

Texas Voters Set the Standard for Successful Schools TSTA President Donna New Haschke - February 1, 2005

When you get outside the Capitol, Texans understand what is most important in good schools and what we need to do to make them even better. Their message to those inside the Capitol is clear: invest resources in the programs that make our classrooms a better place to learn, and don't make things worse by "fixing" things that aren't broken. They understand that "reform" doesn't mean throwing out programs that work.

A strong, bipartisan consensus exists among Texas voters on how to improve public education, according to the findings of a bipartisan poll of Texas voters conducted January 6-12 by Republican pollster Ed Goeas of The Tarrance Group and Democratic pollster Paul Harstad of Harstad Strategic Research.

Overwhelmingly, Texans believe good teachers, small classes, discipline and safety, and up-to-date textbooks and teaching materials are essential to meeting high standards for academic achievement.

Public education remains the top state priority. Forty-two percent of Texans identified public education as the most important issue the legislature must resolve this session. Health care ranked second with 30% and only 13% said holding the line on taxes is most important.

Texas voters also support stronger education standards, and they believe more state funding is necessary to meet those standards. Sixty-five percent say they would like to see stronger state education standards, compared to only 5% who want to reduce state education standards. Correspondingly, 72% of voters would like to see state funding for public education increased, while only 5% want less spent on our schools.

The breadth of support for our public schools indicates Texans believe the proven bipartisan reforms instituted over the last two decades are working. They understand that we must invest enough resources in public education to fully realize the promise of those reforms. These voters see a return on their investment in our public schools. Two-thirds of Texas voters say our public schools are either starting to improve or have improved and need to continue to do so. And two-thirds of those who are the actual "consumers" of public education give the schools even higher marks. When asked to rate their child's school, 86% of parents give those schools a grade of A or B.

Voters believe it wiser to provide full funding for proven education programs based on successful reforms rather than untried experiments such as tying funding to increasing standardized test scores. Sixty-two percent of voters believe we should fund the existing reforms and only 28% want to move to a system that gives funding and rewards to schools and teachers who show improved student performance as measured by tests.

Throughout the survey, parents and voters repeatedly acknowledge the value of teachers as the single most important factor in determining the quality of our children's education. Eighty-nine percent of parents rated their children's teachers as excellent or good. When asked to volunteer the most important factor in a good public school, a 59% majority of voters mention teachers first, compared to other factors such as curriculum, safety, materials, administration, test performance, and all other factors. When asked to choose the most important of four factors that contribute to a quality education, a strong 45% plurality choose paying teachers enough to attract quality, certified teachers.