelmingly support this centralized policy innovation by a 72% to 21% margin.

Major ethnic differences contribute to the controversial character of the national exam idea. Black respondents are split evenly between supporters (50%) and opponents (49%). But Latinos heavily favor national exams, 71% to 22%.

### **Bilingual Education: Who Should Control Teaching Practices?**

The so-called Unz Initiative (Proposition 227 on the June ballot) would require that virtually all children with limited English skills be instructed only in

English. That is, the state would be required to enforce a single form of pedagogy, regardless of local conditions or individual differences across diverse children. We saw above how the majority of Californians believe that teachers should retain control over pedagogical practices. But do citizens feel so strongly about instruction in English that they endorse a uniform mandate that would be enforced from Sacramento?

In 1996, we asked a sample of Californians this question: "*Thinking about students who do not speak English well, would you favor a system in which each local school district decided for itself how best to teach English language skills... or would you favor a uniform statewide policy regarding the way non-English-speaking students are taught English skills?*"

Two years ago Californians were split evenly: 46% favored retaining local control, and 46% favored a uniform statewide policy. The February *School Reform Poll* reveals no significant movement on this issue: 49% favor local control, and 44% favor a statewide policy prescribing teaching practices for students with limited English proficiency.

An early *Los Angeles Times* poll on the Unz Initiative found that 69% of likely California voters would support requiring all children to participate in English immersion programs.<sup>6</sup> Yet when the issue is framed in terms of which level of public authority -- Sacramento or local districts and teachers -- should design and enforce pedagogical practices, Californians are evenly split. Latinos, younger, and better educated respondents more strongly favor local control over this issue.

#### IV. Statewide Mandates versus Decentralized School Reforms

We asked about 10 school reform proposals that have been endorsed by various political leaders, including Mr. Wilson, Ms. Feinstein, and declared gubernatorial candidates. Five of these proposals would require legislative action in Sacramento and/or place state agencies in the role of enforcing uniform policies. Policy proposals that require more *centralized authority*, based in Sacramento, include:

- Moving to statewide standards, based on test scores, for which students would be promoted to the next higher grade level or be allowed to graduate. The aim is to “end social promotion.” This authority current resides with local school boards and is usually left up to individual teachers.
- Mandating from Sacramento that low-performing students, as defined by a state agency, must attend a four-week summer school program.
- Setting, in Sacramento, more challenging curricular and graduation standards which all teachers must follow.
- Creating a “chief inspector of schools” office that would have the authority to take over low-performing schools.
- Lengthening the school year by 7-10 days.

Figure 6 reveals widespread public support for these kinds of statewide policy mandates. Setting uniform student promotion requirements -- “*based on students passing an achievement test, rather than leaving this up to teachers*” -- is supported two to one among those interviewed (62% in favor, 31% opposed). Requiring low-performing students to attend summer school is even more heavily supported, 84% in favor to 12% opposed.

This proposal is controversial across different groups. Political conservatives actually support this centralized reform more heavily (69%), compared to



moderates (60%), and liberals (54%). Only 42% of all black respondents support the proposal, compared to 61% of Latinos. Women are among the strongest backers (65% in favor) relative to men (59% in favor).

The establishment of *“more challenging statewide curriculum standards that all teachers would be required to follow in their classrooms”* is supported by 76% of those interviewed, with just 18% opposed.

Even conservatives support the chief inspector idea, a European-style form of central regulation being put forward by Governor Wilson and Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Gray Davis. Among those identifying themselves as “strongly” or “moderately conservative,” 61% support this regulatory agent who would ride out from Sacramento to take over ineffective schools. Among all Republicans, 58% support the proposal, compared to 66% of all Democrats interviewed.

Legislative action to lengthen the school year by at least 8 days is supported by 63% of all respondents, with 28% opposing the idea.

Californians express mixed reactions when it comes to alternative policy remedies that would further decentralize control of schools. We asked about these five proposals:

- Creating school-level councils comprised of parents and teachers who would have the power to control school budgets, rather than local school boards. This governance reform is being tried in Chicago with mixed success.
- Making it easier for local voters to raise their property taxes to finance school construction and renovation.

