

# Education Matters

November 2009

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## EDUCATION STIMULUS WATCH

**Buckets of money may yield only drops of reform**

By Andy Smarick



**T**he American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which was signed into law in February, will pump nearly \$100 billion into K-12 education. This is an unprecedented sum of federal money, and the legislation has the potential to play a uniquely influential role in the affairs of districts and schools. However, what is at issue is the substance of that role.

Since congressional deliberations began, much of the commentary about the ARRA has suggested that it will contribute mightily to the ongoing efforts to improve America's schools. *The New York Times* reported on Democratic congressional leaders' vigorous efforts to craft the law in a way that would ensure that the funding would be used for reform. Since its passage, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said many times that ARRA education funds must drive improvement. Significant media and education industry attention has been paid to the law's "Race to the Top" and "What Works" funds, billions of dollars designed to launch new initiatives and scale up those already working.

For these reasons, the law's education components have been depicted as potentially among the most important engines for education reform in generations. However, although some congressional leaders may have thought they were writing a blueprint for reform, what resulted was quite different. And while Secretary Duncan, to his credit, has spoken passionately and often about the need for improvement, the tools he was handed were cracked and dull.

In short, at this point the enthusiastic predictions about the

ARRA's contributions to K-12 education reform should be approached with skepticism. The law's provisions and their interpretation by the Department of Education erect significant barriers to reform. Moreover, additional conditions on the ground make those obstacles even higher. At this early date, it appears that we must adjust our expectations about the ARRA's ability to generate the types of improvements our schools so urgently need.

The overriding purpose of the ARRA was to stimulate the economy, and the vast majority of its funding streams passing through education were designed to serve this purpose. To accomplish this, many existing formula-based programs were utilized and job protection and quick dissemination of funds were prioritized.

It appears that during deliberations some members of Congress and administration officials sought to add reform as a subsidiary goal of ARRA education funding. The assumption was made that stimulus and reform could easily go hand-in-hand. However, the story is more complicated than that. In fact, by trying to ensure the former, the latter appears to have been inhibited in a number of formidable ways. It seems that the influence of the bulk of ARRA education funds will be determined by local leaders preoccupied by short-term considerations such as budget shortfalls and job losses.

### 1. Stabilization versus Reform

The Department has sent mixed signals to fund recipients: it



wants them spending dollars quickly and immediately to save jobs while also carefully devising thoughtful reform strategies that invest in the future. While this clearly represents cognitive dissonance on the part of the federal government and causes headaches for state and local leaders willing to follow Washington's guidance, there is a more serious problem: in important ways, stabilizing our education system and reforming it are opposite objectives.

For example, budget shortfalls would have forced states and districts to make difficult but much-needed decisions, such as prioritizing programs and reconsidering staffing patterns. Because teacher positions have grown twice as fast as student enrollment in recent decades, America's schools employ well over three million teachers. A district could have used the possibility of impending layoffs as an opportunity to remove its most ineffective teachers from the classroom or to renegotiate contract provisions on last-hired, first-fired, or performance pay.

States and districts also could have used difficult budget conditions to close persistently low-performing and under-enrolled schools, force changes in excessively expensive pension programs, or launch less labor-intensive initiatives like online learning programs. Beyond stalling these reform opportunities, the ARRA may ultimately make future reforms more difficult to the extent they fund and therefore help sustain policies and practices antithetical to long-term improvement, such as strict salary schedules and choosing teacher quantity over quality.

## 2. New Funds, Old Formulas

The legislative language governing the use of Recovery-First Funds prioritizes programmatic compliance, job protection, and budgetary support ahead of systemic reform. The federal guidelines for IDEA and Title I funds make clear that these dollars must be used in a manner consistent with program specifications. These are explicitly Title I and IDEA program dollars, not

funds tailored to a specific proven or promising reform area.

Although it is possible that some reform-minded state and local leaders will use these funds to support valuable initiatives, tens of billions of dollars have flowed through these programs over decades, and history suggests that they have not always been engines of innovation and improvement.

## 3. One-Time Money

As the administration has consistently emphasized, the ARRA provides one-time funds. Were state and district leaders inclined to pursue reform, many would be rightfully dissuaded by the "funding cliff" on the horizon. Since reform initiatives require sustained effort, continued spending is unavoidable.

