

Perceptions and Issues Related to K-12 Education

By John Nienstedt

The latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll of San Diego County residents contains largely good news for local educators. Schools are generally well-regarded and achieve the equivalent of a B-minus grade. Perhaps more importantly, the assessment among those with school-age children in the household rises to a straight B grade. Widespread support exists for more flexible teaching methods in the classroom. This casts grave doubt on the level of public support for the current “Blueprint for Success” plan which incorporates centralized planning. School vouchers are a hot button topic which receive mixed reviews. On balance, more residents oppose the voucher plan we asked about than favor it. Perhaps the study’s most intriguing finding is that more residents, by far, regard parents as the main factor driving student success. On the other hand, few see teachers or other school-related factors as being the biggest contributors. Finally, the survey shows that there are many different information sources that residents are likely to consider when judging a school’s performance.

The Report Card

Overall, the public school system earns a grade point average (GPA) of 2.72; the equivalent of a B-minus grade. Half rate the schools as excellent or good, 16% rate them as fair, and 9% feel they are doing a poor job or failing. Another quarter are not sure what grade schools deserve.

Approximately 30% of the residents have at least one school-age child in the household and about half of those households have two or more school-age children in them. The survey shows that almost all these folks are, in fact, paying attention to how schools are doing. Ninety-five percent of parents are able to evaluate K-12 education in San Diego County while one-third of those who do not have kids are unable to judge school performance. What’s more, among those who have an opinion, parents say schools are

doing a significantly better job. The GPA among parents is 2.93 while among non-parents it is 2.60. Schools are therefore perceived as doing better among their core customers. It is also interesting to note that parents with multiple children rate the schools *even more favorably* than those with only one child.

The survey also finds that schools score better with residents who support a possible tax increase (GPA of 2.85) than those who do not (2.57). The inference here is that liberals tend to be more open to tax increases and also more sympathetic to public education.

Schools also score higher with lower income residents (2.96). This suggests that affluent residents may set higher expectations. They are also more likely to have alternative private schooling available to them, which they may compare favorably to public schools.

Performance grades did not vary significantly by region of the County.

Centralized Planning vs Flexibility in the Classroom

County residents are clearly at odds with the San Diego School District's policy of requiring its schools to conform to a centralized curriculum in order meet state academic standards. Only 27% favor the centralized plan over a more flexible approach in the classroom. Most people (65%) favor the latter. In what can only be described as a disturbing finding for San Diego Unified School District Superintendent Alan Bersin's "Blueprint for Success," the survey shows that residents within the District judge the centralized approach much more harshly than those in other areas. To be sure, flexibility is preferred throughout the County, but two-thirds in San Diego favor that approach – 45% strongly – and a mere 23% favor the centralized plan. Outside the City just 55% favor more flexibility in the classroom while 31% agree with centralization. The City vs. non-City factor is so important that, once it is accounted for, other seemingly important variables such as whether someone is a parent or what their opinion of school

performance is are shown to be insignificant when it comes to explaining preference for centralization or flexibility. This suggests that the issue has become politicized. Since even those who give schools low grades tend to support flexibility over centralized control, it appears whatever educational merits the reforms had have been overshadowed by other factors.

The survey also finds that those who pay closer attention to County schools are more likely to favor the flexible approach. This should be another red flag for proponents of centralization.

Other factors which come into play include age and income. Younger residents overwhelmingly favor a more flexible approach while elderly respondents, perhaps longing for the perceived structure of their own school days, are far less fervent. Though affluent residents also favor more flexibility in the classroom, they are not as enthusiastic as lower income residents. About two-thirds of those earning less than \$60,000 annually say they want a more flexible approach.

The Debate Over School Vouchers

Half the County's residents oppose giving taxpayer-funded vouchers to parents with children in sub-standard schools so that their kids can attend a private school with 34% strongly opposing this. On the other hand, 41% support this type of education voucher and only 9% are unsure.

