



ADVANCING LIBERTY
WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING
MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI
PUBLIC POLICY

POLICY

S T U D Y

NUMBER 9

MAY 7, 2007

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

By Verne Kennedy and Sarah Brodsky

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an attempt to gauge the intensity and direction of public opinion on school choice in Missouri, 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.

Respondents reported a high level of dissatisfaction with public schooling in Missouri and little faith in the power of parents to change public schools for the better. When asked 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." 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.

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.

Respondents were also strongly supportive of proposals to provide tuition tax credits to families with children in private schools, though attitudes were far more mixed when it came to taxpayer support for home-schooling families. Particularly significant is that while Missourians had only modestly positive views of the politicized term "school vouchers," two-thirds of respondents embraced the notion that all families should be able to use public funds to send their children to a public or private school of their choice.

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.

INTRODUCTION

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? And, amidst heated debates over charter schooling and tax credit programs, how does the public feel about various school choice options? In an attempt to gauge the intensity and 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 sample of 600 Missouri residents.

The sample was drawn proportionately by county and the demographic makeup was selected so as to be representative of the state's population, with a margin of error for the entire sample of 4.1 percent. MRI then expanded the survey to include 300 parents of school-age children (providing a 5.7-percent margin of error). Supplemental samples of 100 African-Americans and 100 Hispanics were taken, each supplemental sample yielding a 10-percent margin of error. A total of 942 Missouri residents was interviewed.

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.

As in their opinion of private schools, minorities were often even more supportive of choice and alternatives to the public schools than the general population. African-Americans and Hispanics were supportive of charter schools at a much higher rate than whites. Minorities were also less likely to believe that school choice would hurt the traditional public schools.