This is clearly on the minds of state leaders. As a Kansas state senator said, "There is no avoiding the crater when the federal faucet shuts off." Similarly, the Minnesota House Speaker remarked, "One-time money ends. . . . When it ends, and the music stops, there are a whole bunch of people left with no chair to sit on here." Washington, D.C., schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee agreed: "We don't want to be in a position of bringing in this huge amount of money and then having to lay people off in two years after the money runs out."

## 4. Vested Interests

Many local advocacy organizations are committed to maintaining and augmenting the status quo. In instances where reform-minded local leaders hope to launch innovative initiatives, organizations with vested interests may construct impassable roadblocks. Unsurprisingly and understandably, teachers unions have placed intense pressure on policymakers to use the funds solely to restore jobs and prevent layoffs.

For example, Montana proposed dedicating \$43 million of its share to the teachers' pension system, which had lost hundreds of millions of dollars in recent months. Some in Michigan have also proposed using the funds to shore up teacher pensions. Meanwhile, the Utah Education Association is running television commercials recommending that policymakers use stimulus funds to restore education cuts to prevent layoffs.

While some local leaders may use these dollars to fund promising reform initiatives, the history of federal education funding and the language within the stimulus package strongly suggest that these will be the exceptions, not the rule. For these reasons, despite high hopes and buoyant predictions, the ARRA has gotten off to an inauspicious start. ■

*This article is adapted from a "Special Report from the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research." To view the entire report, go to [www.aei.org/paper/100024](http://www.aei.org/paper/100024).*



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# The Biggest Bonus

## How high-performing charter schools do “merit pay”

By Stafford Palmieri

With all the positive press surrounding high-achieving charter schools, it’s not surprising that they’ve turned into the education reformers’ go-to point of comparison. And so, when Jay Mathews of the *Washington Post* wrote that districts could learn a thing or two from high-flying charters about performance-based pay for teachers (“Charter Schools Provide Good Model on Teacher Pay”), I was intrigued—especially because, as Mathews made clear, these schools generally don’t pay their staff that way.

Instead, the reward for teaching in great charters is a great work environment—a culture of success, where strong performance is praised, and, more importantly, shoddy work holds consequences.

Mathews explains that successful charters are wary of performance pay because such a compensation system could pit teachers against one another. It would also refocus the spotlight away from student performance and back on the squabbles of adults.

### Important Distinctions

But we have to be careful. Just because charter schools don’t do merit pay doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t experiment with it in traditional public schools. Why? Because, when it comes to individual teachers, charter and district schools start from a completely different premise: in most charters, teachers can be fired, usually without much hassle, while in traditional, unionized schools, they cannot. Put another way, teachers are pitted against one another—for their very jobs.

This is an important distinction because it means that charter schools already have an incentive scheme that encourages good work: if you don’t perform, you’ll get fired. In other words, pay rewards performance indirectly since employees are at-will. Consequently, your pay goes up if you can cut it. In merit pay schemes, pay rewards performance directly; when you

cannot be terminated, it’s hard to think of another gauge.

The currency of the charter rewards system is respect: knowing that your peers—other teachers—have their jobs because they deserve them, not because they made it through three years without molesting a child or passed an eighth-grade-level exam that has little relationship to actual teaching quality. This can make a huge difference when it comes to workplace culture. And we’ve long understood that stellar coworkers can inspire and motivate us—and underperforming colleagues can drag us down.

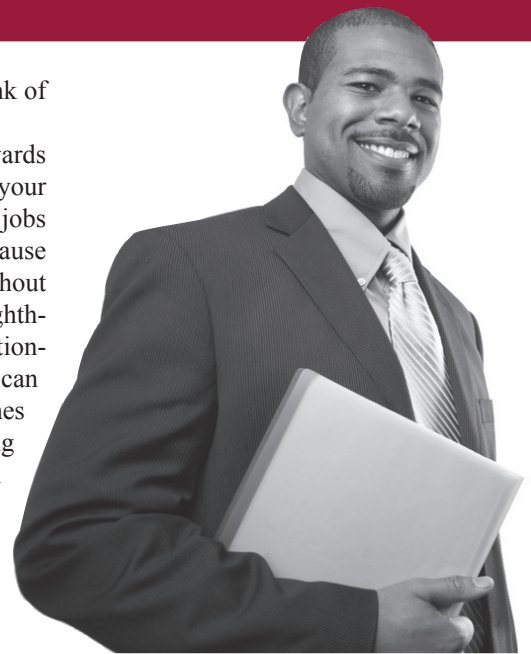
Charter-school HR is an individualized system: individual teachers getting retained or dismissed on the basis of performance—just like merit pay schemes under discussion in places like Washington, D.C. Yet teachers in these

**“The currency of the charter rewards system is respect.”**

high-flying charters are not pitted against one another. Instead, they exist in harmony, accepting the common goal of student achievement and reveling in their own individual contribution to its attainment. It’s teamwork as the sum of its parts. Even if some of their coworkers get a larger paycheck at the end of the month, there is a general understanding that those teachers work at that school in the first place because they deserve to do so.

