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READY FOR CHANGE: WHAT MISSOURIANS THINK OF PARENTAL CHOICE AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Verne Kennedy and Sarah Brodsky

This year's legislative session was marked by contentious debates on how to improve Missouri's schools. In the course of a school year marked by the state takeover of the Saint Louis schools and debates over mayoral control of schools and tuition tax credit legislation, there is a growing appetite for big changes in K-12 schooling. Are Missourians satisfied with the condition of the state's schools? How does the public feel about various school choice options? In an attempt to gauge the direction of that thinking, the Show-Me Institute commissioned Market Research Insight (MRI) in fall 2006 to conduct a telephone poll of Missouri residents. Between November 20 and December 8, 2006, MRI interviewed a total of 942 Missouri residents.

Missourians expressed enthusiasm for reforms that would give parents greater choice in their children's education. Most Missourians had a positive opinion of private schools, and support was especially strong among minorities. Some of the most widely

favored parental choice policies included tuition tax credits and school choice for low-income students and students in unsafe schools. Missourians had less-positive opinions of the politically loaded term "school vouchers" and of some proposals such as tax credits for home-schooling families.

Minorities were often even more supportive of choice and alternatives to the public schools than the general population. They were also less likely to believe that school choice would hurt the traditional public schools.

A Bleak Picture: Concerns about School Quality and Parental Influence

Respondents reported a high level of dissatisfaction with public schooling in Missouri and a lack of confidence that more money will lead to educational improvement. Respondents showed little faith in the power of parents to change public schools for the better. When asked

Verne Kennedy is president of Market Research Insight. He holds a Ph.D. from Louisiana State University.

Sarah Brodsky is a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute. She holds an A.B. in economics from the University of Chicago.

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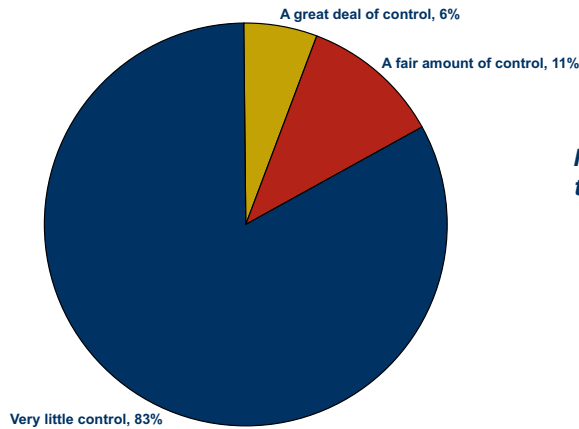
how well Missouri’s K-12 public schools are doing, just 12 percent of respondents believed the schools are “doing very well,” while 63 percent reported that public schools in Missouri are either “in a crisis” or have “serious problems.” One in four Missourians deemed the schools to be in a state of crisis. Eighty percent of African-Americans and 74 percent of Hispanics said the public schools are “in a crisis” or have “serious problems,” with one in two African-Americans and nearly one in three Hispanics believing the schools to be in a crisis.

Some people contend that choice and accountability are needed to improve the public schools, while others maintain that

the public schools need more money. Most Missourians do not accept the argument that poor academic performance is simply the result of insufficient funding. Sixty-one percent of respondents reported that additional school funding “is not the issue” or “makes no difference.”

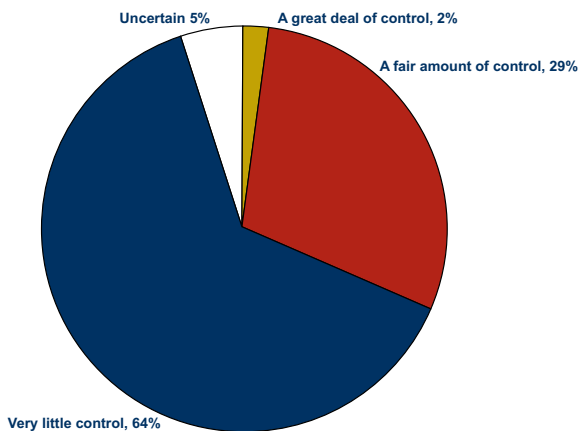
How able are parents to address their concerns within public schools? Sixty-six percent of respondents felt that parents have “very little control” over how schools are run, with just 5 percent saying that parents have “a great deal of control.” African-Americans overwhelmingly indicated that parents have little influence over schooling, with 83 percent of African-Americans saying that parents have “very

