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In new statewide survey, Virginians speak out on education reform topics
-Survey results find strong support for school choice policies-

RICHMOND (November 16, 2009) – While a majority of Virginia’s voters believe the state’s public school system is good or excellent, similar numbers favor school choice reforms such as tax-credit scholarships, school vouchers, and charter schools. Fifty-five percent of likely voters would opt for schools other than regular public schools, according to the results of a public opinion survey released today by several state and national education, business, religious and policy organizations.

The survey of 1,203 likely voters was conducted October 1-4, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percent. Braun Research, Inc., a New Jersey-based survey research company, administered the interviews and collected the data for the project. Braun Research has previously conducted surveys and completed other projects for the Gallup Organization, the Pew Research Center, and the Eagleton Poll. It is also the field house responsible for collecting data for the *Newsweek Poll*.

The survey results found broad support among Democrats, Republicans and Independents for tax-credit scholarship and school voucher policies. Democrats indicate support for tax-credit scholarships (64%) and school vouchers (53%). They are more likely to favor rather than oppose these policies by +43 percentage points and +15 percentage points, respectively. Similar “favor-oppose gaps” were seen among Republicans (+46 tax-credit scholarships and +39 vouchers) and Independents (+44 tax-credit scholarships and +22 vouchers).

“These survey results confirm first and foremost that our parents want more choices and options in our educational system,” said Chris Braunlich, Vice President of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy. “While Virginians do support our state’s public schools, it is also clear that they want more and different opportunities for the education of their children. For years, opponents of parental options have claimed that being for school choice means someone is against public schools. As this survey shows, that’s certainly not true. Simply put: One size does not fit all, and Virginians want more choices and more alternatives that will best respond to their children’s needs.”

Paul DiPerna, Research Director for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, spoke further about the appetite for school choice found in the survey data. “These results indicate a

major disconnect between Virginians' schooling preferences and actual school enrollments," said Mr. DiPerna. "While 39 percent of K-12 parents say they would like to send their child to a private school, in reality, only about 9 percent of Virginia's K-12 students attend private schools. Ten percent of parents would like to send their child to a charter school, yet there are only three charter schools currently in operation in Virginia. In our survey, four out of ten Virginia parents said they would choose a regular public school for their child, yet more than nine of ten (91%) Virginia K-12 students attend public schools."

"As in other states where we have surveyed, the implication of these results is that Virginia does not have a sufficient school choice system in place to match parents' schooling preferences," he said.

Virginia Walden Ford, Executive Director of DC Parents for School Choice, accentuated the benefits parents and their children experience when educational options are enhanced. "I truly believe that the more options we are able to offer parents the better off we'll be," she said. "The hope I express today is that we will all work together, so that private schools, charter schools, and traditional public schools can seamlessly benefit our children. Because that's what this is all about: what is best for the children."

Delegate Chris Saxman, who is also the founder and Chairman of School Choice Virginia, observed, "We already have school choice here in the Commonwealth, in the form of both tax credits and vouchers. The Neighborhood Assistance tax credit funds religious pre-K programs, and TAG grants are vouchers for college students who attend nonpublic institutions. People like these programs because they are effective and save money. School choice works very well for pre-K and college students, and it will work every bit as well for students in between."

Virginia Catholic Conference Director Jeff Caruso also emphasized the important role that nonpublic schools play in the state educational system. "Through its programs for pre-K and college students, our state clearly recognizes the value of its nonpublic educational partners at those levels. It's now time for Virginia to acknowledge the equally valuable contributions that its nonpublic elementary and secondary schools make to the common good of our Commonwealth."

The survey was undertaken for Virginia-based organizations by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Sponsoring organizations from Virginia and the region include the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, Virginia Catholic Conference, The Family Foundation, The Chase Foundation of Virginia, The Alderson Family Foundation, Virginia Council for Private Education, Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium, Old Dominion Association of Church Schools, Agudath Israel of America - Mid-Atlantic Region, Verizon Virginia, Markel Corporation, Joe Ragan's Coffee and Office Products, School Choice Virginia, The Lexington Institute, and Americans for Prosperity – Virginia. National organizations include the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), Association of Christian Schools International, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, National Catholic Educational Association, and United States-Mexico Cultural and Educational Foundation.

Highlights of Virginia Survey Results

- Likely voters are more likely to favor a tax-credit scholarship system and school vouchers than oppose such policies – 65 percent support and 22 percent oppose tax-credit scholarships; 57 percent favor and 35 percent oppose school vouchers.
- There is strong support for tax-credit scholarships and school vouchers among the state’s Democrats (D), Republicans (R), and Independents (I).

Support levels are substantial:

- Tax-credit scholarships D: 64% | R: 68% | I: 66%
- School vouchers D: 53% | R: 67% | I: 58%
- Special needs school vouchers D: 81% | R: 79% | I: 76%

Favor-oppose gaps are large:

- Tax-credit scholarships D: +43 | R: +46 | I: +44
- School vouchers D: +15 | R: +39 | I: +22
- Special needs school vouchers D: +67 | R: +64 | I: +60

- More Virginians say the state’s public school system is either “good” or “excellent” (62 percent) rather than “fair” or “poor” (31 percent). Virginia is the first state of thirteen other states surveyed by the Friedman Foundation to register a good/excellent rating above 50 percent.
- Nearly two out of three voters interviewed (65%) substantially underestimated per-student funding in Virginia’s public schools. It is evident Virginians do not know the per-pupil costs within the public school system.
- When asked "if it were your decision and you could select any type of school, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child," here's how likely voters in the state responded:
 - 42 percent selected regular public schools
 - 35 percent selected private schools
 - 10 percent selected charter schools
 - 9 percent selected home schooling
 - 1 percent selected virtual schools