There is no such understanding in district schools. Since a tenured teacher is practically impossible to fire, the negative incentive to work harder—i.e., the risk of losing your job—does not exist. Performance never enters the picture.

So what’s left? Incentivizing in the other direction—positively—with individual merit pay. Merit pay is, admittedly, an imperfect system, at least so far. Since there is no losing money, only gaining it, it tends to normalize the status quo; work that is simply average remains completely acceptable. And you’ll surely find plenty of teachers who are content enough with life as it is—including their paychecks.



But merit pay does do one thing: shake up the system. In other words, it opens the door on potential excellence and presents a way to be recognized, finally, for good work. Stepped salary schedules do not do this.

Critics squawk that merit pay is unfair and prohibitively tricky. Not only is quantifying teacher effectiveness difficult, but also evaluation systems are at best flawed and at worst useless. The New Teacher Project recently found teacher evaluation systems to be laughable and, earlier this year, the National Council on Teacher Quality discovered that instructional effectiveness is rarely considered when making tenure decisions. However, significant strides have been made in identifying traits that predict classroom success and in developing “value-added” calculations of student learning.

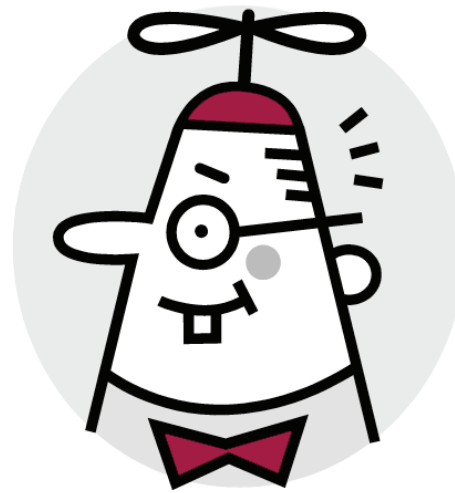
In a perfect world, districts would adopt the charter method of incentivizing teachers and abolish tenure. But as long as that’s politically infeasible, individualized merit pay is the main method we’ve got to recognize good work and shake up the mediocre-is-fine culture of too many schools. ■



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# THE CLASSROOM WITHOUT REASON

Feelings over reason is the ideal for some professors



By Douglas Campbell, Ph.D.

**N**ot very long ago a student approached me, pointed at my office door, and announced, “You can’t say that!” She was pointing to some articles taped to the door that challenged the foundations of global warming theory.

“I believe the arguments presented in those articles are scientifically sound, and I am not at all convinced that human-caused global warming is occurring,” I replied.

Much to my surprise her outrage suddenly faded and, smiling, she said, “Yes, but if people don’t believe in global warming they won’t stop polluting.”

Quickly recovering from my initial shock, I replied, “So the end justifies the means? You would lie to people just to advance your agenda?”

She smiled sweetly and said, “Well, people don’t know what is good for them.”

As she departed, I turned to a colleague standing across the hall who had overheard the entire exchange. “Can you believe that?” I sputtered.

“She is right, Doug, and you should take that stuff off your door before you get in trouble,” he replied as he turned, walked into his office, and closed the door.

It was suddenly very obvious to me why that young woman believed that “people” could not be told the truth and

that the end justifies the means.

California’s annual budget crisis is now a well-known issue. Last May, a student approached me at the end of class and perkily said, “I missed class last Monday because I was at the rally in Sacramento for more funding for the universities.” She was obviously fishing for an excused absence.

Instead, I asked, “So just where will that additional money come from?”

“What? Um, well they can take it from the prisons,” she stuttered.

“The prisons are overcrowded and facing federal mandates. Do you want them to release felons back on to the streets?” I responded.

Stunned, she burst out, “No, of course not, but you don’t understand, I have to graduate. I need my classes.”

“So this is about you—your personal needs—not the efficacy of the educational system or the greater good,” I suggested.

Her smile disappeared and a dark countenance fell across her face as she said in a low, angry voice, “So do I get an excused absence?”