Responses of African-Americans

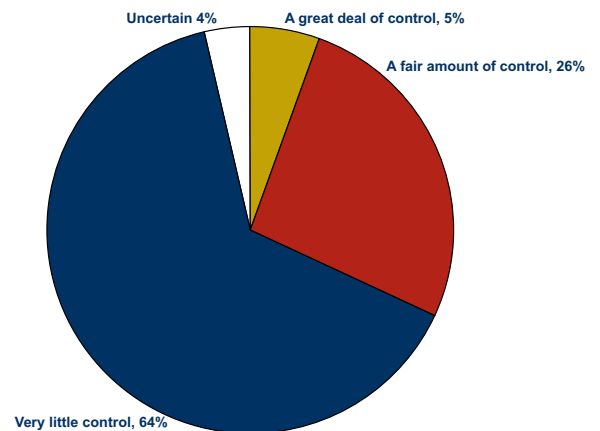


How much control do you think parents have over how the public schools are in Missouri today? Do you think parents have a great deal of control, a fair amount of control, or very little control?

Responses of Hispanics



Responses of Whites



little control” over how the public schools are run. The figure was 64 percent for whites and 64 percent for Hispanics.

Strong Support for Choice

As a general principle, Missouri residents overwhelmingly support parental choice in education. When asked whether parents, state government, or local government should make the decision about which school or which kind of school a child attends, 85 percent of respondents said that parents should make the decision.

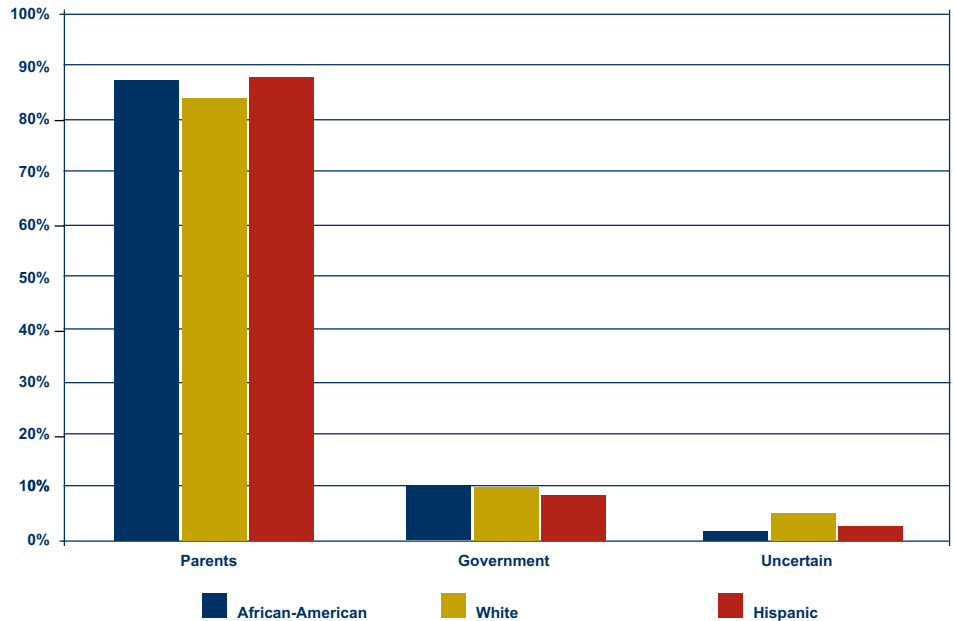
Missourians are particularly supportive of school choice for children in troubled schools. When asked whether parents whose children attend failing schools should “have a choice to put their child in another public or private school,” 75 percent of respondents favored the idea and just 17 percent opposed it.

There is also widespread support for allowing low-income parents to “use the same money spent on the child at a public school to send their child to any school of their choice, public or private.” Seventy percent of all Missourians favored this proposal. Eighty-four percent of Hispanics favored the proposal, compared to 78 percent of African-Americans and 68 percent of whites.

Charter Schools, “Vouchers,” and Tuition Tax Credits

Most Missourians do not have strong opinions about charter schools. Overall, 27

Who do you think should make the decision about which school or which kind of school a child attends? Should that decision be made by parents or by state or local government?



