

May 13, 2008

# California Voters Concerned About Public Education

## Want to Increase Information & Accountability

**To:** Interested Parties

**From:** Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

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California voters are concerned about the state of public education and support a series of reforms that would give parents the tools to hold schools accountable.

A survey conducted for California Business for Education Excellence (CBEE)<sup>1</sup> found voters believe education is now one of the most important problems facing our state, trailing only the economy as a serious concern.

Key among the poll's findings are:

- Voters believe California's public schools are getting worse, not better
- Voters believe too many school resources are wasted on bureaucracy and administrative costs. More believe the problems in California's education system are due to a lack of accountability, rather than a lack of funding
- Voters are aware of an "achievement gap" between students of different ethnicities and economic backgrounds and see it as a serious problem that must be addressed. They are optimistic, however, that the achievement gap can be closed
- Voters want clear-cut ways to evaluate the success or failure of schools, and they want parents to have more information available to them about school performance, so parents can make informed decisions for their children and also hold schools accountable when students do not perform at grade level
- Voters see testing as a valuable tool in evaluating the performance of students, teachers and administrators
- Voters strongly support a number of CBEE's recommendations for improving K-12 public education in California, including making kindergarten mandatory, making school performance data understandable and available to the public, and setting grade-level proficiency expectations for every school.

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<sup>1</sup> California Business for Education Excellence commissioned Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc., to design and administer a telephone survey of 1,000 registered California voters from February 4-10, 2008. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.1 percent.

## Education Seen as an Important Problem

■ **Table 1:** California's Top Issues

*Now I am going to read you a list of issues facing California. Please tell me which issue is the most important problem facing our state.*

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Total</b>
The economy and jobs	16
Education	15
Illegal immigration	14
The cost of health care and health insurance	12
The cost of housing	5
Crime, gangs and violence	3
Energy and gas prices	3
Taxes	3
Traffic and congestion	2
The environment	2
(All)	24
(None)	0
(Don't know/refused)	0

Education is in the top tier of issues concerns for all California voters and it rises to the very top among certain demographics. Parents of children younger than 18, not surprisingly, rate education as the most important problem facing our state. One in five parents (21 percent) rated it as most important, compared to one in seven (14 percent) who rated the economy and jobs as most important, which was the next highest rated issue.

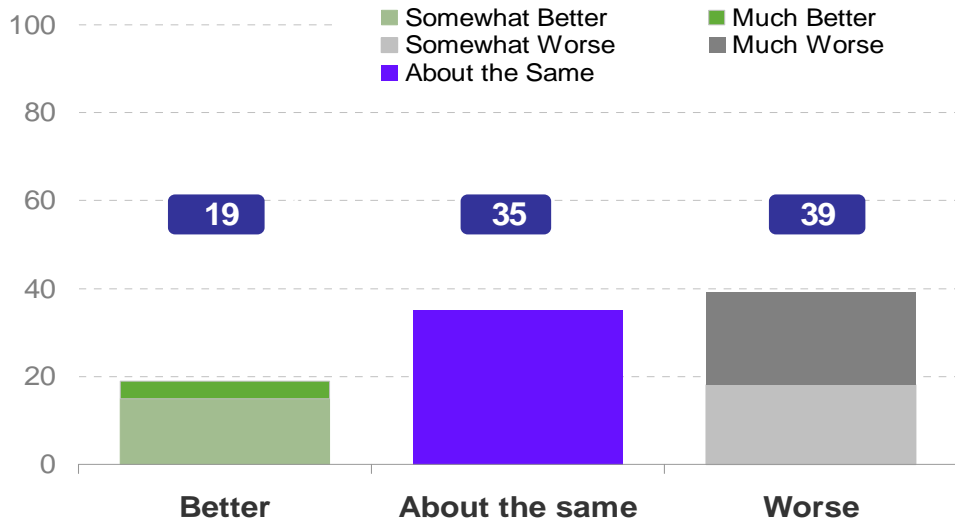
One quarter (25 percent) of the youngest voters, 18 – 29 years old, rated education as the top issue, compared to only one in ten (9 percent) senior citizens 65 years old or older.