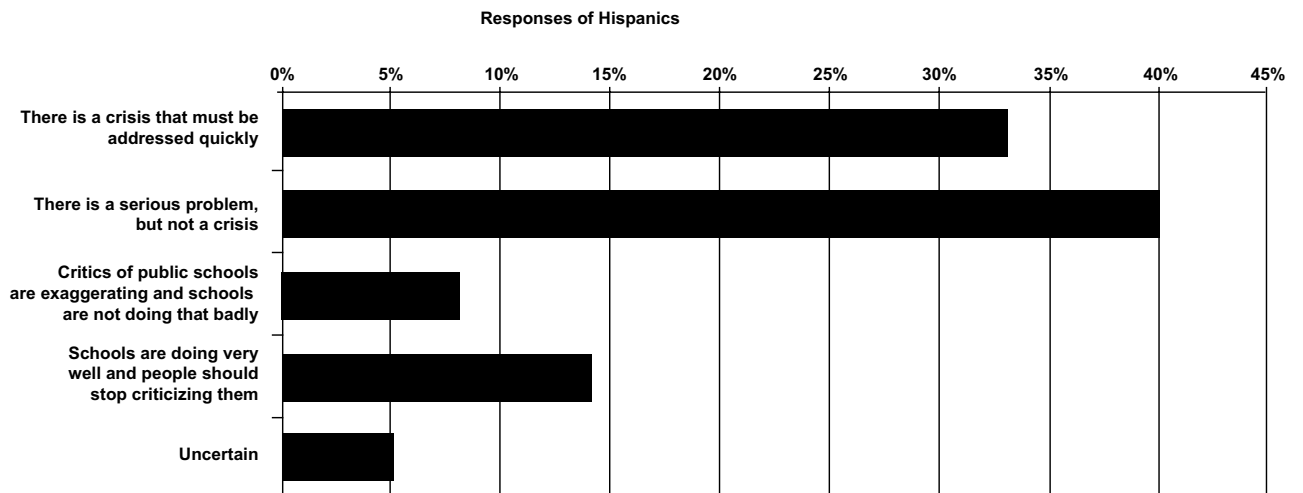
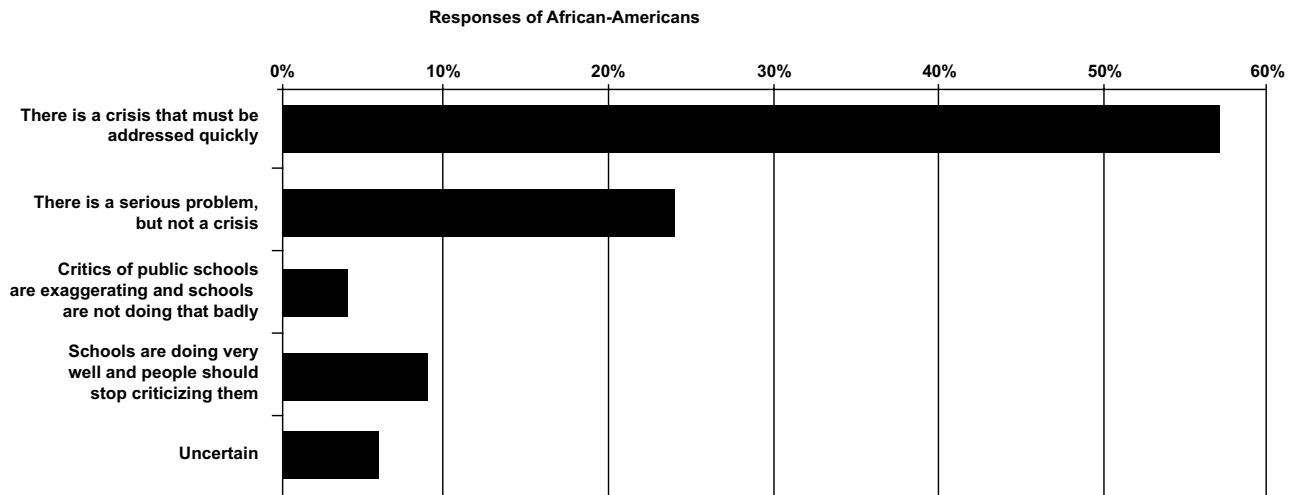
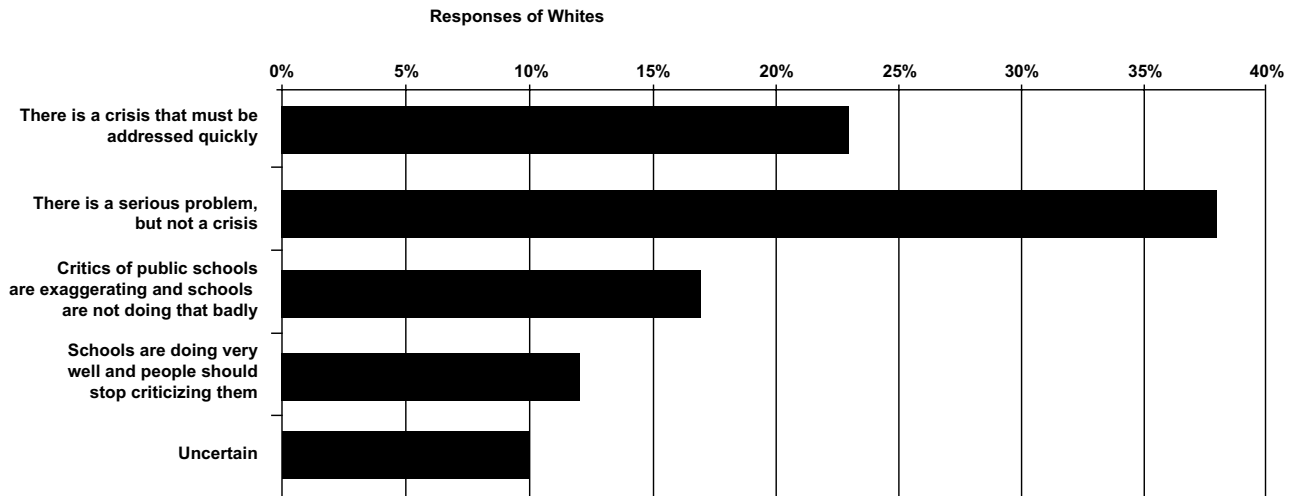
A BLEAK PICTURE: CONCERNS ABOUT SCHOOL QUALITY AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Respondents reported a high level of dissatisfaction with public schooling in Missouri and a lack of confidence that more money would lead to educational improvement. Respondents showed little faith in the power of parents to change public schools for the better; indeed, the responses indicated that most Missouri parents feel they have little control over the public schools. When asked 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

Missourians expressed enthusiasm for reforms that would give parents greater choice in their children's education.

Which of the following statements comes closer to representing your personal opinion about public schools in Missouri?