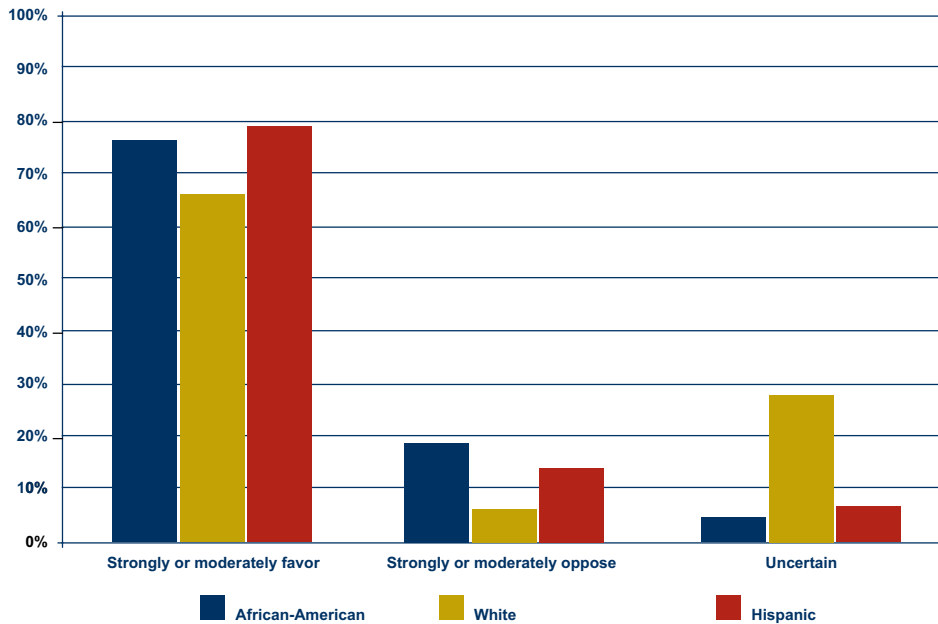
percent of Missourians had a favorable or very favorable opinion of charter schools, while 15 percent had an unfavorable view. The rest—58 percent—either said that their feelings toward charter schools were neutral, or that they were not familiar with the schools. African-Americans were more favorable towards charter schools. Fifty percent of African-Americans indicated a favorable opinion and just 18 percent a negative opinion.

Missourians are generally supportive of tuition tax credit proposals such as those that have been debated in the Missouri legislature. When asked whether they favored a law that would “give individuals and businesses a credit on either their property or state income taxes for contributions they make to education scholarships that help parents send their children to a school of their choice, including public, private, and religious schools,” 67 percent said yes. Support was 77 percent among African-Americans, and 79 percent among Hispanics.

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Do you favor or oppose a law that would give individuals and businesses a credit on either their property or state income taxes for contributions they make to education scholarships that help parents send their children to a school of their choice, including public, private, and religious schools?



about this result is that the phrasing essentially describes a school voucher program—but without using the loaded term “voucher.” Eighty-two percent of Hispanics favored the proposal. Most strikingly, 76 percent of African-Americans were in favor, despite their hostility to the term “voucher.”

Implications for Education Reform in Missouri

Missourians are receptive to arguments in favor of school choice, but it matters greatly which proposals they are responding to. They are far more supportive of undefined “school choice” for children in unsafe or troubled schools and of tuition tax credits for private schooling than of “school vouchers” or financial support for home-schooling.

When it comes to voting, there is evidence that Missourians, on balance, are more likely to support candidates who support choice than those who oppose it. Forty-eight percent of Missourians indicated they would be more likely to vote for a candidate for state office if he or she supported school choice, and just 10 percent said support for choice would make them less likely to support a candidate. Sixty-seven percent of Hispanics and 53 percent of African-Americans indicated that they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who favors school choice.

For more details, please see *Show-Me Policy Study no. 9*, which is available at www.showmeinstitute.org.

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The term “voucher” appears to be politically charged. Only 41 percent of Missourians reported that they held a favorable opinion of “the term ‘school vouchers,’” while 27 percent held an unfavorable view. African-Americans held a less positive impression of the term “school vouchers” than did members of other ethnic groups, despite the fact that African-Americans held a more favorable view of almost all types of school choice when the term “voucher” was omitted. Thirty-four percent of African-Americans had a favorable impression of “school vouchers,” while 36 percent reported an unfavorable one.

Interestingly, 67 percent of respondents indicated that the state should give “all families the same amount of money needed to educate a child in a public school so that parents can send the child to a public or private school of their choice.” What’s particularly interesting



7777 BONHOMME AVENUE
SUITE 2150
SAINT LOUIS, MO 63105

WWW.SHOWMEINSTITUTE.ORG