

Editorial

Many Kinds Of Texans Favoring School Choice

Offering a conclusion on "what Texans want" is a rather shaky premise because what many might favor could be totally unacceptable in the minds of others and some just might not care.

But policymakers are in the business of trying to figure out what the people "want," and the most popular way they have of trying to do that is through surveys and opinion polls, which may not always agree. It doesn't always translate into responsive action when they find out.

There are different kinds of public opinion surveys, some of which are labeled "scientific" while others might be "random" or "unofficial."

Of particular interest in some circles is a recently conducted opinion poll labeled as "scientific," which are considered the most accurate kind but still carry a margin of error disclaimer.

Conducted by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, the poll asked a scientifically selected group of Texans: "Do you favor or oppose a proposal that would create a school choice program whereby education scholarships would be given by the state to pay for a child's education at any public, private or parochial school?"

The overall results show about 60 percent of Texans surveyed favor school choice. Looking deeper at the results, the numbers show support for school choice crosses every social, economic and political boundary, said Chris Patterson, director of research for the TPPF.

Some of the findings show that Texans without a college diploma are the strongest advocates of school choice, with 81 percent of registered voters without college degrees, between the ages of 18 and 44, in support. For college graduates in the same age group, support is right at 60 percent.

Among Texans making less than \$30,000 a year, 66 percent say they favor school choice, and 57 percent in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 annual income level do the same.

It is not just conservatives who support school choice, Patterson noted. Just shy of 60 percent of women who make less than \$50,000 want school choice for their children. Among women who vote Democratic, about 61 percent are in favor. At the other end of the political spectrum, 57 percent of Republican voting men surveyed favor school choice.

Rural voters were found to support school choice 62 percent of the time, while urban-dwellers give it 56 percent support.

Hispanics (73 percent) and African Americans (63 percent) are among the strongest supporters of educational freedom, judging by survey results.

All of this leads Patterson to conclude that "Every kind of Texan wants parents to be free to select the school best suited for their children, and have no problem in using tax dollars to pay for it." But not "every" Texan, it is obvious.

Last year the U.S. Supreme Court held that vouchers are constitutional, Patterson noted, so the leading argument against school choice has become money. Opponents express concern that vouchers will siphon money from cash-strapped public schools.

Patterson responds by citing another result from the poll that found 56 percent of those surveyed think public schools "spend money in a wasteful fashion." And, she said, numbers compiled by Rep. David Swinford "demonstrates that higher performing schools actually underspend poorly performing schools."

Giving parents freedom to choose the school they want for their youngsters would serve notice to all schools to prove their academic value to parents. Patterson argues choice would drive school systems of all types to greater academic achievement and economic efficiency.

Gov. Rick Perry is likely to call the legislature into a special session on school finance later this year, or perhaps next spring, to work on a new school finance system for the state. Patterson figures there could be no better time to also tackle the school choice issue.

It's time, she said, for the legislature to "do the right thing and represent the will of the majority of Texans."

What "most people want," however, or even what most people believe the Constitution says, doesn't always translate into responsive action on the part of today's policymakers, elected or appointed.