1. There is a crisis that must be addressed quickly
2. There is a serious problem, but not a crisis
3. Critics of public schools are exaggerating and schools are not doing that badly
4. Schools are doing very well and people should stop criticizing them
5. Uncertain



in four Missourians deemed the schools to be in a state of crisis. Dissatisfaction with the public schools was especially striking among African-Americans and Hispanics. Eighty percent of African-Americans and 74 percent of Hispanics said that 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. And while 29 percent of white respondents felt that the public school critics are exaggerating the existing problems, or that the public schools are doing very well, just 13 percent of African-Americans and 22 percent of Hispanics held such views.

Dissatisfaction with the public schools was evident at all income levels, from Missouri’s poorest families to the wealthiest. Sixty-three percent of respondents with incomes less than \$20,000 a year felt that the public schools are in crisis or experiencing serious problems. Among those in families making over \$100,000 a year, the figure rose slightly to 69 percent. Residents of Missouri’s cities were far more likely to voice concern about public school performance than were those who live in suburban or rural communities, with nearly a third of Saint Louis residents regarding the public schools to be in a crisis.

Debates over school reform often center on the level of funding for the public schools. Some people contend that choice and accountability are needed to improve the public schools, while others maintain that the public schools need more money to do their job. 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.” When asked about the effects of funding on public school quality, African-Americans were more likely than whites or Hispanics to blame public school problems on a lack of money; 40 percent of African-Americans strongly endorsed this view, compared with 33 percent of Hispanics and 23 percent of whites. At the same time, it is worth noting that 40 percent of African-Americans, 51 percent of Hispanics, and 48 percent of whites believed that lack of money “is not the issue.”

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 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

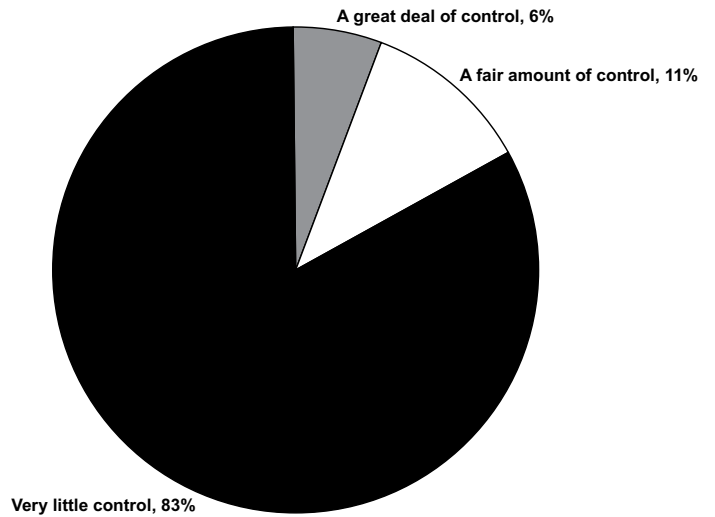
As a general principle, Missouri residents overwhelmingly support parental choice in education. When asked whether parents, state government, or local government should make the decision about which school or which kind of school a child attends, 85 percent of respondents said that parents should make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

Minorities were often even more supportive of choice and alternatives to the public schools than the general population.

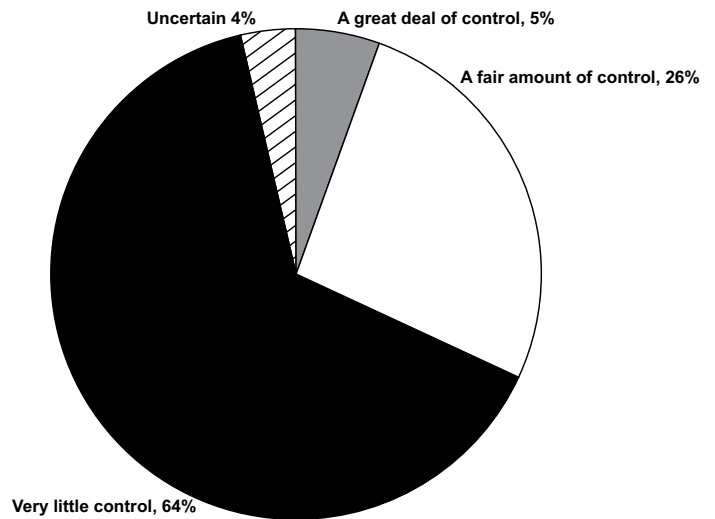
How much control do you think parents have over how the public schools are in Missouri today? Do you think parents have a great deal of control, a fair amount of control, or very little control?