- Expanding the number of charter schools, taxpayer supported schools that escape state and local regulation for a period of up to five years.
- Enacting a school voucher system where taxpayer dollars could be used to enroll children in private and parochial schools.
- Expanding local preschool and child-care programs which are operated by local schools or community organizations.

Figure 7 reports on Californians' levels of support or opposition to these decentralized policy proposals. The idea of further decentralizing governance and budgetary control down to the school level, "*rather than leaving this power to the local school board or district superintendent,*" is heavily supported. Statewide, 76% are in favor, with 19% opposed. Here again we see that faith in local boards and administrators is quite low among most Californians. Opinions are quite uniform across partisan, ethnic, and social-class groups. Giving schools control over their budgets is a very popular idea.

In contrast, Governor Wilson's proposal to make it easier to raise local taxes for school construction bonds is proving to be quite contentious. Californians are split down the middle on this issue: 46% support moving to a simple majority vote, rather than the present two-thirds vote required; 47% are opposed to this liberalization. Older respondents are generally opposed, with only 34% supporting the proposal among Californians over age 50. Among respondents, age 18-24, 57% support moving toward a simple majority vote. Liberals back the proposal, 60% in favor to 31% opposed. A much smaller share of conservatives back Mr. Wilson's proposal: just 34% in favor, to 58% opposed.

Californians are unsure of charter schools as a school reform device. These innovative schools are receiving growing notoriety and enthusiastic support by the Clinton Administration and the Congress. California was the second state in the

nation to allow parents, teachers, and local activists to secede from local school districts, with public review every five years. But among all respondents, just 49% favor expanding the number of charter schools, while 37% are opposed to the idea. Fourteen percent (14%) hold no clear opinion. Liberals and younger respondents express significantly more support for charter schools than do Californians over age 50, those who remain most cautious about decentralized reforms in general.

A majority of Californians continue to oppose school vouchers: 44% in favor, to 52% opposed. This level of support is virtually unchanged since we asked a similar question in the 1996 PACE poll. Vouchers continue to be a divisive issue. Conservatives strongly back a voucher program: 63% in favor, to 33% opposed. Liberals remain adamantly opposed: 27% in favor, to 67% opposed. Very few citizens remain undecided on the voucher issue, one which is now widely debated and highly politicized.

A similar question on vouchers was asked on the 1997 national Gallup education poll. Overall, the national results mirrored our own findings for California: 44% of sampled Americans supported the voucher concept and 52% were opposed. Nationally, however, almost two-thirds of all Latinos interviewed supported vouchers, and blacks were split evenly (48% in support, 50% opposed).<sup>7</sup> On the *School Reform Poll* we found that California Latinos were split on vouchers (49% in favor, 46% opposed), while blacks are more strongly opposed (40% in favor, 60% opposed).

Governor Wilson and state schools chief Delaine Eastin recently have pushed to dramatically expand local preschool and child-care programs. Their proposals would rely on local schools and community organizations to operate expanded preschools. This idea -- "*spending more tax dollars to expand preschool*

*programs*" -- is supported by 68% of Californians interviewed. Latino and black respondents are among the strongest supporters. Latinos favor the idea by a 75% to 20% plurality. Among black respondents, 82% supported expanded preschool programs, with just 12% opposed. Even among "moderately conservative" respondents, over two-thirds back higher spending for preschool expansion.<sup>8</sup>

### **Partisan Differences?**

We were surprised by the extent to which conservatives and moderates back policy reforms that represent statewide mandates or shifting more control to Sacramento. A large portion of conservatives and Republicans simultaneously back stronger centralized action by Sacramento *and* decentralizing remedies (such as vouchers). To further explore partisan or philosophical differences in the preferred locus of school reform, we focused on levels of support observed between Republicans and Democrats.

Figure 8 shows small differences between Republicans and Democrats in their support of statewide mandates. Figure 9, however, reveals partisan gaps in how decentralized reform proposals are being evaluated. Democrats more heavily favor easing the plurality required to raise local taxes for school bonds and expanding local preschool programs. Republicans more strongly support a move to school vouchers.

### **Do Likely Voters Express Differing Views?**

Likely voters, in general, more heavily support statewide mandates and decisive action in Sacramento. Most of these differences pertaining to likely voters lay within, or just outside, the margin of error and should be considered modest. Likely voters more heavily favor (by 4 percentage points) statewide