Where does such thinking in university students come from? The answer is that it comes from the university itself. As further evidence I offer the following example. Recently, I completed a required program of instruction that was intended to improve my teaching. Among the re-

quired readings were two particularly disturbing books presented as critical to our personal and professional development. The first, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, by Stephen D. Brookfield, stated that our job is “to increase the amount of love and justice in the world” and “change the world.” Brookfield described faculty with an “anti-collectivist orientation” as “obstructionist dinosaurs standing in the way of desirable innovation and reform”.

Love, justice, and changing the world—these sound like qualities that describe a social activist rather than an educator committed to increasing knowledge; providing skills; encouraging logical, sequential, and critical thinking; and preparing students to be functioning professionals.

The second book, *Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, by Parker J. Palmer, was no better. Palmer tells us “to correct our excessive regard for the powers of intellect.” He goes on to attack all philosophies that insist on the primacy of the rational thought process, and he blames rational thought for totalitarianism, violence, and every social ill imaginable. Palmer tells us that we must put our feelings on at least an equal—preferably dominant—position to logic and rational thought processes.

The obvious problem with this is that

when feelings are emphasized over logic in problem solving, we cease to think rationally and instead devolve to rationalizing our feelings. Feeling and emotions are natural but should flow from the rational examination of facts. Then the resulting feelings are justified and may even be called logical and worthy of respect. Education should be the triumph of facts, logic, and reason over unsupportable emotions.

When we teach students to place their emotions above intellectual analysis, above logic, and above reason, we are disarming them from competing rationally in the marketplace of ideas; and we place them at risk of falling prey to charlatans and the self-serving activists who seek to lead them with appeals to their emotions and passions instead of their minds.

What are the core responsibilities of college and university educators? Are we to teach students to think or what to think? Are we simply free to expound our opinions or are we obligated to teach students how to research, analyze, and develop rational opinions of their own? Should we do both? Can we do both? Are they compatible? If you think that the answers to these questions should be obvious, consider the following account.

In 2001, I participated as a panel member in a public university forum entitled "A Critique of Political Correctness." One topic that arose during the panel was the appropriate roles and responsibilities of a university professor. Much to my surprise, I found myself entirely alone among the panelists in advocating that a professor is professionally obligated to present equally well all sides or interpretations of an important issue being discussed in class. My supporting argument was that only by being equally informed of all positions and their supporting rationale can students apply logic and reach their own rational conclusions on important issues and problems.

I was stunned by the fierceness of the opposition from other faculty members, both on the panel and in the audience. One professor accused me of attacking the very notion of academic freedom. I particularly remember one older member of the sociology department who indignantly proclaimed, "I am a professor, and

my job is to profess my viewpoint. For another viewpoint they can go elsewhere." The chairperson of one academic department later told me privately that "there is no place in the university" for my kind of opinions. This kind of confidence in the "right" to use class-time to promulgate only personal viewpoints inevitably stifles the free exchange and critical analysis of ideas and opinions. Such an attitude naturally leads to the politicization of the classroom.



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I offer yet another true story. Just before the last presidential election, at the beginning of a course on business planning, a student asked me in front of the entire class why I had not told the students which candidate I supported. I responded, "Politics is not the subject of this class. We have enough material to cover to fill our class time. Besides, on principle, I will not use class time to impose my political opinions on you. If outside of class any of you seek my opinion of the candidates, then I will be happy to share my thoughts."

The reaction of the class surprised me. A few students were nodding their head, others were smiling humorously at me, and a few were laughing and gossiping about my response. Somewhat peeved, I asked, "What is so funny?"

One student said, "You might as well tell us who you think we should vote for because all the other professors already have." Other students chimed in to support that student's claim and mentioned specific faculty members who had turned their classes into campaigns for their presidential candidate. Undaunted,

I proceeded with the subject of the class. However, after class a young woman and a young man came forward to thank me privately for sticking to the course subject. They also expressed weariness with being bombarded by "anti-American" and political propaganda in their classes.

I respectfully suggest that the philosophical and ethical foundations of both the United States and the modern American university are being undermined by the ideology of collectivism, with its dogmatic hatred of Western civilization and individuality, and, most serious, its hostility

to rational debate. The quintessentially American acceptance of the right of individuals to come to their own educated conclusions, and then to speak and act according to these conclusions and their own conscience, is under siege by collectivist rules and a repressive group mentality.