Sixty-six percent of respondents felt that parents have “very little control” over how schools are run.

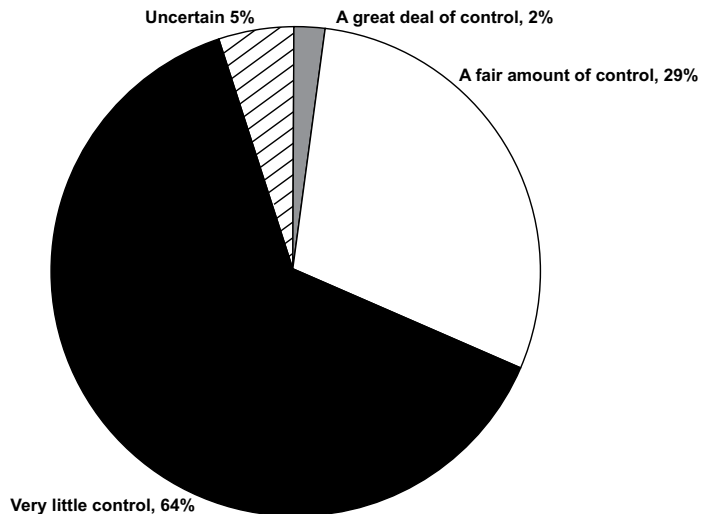
Responses of African-Americans



Responses of Whites



Responses of Hispanics



levels and among both parents and non-parents, more than four in five respondents thought parents should choose the school their child attends.

Missourians were 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. Among Hispanics, support was 87 percent; it was 79 percent among African-Americans and 75 percent among whites. There were no noteworthy differences between parents and non-parents or between urban, rural, and suburban residents. Support was above 70 percent at all income levels.

Asked whether they supported providing school choice to children who attend “unsafe” schools, 80 percent of Missourians indicated that they did. Half of all respondents thought that if a public school has failed for “several years,” parents should be “given additional opportunities to choose a different school.” That figure was consistent for whites and African-Americans, but slightly lower (42 percent) for Hispanics. On the other hand, 36 percent of Missourians thought that such a school should be given more resources. The figure was 40 percent for African-Americans and 45 percent for Hispanics. This result is somewhat puzzling, because three-quarters of respondents favored giving choice to parents of children in failing schools in response to another question.

There was 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. The percentage favorable was somewhat higher for parents (74 percent) than for non-parents (65 percent). Eighty-four percent of Hispanics favored the proposal, compared to 78 percent of African-Americans and 68 percent of whites.

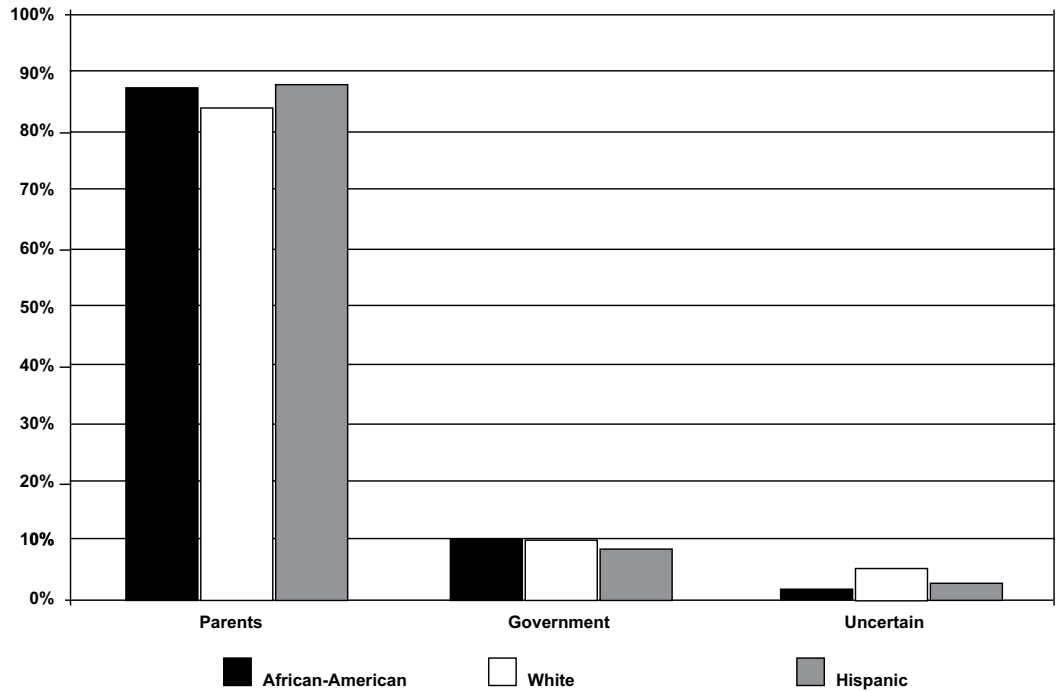
Missourians had a markedly positive view of private schools. Sixty-two percent of all respondents reported a “favorable” or “very favorable” impression of private schools. Among African-Americans and Hispanics, the percentages with a positive opinion of private schools were 69 percent and 63 percent, respectively. This impression was shared by those with children in the household and those without, and was somewhat more favorable for suburban and urban residents than for urban rural residents.