One quarter (24 percent) of Asian-American voters rated education as the most important issue facing California, outpacing all other issues by a significant margin. Fifteen percent of Latinos listed education as their top concern, tying it with the cost of health care and health insurance as tops for this community.

Among all voters, twice as many feel California's public schools have gotten worse in the last few years (39 percent) compared to those who feels schools have improved (19 percent). More telling, is that one in 25 voters (4 percent) feels schools have gotten *much better* in the past few years, while one in five (21 percent) believe schools have gotten much worse.

## ■ Graph 1: Direction of Public Schools

In the past few years, have California's public schools gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same?



More than half (52 percent) of African-American voters believe that schools have gotten worse, compared to less than one quarter (23 percent) who say they have improved.

Two out of five (40 percent) of Latinos believe schools have gotten worse, while more than one quarter (27 percent) feel they have improved.

Asians and white voters had similar perspectives on the status California's public schools. Thirty-eight percent of white voters and 35 percent of Asian voters believe schools have gotten worse, while 17 percent of each of these groups feels schools have improved.

## Specific Concerns

Within the general concern California voters have about the status of public education in the state, a couple of themes emerged in the results of the survey:

- Voters are concerned about the way schools use their resources
- Voters believe are troubled that too many students not performing at grade-level
- Voters want to make sure parents are more involved in their children's education

■ **Table 2:** Problems with California's Education System

*Now I'm going to read you a list of problems facing California's education system. After I read each item, please tell me whether you think this is an extremely serious problem, a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, or a not too serious problem.*

<b><u>Issues</u></b>	<b><u>Extremely Serious</u></b>
Too much money being spent on bureaucracy and administration	40
A lack of parental involvement	37
Crime, gangs and violence in schools	37
Too many students not performing at grade level	34
Wasteful spending of school finances	33
Students dropping out of school	31
Classrooms being too crowded	31
Not having enough quality teachers	29
An achievement gap between students from different economic backgrounds	26
An achievement gap between students of different ethnicities	25
Expectations are too low, or are not the same for all students	23
Too little accountability for student achievement results	21
Students lacking up-to-date textbooks	19
Not having enough quality principals	17

To test whether voters feel the problems with California's education system are the result of a lack of funding, they were asked to choose between the following two statements:

*Some people say the main problem with our schools is the lack of accountability. There is adequate funding for education, but there is too much underperformance and inefficiency in the system. California already spends 67 billion dollars a year on education, but too much goes towards efforts and programs that don't help prepare students achieve academic success.*

*Other people say the lack of funding is a major reason for the poor quality of our schools. California ranks near the very bottom in the country in per student funding, along with states like Mississippi. Our schools cannot improve unless we increase the money we spend in the classroom.*

More than half (54 percent) chose the first statement, about "lack of accountability," while one third (33 percent) chose the second, about "lack of funding." Support for the accountability statement was much more intense than support for the funding statement. Twice as many voters (46 percent) said they agreed with the accountability statement "much more," compared to those who agreed with the funding statement "much more" (24 percent).

## Solving the Achievement Gap

Seven out of ten voters (69 percent) say they have heard about an "achievement gap," defined as a difference in academic performance between students of different ethnicities and economic backgrounds. When asked specifically about the achievement gap, three out of four (74 percent) believe it is a serious problem.

But voters are optimistic. Three quarters (75 percent) of those who see it as a serious problem believe that schools with high levels of poverty and large minority student populations can overcome this problem.