If Aristotle was right that "Man is a rational animal," it seems unlikely that these efforts to turn higher education into exercises in ideology can ultimately prevail. They run against something basic in human nature, even as they take advantage of human weaknesses, such as vanity. But such optimism as I can summon is for the very long term. The point at which students demand that their teachers once again take their rational capabilities seriously has not arrived and isn't even on the horizon. What do we do in the mean time? We support the organizations and individuals who resist the irrationality. We do our best to keep alive the hope that one day teachers will be able to teach and students will be able to learn in an environment free from coercion and deceit, and that civility, rationality, and the open exchange of ideas and the virtues of tolerance will be returned to their rightful place. ■

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## AAE Member Receives State Award

Tonya Holmes, 3rd-4th grade teacher in Midvale School District, Midvale, Idaho, and a member of Northwest Professional Educators (an affiliate of AAE), has been awarded the 2009 Preserve America History Teacher Award for the state of Idaho. Sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the award was presented by Peter Kavouras, Content Areas Director for the Idaho State Department of Education, at a special reception held in Mrs. Holmes honor at the Idaho Council for History Education Conference on October 1. The award includes \$1,000, books, and curriculum materials. Mrs. Holmes will represent Idaho in the national Preserve America History Teacher of the Year Award competition. ■



L to R: Julie Calahan, Tonya Holmes, and Jim Warren.

## Lawmakers, Veteran Groups Debate Jr. ROTC Program in San Francisco

The fight to keep Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) programs in San Francisco's high schools is far from over, despite a last-minute push by veterans groups across the country, reports Foxnews.com.

Pentagon officials, calling JROTC "an important academic and citizenship program for high school students," say they're hopeful the program will be saved. But they also say there are 700 schools in the country that are waiting to adopt the program if San Francisco drops it.

The battle by the bay began two years ago, when San Francisco's school board voted to phase out JROTC programs by the end of the 2007-08 school year, citing recruitment concerns and the military's policy toward gays.

The program was extended for another year, but last June, under threats of a lawsuit for not enforcing tougher state education standards, the school board voted to stop granting physical education credits to JROTC students and to offer JROTC as an elective course only. Immediately, enrollment in JROTC dropped dramatically.

However, a state assemblywoman, Fiona Ma, a Democrat from San Francisco, submitted legislation that would rein-

state JROTC at seven of the city's public schools and overturn the original decision by its Unified School District to phase out the program.

State Bill 601, which fortified physical education standards in California and was enacted last January, requires the California Department of Education to monitor to what extent schools provide physical education instruction by gym teachers who hold appropriate credentials.

Last June, facing allegations that it was illegally granting physical education credits for JROTC classes, the San Francisco school board members voted to eliminate the gym credit.

"Since none of our JROTC instructors hold appropriate physical education credentials, that's one factor the board took into consideration," spokeswoman Gentle Blythe told FOXNews.com.

Blythe also noted that State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell wrote a letter last April to Col. Michael Johnson, who oversees California's JROTC programs, stating that JROTC classes do not, in most cases, fulfill the state's requirements for physical education. ■

Source—Foxnews.com

## Teachings' Pecking Order

Offering teachers plum assignments has long been one way to reward performance. A discrimination and demotion lawsuit in Hagerstown, Indiana, provides a picture of the perverse effects of this type of reward. After two years of positive reviews teaching seventh grade English, Sharon Lucero was rewarded for her success by being reassigned to 12th grade honors English. Unfortunately, she bombed and was put back in the lowly seventh grade—her original assignment. She stayed in the same building and there was no pay decrease, but Lucero filed a lawsuit against the school board and pursued it for five years.

The lower the grade taught or the lower the academic ability of the students being taught, the lower the perceived value of the teacher. This status hierarchy may not be objective, but it is widespread, and it is bad for students. Finally last summer, the judge ruled against her on all charges. ■

Source—TQ Bulletin, a publication of the National Council on Teacher Quality



For member information:  
[www.aateachers.org](http://www.aateachers.org)

# Americans Speak Out

## Are Educators and Policymakers Listening?

By Emmy Partin



The 41st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/  
Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes  
toward the Public Schools

This hefty annual offering, which features some repeat questions and others dusted-off less frequently, is worth an annual revisit. There's so much data in this big guy that we'd be hard pressed to even scratch the surface but we'll give it our best shot. So, what do we, the American public, think about public education in 2009?