WHAT IS SCHOOL CHOICE?

Missourians have a variety of specific notions of what they think the phrase “school choice” entails. When asked an open-ended question inviting them to say what comes to mind when they hear the term “school choice,” 70 percent of respondents mentioned a particular vision of parental choice, such as “parents choose best school for child” or “voucher program.” Twelve percent of respondents were uncertain what “school choice” meant, and 15 percent gave answers that didn’t convey any clear conception of choice—such

Across all income levels and among both parents and non-parents, more than four in five respondents thought parents should choose the school their child attends.

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?

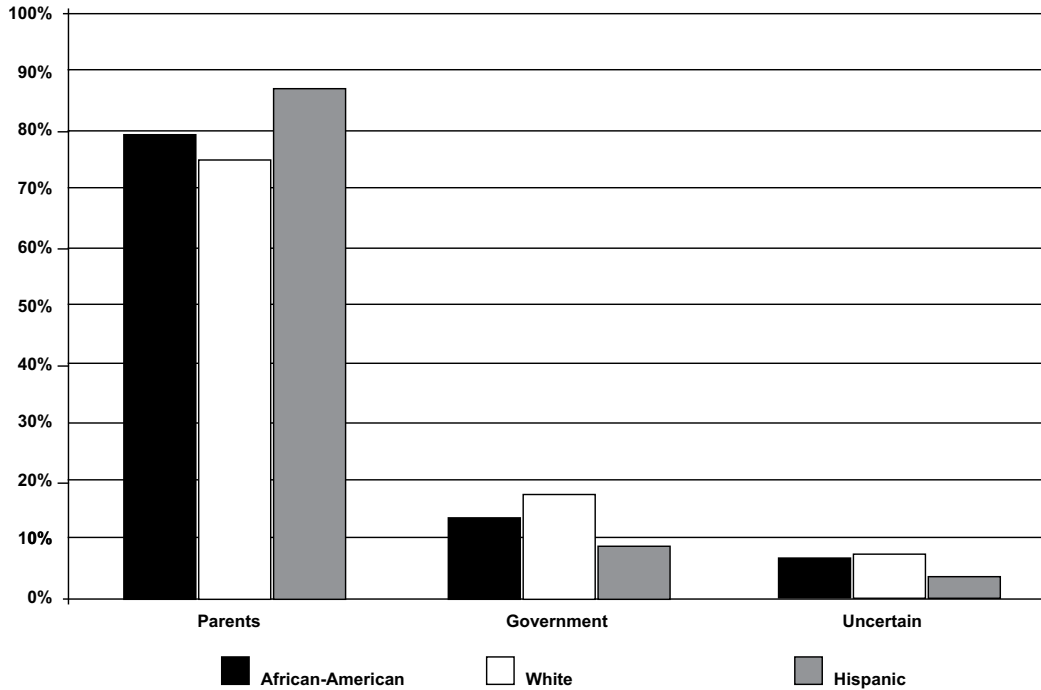


There was also widespread support for allowing low-income parents to “use the same money spent on the child at a public school to send their child to any school of their choice, public or private.”

as referring to “better education and curriculum.” Twenty-six percent gave answers in the category of “parents can choose best school for child.” Thirty-one percent mentioned “ability to choose between public and private schools.” Another 9 percent of respondents mentioned charter schools, religious schools, or home schooling. Six percent responded that school choice means the ability to “attend school in your district” and 5 percent mentioned “better education and curriculum.” Parents were somewhat more likely than non-parents to offer a specific notion of school choice. The responses were similar across ethnic groups, except that Hispanics were more likely to offer a specific vision of parental choice (83 percent) than whites (70 percent) or African-Americans (71 percent).