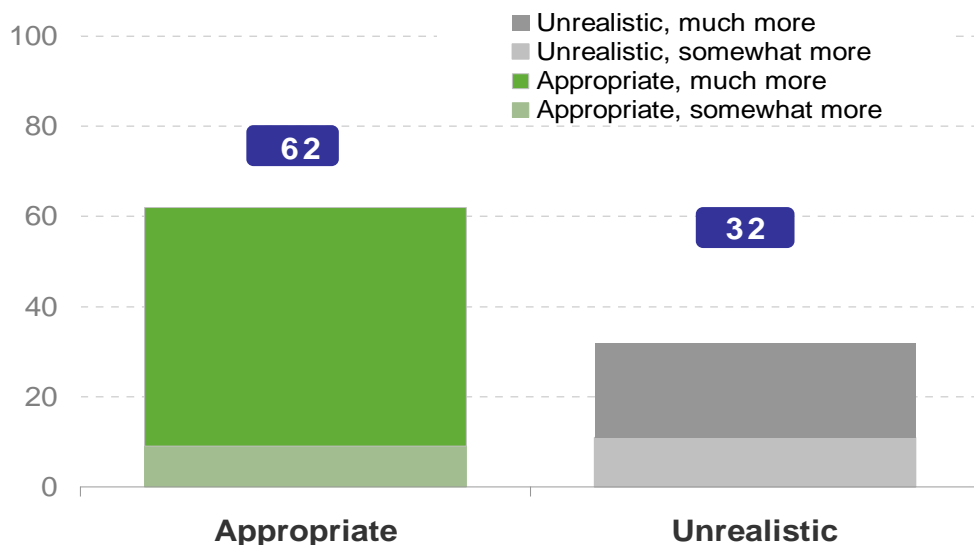
Additionally, by a two-to-one margin, voters feel it is appropriate to have the same high expectations for students from all ethnic groups and economic backgrounds.

### ■ Graph 2: One Set of Expectations for All Students

Which of these two statements comes closer your own point of view:

*It is appropriate to have the same high expectations for students from all ethnic groups and economic backgrounds*

*It is unrealistic to think that the schools can prepare all students for college or the workplace, regardless of the student's background.*



This question was answered nearly equally by white voters (62 percent appropriate; 32 percent unrealistic), African-American voters (65 percent appropriate; 29 percent unrealistic) and Latino voters (61 percent appropriate; 33 percent unrealistic).

## Support for Standardized Tests

On first glance, voters slightly favor using regular standardized tests to assess student progress, but there are concerns about cultural biases and that some children simply don't perform well on tests.

Half (51 percent) of all voters agree with the statement: *We need to continue regular standardized tests so we can track the progress of students, teachers and schools, and work to help those that are underperforming.*

While four out of nine (44 percent) are closer to the statement: *Standardized tests can often be culturally biased and we should not focus so much on test scores. It's been known for a long time that some students often under perform others in standardized testing, due to social factors, like poverty and crime, and poor schools.*

But a large majority of voters clearly see the advantages of testing, as shown in the table below.

### ■ Table 3: The Benefits of Assessment Tests

*How important is testing in doing each of the following – extremely important, very important, somewhat important, or not too important?*

	<b><u>Extremely / Very Important</u></b>
Holding students and parents accountable	76
Giving students and parents information about how well the teachers and school are doing	75
Identifying schools that are succeeding, so they can share proven strategies with less successful schools	72
Measuring student performance	71
Holding students accountable	70
Measuring teacher performance	68
Holding schools accountable	67

At least two thirds of all voters say testing is either extremely or very important for each of the goals asked in the survey. From these responses, we can see the value voters place on testing for keeping **parents** informed on the progress of their children.

From these results – and the policy recommendations they support most strongly – it is clear voters want parents to have the tools they need to work with the schools educating their children, as well as have the proper information to be able to hold the schools accountable when they are not succeeding in their job.

## Recommendations

### ■ Table 4: Potential Reforms

*Now I am going to read you some potential education reforms and policy options for California's K-through-12 public schools. After I read each one, please tell me whether you strongly support it, somewhat support it, somewhat oppose it or strongly oppose it.*

	<b><u>Strongly Support</u></b>	<b><u>Total Support</u></b>
Set the expectation for all schools to get all students to attain a minimum of grade-level proficiency each year in reading, writing and mathematics.	74	91
Make kindergarten mandatory for every child in the state of California	73	84
Make school performance data, such as overall student assessment test scores and grade-level performance, available and understandable to the public, so parents can better understand what is happening within schools. Test scores of individual students would remain confidential.	72	91
Give parents clear options for when their local school is chronically low-performing, including easy to access tutoring services for their children, transfers to another school, and charter school options	68	86
Continue to provide additional money to low performing schools that raise achievement as an incentive for further improvement, rather than taking the additional money away	64	82