Support and opposition generally revolves around two things: one's perception of how well schools are performing and how much benefit one is likely to derive from a voucher program. Maintaining a school performance grade of B or better is apparently critical to staving off a popular movement to vouchers. Forty-four percent of those who give schools an A grade *strongly oppose* vouchers while only 11% strongly support them. Among residents who feel schools deserve a B grade, opposition is still broad as 53% line up against vouchers but it is much less intense (32% strongly opposed). However,

the tables turn somewhat among those who give schools less than a B grade. Half of these folks support vouchers and 38% intensely favor them.

We also find that low income parents – the ones most likely to take advantage of the type of vouchers we tested – favor them. Support stands at 53% among parents of school-age kids who earn less than \$40,000 annually. Though support is not intense among this group, neither is opposition. This indicates low income parents may like the concept of vouchers but are unsure about the details. Parents making more than \$40,000 are split down the middle, though again, opposition is fairly soft. Such a lukewarm stalemate in this portion of the population may result from the combination of fuzzy details and the potential of only indirectly benefitting from vouchers (e.g. creating school competition via vouchers may raise quality at all schools). Not surprisingly, those without school-age kids tend to oppose vouchers (51% to 38% support). The fact that 70% of San Diegans do not have school-age children goes a long way toward explaining the County-wide lack of support for this voucher idea.

Student Success Drivers

We asked respondents what the most important factor driving a child's academic success or failure is. Our list included: the parents; the child's motivation; the teachers; the availability of books supplies and technology; the child's friends and fellow students; and the child's IQ. Since only 1% gave a response that was not on our list, it is clear we covered the spectrum of potential success drivers.

Though 29% believe that all the factors we mentioned are “most important,” parenting stands out as the clear leader. Nearly 70% say it is one of the most vital aspects to academic success and 40% say a student's parents are singularly important above and beyond all other factors. Significant numbers of residents also consider teachers (12%) and a child's motivation (10%) to be the most important factors. But even when all child-related factors are combined and school-related factors are combined, they account for 14% and 13% respectively of public opinion here.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that there is only one demographic group which elevates child-related factors ahead of parents. Forty-two percent of adults under the age of 24 consider child-related factors to be the main driver of student success while just 21% say parents are mainly responsible. Therefore, those least removed from the school experience substantially discount parental influence in a way that all others do not. Could this be an example of youthful hubris? We found that it does not matter whether these young residents have school age children in the household.

Indicators of School Performance

While 28% think the changes they observe in a child's development are the most important indicator of school performance, 17% focus on standardized test scores, 13% look at a school's official ranking and 12% say a child's grades are the most important indicator. Those without school kids in the household tend to rely more heavily on a child's grades than do childless residents, but other differences are insignificant.

Further analysis shows that those who focus on an individual child's development are less happy with the performance of County schools. And, those who rely mainly on the media for information on school performance evaluate schools much more harshly (GPA 1.67), though there are very few who say they look mainly to the media. On the positive side, both those who mainly rely on a child's grades and those who rely on the assessment of teachers and administrators see schools performing significantly better than average.

Conclusions

The County's public school teachers should find much to be happy about in this poll. Schools not only receive good marks, but they get better grades among their core customers. On the other hand, the results related to the concept behind the "Blueprint for Success" should give administrators pause. They appear to be losing the hearts and minds of *their* core customers. While vouchers in the incarnation we asked about do

not have widespread appeal, sufficient support exists to suggest that another type of proposal would be better received. Since the key factor driving support or opposition to vouchers is school performance, opponents of vouchers must hope that the current perception remains.

Residents clearly believe that parents play a big part in a child's education. This echoes numerous important studies on the subject. Whether or not this study's findings are "heartening" turns on whether the County's 600,000 parents act on their responsibility. Finally, residents claim that relatively direct means – via child development, child grades and child test scores – are the preferred method of determining a school's performance. And, while 13% view school rankings as the best way to evaluate a school, there is no evidence to suggest that folks using these rankings are any more critical of schools. Instead, those who rely on the most indirect medium of all – the media itself – are the schools' harshest detractors.