While most choice plans are targeted to low-income populations, low-income respondents were the least likely to have a specific choice program in mind; only 51 percent of respondents with incomes under \$20,000 had a specific choice program in mind, compared to more than 70 percent of respondents in most other income categories. For respondents with incomes above \$100,000, the figure was 82 percent. At both of those income levels, “ability to choose between public and private schools” was most frequently mentioned, and “parents can choose the best school for child” came in second. Rural Missourians are approximately twice as likely to be unsure what the term “school choice” conveys (with 21 percent uncertain) as those who live in urban (11 percent) or suburban areas (8 percent). This comes as no surprise,

One alternative lets parents whose children are in schools that are failing academically have the choice to put their children in another public or a private school. Do you favor or oppose this alternative?



given that parental choice policies are more widespread and more visible in urban Missouri communities than in rural ones.

CHARTER SCHOOLS, VOUCHERS, TAX CREDITS, AND HOME SCHOOLING

Missourians’ support for school choice differs somewhat depending on the specifics of the proposal and the language used to describe it. But almost every proposal to increase Missouri parents’ choices in education attracted majority support.

Missourians were 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 of respondents said yes. Support was 72 percent among parents, 77 percent among African-Americans, and 79 percent among Hispanics.

Similarly, Missourians were highly supportive of tuition tax credits intended to “let parents who pay private school tuition take a credit on their income tax.” This proposal would grant a credit to parents who pay tuition, rather than to

Missourians had a markedly positive view of private schools.

Almost every proposal to increase Missouri parents' choices in education attracted majority support.

individuals and businesses who donate to scholarship funds. Sixty-six percent of respondents favored the idea, including 76 percent of Hispanics and 70 percent of African-Americans.

Most Missourians do not have strong opinions about charter schools. Overall, 27 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. Minorities seemed more familiar with charter schools and more favorable to the concept. Fifty percent of African-Americans indicated a favorable opinion and just 18 percent a negative opinion. Among Hispanics, 37 percent had a favorable impression of charter schools and only 12 percent had an unfavorable opinion.

When respondents were informed that charter schools “are publicly funded schools that are allowed to operate without all the typical red tape and bureaucracy of a traditional public school,” support among all respondents increased to 53 percent, while opposition remained at 27 percent. Fifty-seven percent of parents favored charter schools, compared with 48 percent of non-parents. Support was 66 percent among Hispanics and 56 percent among African-Americans. Fifty-six percent of urban residents supported charter schooling, compared to 44 percent of suburbanites and 48 percent of rural residents.

When asked specifically about using tax money to help parents send their children to religious schools, 57 percent

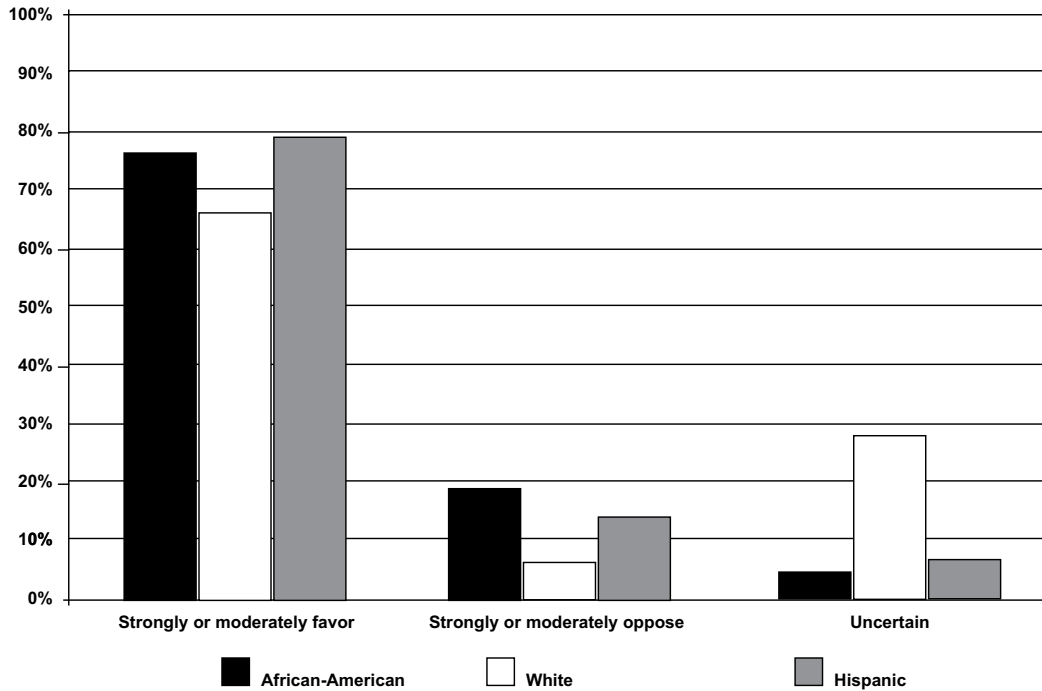
of respondents statewide expressed support. That figure rose to 61 percent for African-Americans and 71 percent for Hispanics, but was just 55 percent among white residents.