First, public schools aren't great and are getting worse. While most of us (51 percent) rate our local schools highly, far fewer (19 percent) are pleased with public schools nationally. Fifty percent say children today get a worse education than they received themselves.

Second, we don't like the brand called No Child Left Behind but we support its major mandates. Just 28 percent look favorably on NCLB, and only 24 percent believe the law is helping our local schools. Yet, two-thirds of us support requiring annual tests in grades three through eight, and this support has remained steady since 2002. And just one-third support letting each state use its own tests; instead, we continue to favor using a single standardized test nationwide, just as we did in 2002. (This should be welcome news to the Common Core State Standards initiative.)

Third, we're not convinced early childhood education is worth the investment. Fifty-nine percent of us (including 53 percent of public school parents) believe that starting formal education one year earlier than usual would have a negative or no effect on children's future academic achievement (this is down just two

points from 1997). Further, fewer of us are willing to pay more in taxes to fund preschool for disadvantaged children (42 percent said no in 2009, up from 36 percent in 1993).

Fourth, we're pro-merit pay and want to use student achievement to inform it. Seventy-two percent of us support merit pay for teachers, and 73 percent believe it should be fed by student performance measured by standardized tests.

Fifth, charter support is growing. Two-thirds now support the idea of charter schools, up 15 percent from five years ago.

And sixth, we're not as informed as we think we are. Nearly three-quarters of us claim to be "well-informed" or "fairly well-informed" about public schools. At the same time, more than half of us do not think charter schools are public schools, 46 percent believe they can teach religion, 57 percent say they can charge tuition, and a whopping 71 percent believe charters can select students based on ability—up from 58 percent just three years ago. ■

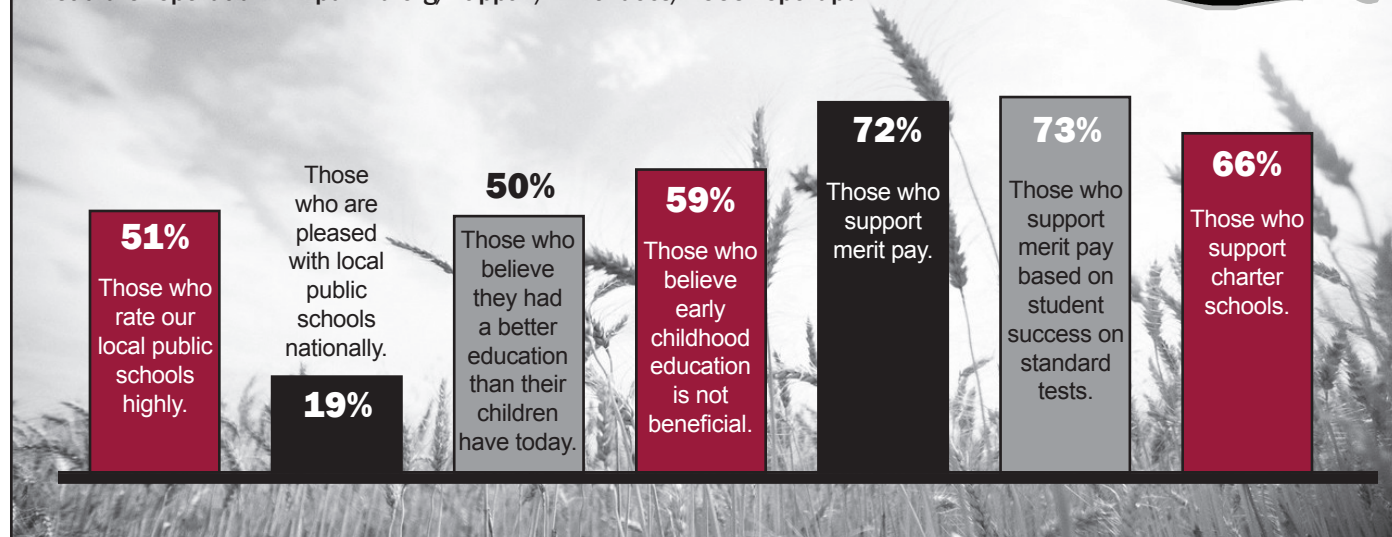


*Emmy Partin is Director of Ohio Policy & Research for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. In this role, she oversees the Institute's Ohio-focused policy analysis, research projects, and advocacy efforts.*



## What Americans Believe about Public Education

Read the report at [www.pdkintl.org/kappan/M-Polldocs/2009Report.pdf](http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/M-Polldocs/2009Report.pdf)





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