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. Thirty-one percent of respondents reported neither favorable nor unfavorable. The responses were similar for parents and non-parents. Suburbanites were less supportive of vouchers than urban or rural residents. Just 27 percent of suburban residents had a favorable impression of school vouchers while 33 percent had an unfavorable one. Urban respondents, meanwhile, were 44 percent favorable and 27 percent unfavorable; rural respondents were favorable by a 45-24 margin.

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 politically charged term “voucher” was omitted. Thirty-four percent of African-Americans had a favorable impression of school vouchers while 36 percent reported an unfavorable one. Whites, on the other hand, were 41 percent favorable and 27 percent unfavorable. Meanwhile, fully 52 percent of Hispanics had a favorable opinion of school vouchers and just 19 percent had an unfavorable opinion.

Interestingly, 67 percent of respondents indicated that the state

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?



Missourians were highly supportive of tuition tax credits intended to “let parents who pay private school tuition take a credit on their income tax.”

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 about this result is that the phrasing essentially describes a school voucher program—but without using the loaded term “voucher.” Parents were more likely to embrace this notion than non-parents, with 77 percent of parents in favor and 62 percent of non-parents favoring it. Eighty-two percent of Hispanics favored the proposal. Most strikingly, 76 percent of African-Americans were in favor, despite their reservations with the term “voucher.”

While Missourians were moderately positive regarding school vouchers and

quite favorable to the underlying idea, they were decidedly mixed on proposals to give home-schooling parents an “allowance equal to what is paid in public schools for books and other educational supplies.” Forty-eight percent of respondents favored the proposal and 44 percent opposed it. Fifty-four percent of parents favored the idea, compared with 44 percent of non-parents. Minorities supported the idea by modest margins, with 56 percent of African-Americans and 55 percent of Hispanics favoring it.

Forty-nine percent of Missourians believed that “if Missouri parents were given the ability to choose and send their children to the school of their choice” the public schools would improve, while 26 percent believed that the public schools

***Minorities
seemed more
familiar with
charter schools
and more
favorable to the
concept.***

would get worse. Sixty-one percent of African-Americans believed that choice would improve the public schools, compared with 48 percent of whites and 52 percent of Hispanics. When those who thought school choice might hurt the traditional public schools were asked about what they feared the most, the most popular responses were concerns over “source of funding” and “hurts schools, low-income communities.” Meanwhile, contrary to what some might expect, just 7 percent of respondents mentioned segregation, including just 4 percent of African-Americans and 8 percent of Hispanics.

Respondents who opposed vouchers were asked what most concerned them about voucher proposals. Thirty-seven percent of those who opposed vouchers said they believed vouchers hurt public schools or poor communities. An additional 13 percent voiced concerns about misuse of funds, and 14 percent objected to vouchers being funded by tax dollars.

WHAT MISSOURIANS THINK OF SCHOOL BOARDS AND TEACHER UNIONS

Despite concerns about the quality of schooling, the school boards that govern Missouri’s public school districts enjoy relatively broad support. Overall, 51 percent of respondents reported a “favorable” or “very favorable” opinion of their local school board. For rural respondents, the proportion rose to 67 percent. Fifty-three percent of white respondents held a positive view of their

school board—a figure noticeably higher than that among African-Americans, 38 percent, or Hispanics, 43 percent.

Respondents were more sharply divided on whether teacher unions help or hurt Missouri’s public schools. Thirty-eight percent of all respondents believed Missouri teacher unions have a “positive” or “strongly positive” impact on schooling; an equal percentage reported that the effect is “negative” or “strongly negative.” Among urban respondents, 40 percent believed the effect to be generally positive, while 28 percent thought it is generally negative. Rural respondents were more skeptical of unions, with 29 percent believing their influence to be positive and 37 percent believing that it is primarily negative. African-Americans were more likely than whites or Hispanics to believe teacher unions are beneficial, with 58 percent of African-Americans reporting that their effects are positive and 15 percent that they are negative. This is compared to the 35 percent of whites and 39 percent of Hispanics who thought the effects of teachers unions are generally positive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION REFORM IN MISSOURI

Missourians are very receptive to proposals 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.

More generally, information on the current state of Missouri schooling and on the potential benefits of school choice has the potential to make Missourians more receptive to choice-based reform. When provided with information about the cost of high school dropouts to the state and informed of a study predicting that school choice could lower dropout rates, 68 percent of respondents said the information would make them more receptive to school choice.

Respondents were then asked whether “Missouri should or should not have some form of school choice for parents.” Primed in that fashion, 80 percent of respondents said that Missouri should have some form of school choice for parents—including 85 percent of African-Americans and 86 percent of Hispanics.

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 indicate 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.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides several important lessons for school reformers in Missouri.

First, most Missourians perceive the public schools to either have “serious problems” or to be “in a crisis.” The vast majority feels that parents have little control over the public schools, and most Missourians do not believe increased funding will solve the problem. There is a need for education reforms that give parents more control over their children’s education. The consensus among Missourians is that throwing money at the problem is not the answer.

Second, there is broad support for the idea of school choice, especially when it is specifically designed to help students transfer out of “failing” or unsafe schools. Respondents were also strongly supportive of proposals to provide tuition tax credits to families with children in private schools, though attitudes were far more mixed when it came to taxpayer support for home-schooling families. Particularly significant is that while Missourians have only modestly positive views of the politicized term “school vouchers,” two-thirds of respondents embraced the notion that all families should be able to use public funds to send their children to a public or private school of their choice.

Third, responses depicting concerns with choice-based reform can help reformers and policymakers identify ways in which they might tweak proposals or highlight issues they need to address. For instance, the leading concerns with school choice made clear that reforms should target aid to low-income students and should ensure that choice does not hurt minority communities or result in

Forty-nine percent of Missourians believed that “if Missouri parents were given the ability to choose and send their children to the school of their choice” the public schools would improve.

There is evidence that Missourians, on balance, are more likely to support candidates who support choice than those who oppose it.

segregation. Giving low-income parents the opportunity to choose the same schools as other parents could reduce inequality in education and alleviate these concerns.

Fourth, contrary to claims that support for school choice is a politically risky strategy, it appears that backing school choice has a significant upside for candidates—especially those with heavily Hispanic or African-American constituencies—and a quite limited downside.

In sum, the Missouri environment appears hospitable to continued effort to promote choice-based reform, especially for policies that give parents greater control over education and give students equal access to safe and academically excellent schools. Public officials who push for sensibly designed choice programs have cause for optimism.

ABOUT THE SHOW-ME INSTITUTE

The Show-Me Institute is a research and educational institute dedicated to improving the quality of life for all citizens of Missouri.

The Institute's scholars study public policy problems and develop proposals to increase opportunity for ordinary Missourians. The Institute then promotes those solutions by publishing studies, briefing papers, and other educational materials. It also forms constructive relationships with policymakers and the media to ensure that its research reaches a wide audience and has a major impact on public policy.

The work of the Institute is rooted in the American tradition of free markets and individual liberty. The Institute's scholars seek to move beyond the 20th-century mindset that every problem has a government solution. Instead, they develop policies that respect the rights of the individual, encourage creativity and hard work, and nurture independence and social cooperation.

By applying those principles to the problems facing the state, the Show-Me Institute is building a Missouri with a thriving economy and a vibrant civil society—a Missouri that leads the nation in wealth, freedom, and opportunity for all.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President Rex Siquefield, a native of Saint Louis, is the co-founder and past co-chairman of Dimensional Fund Advisors Inc.

Chairman R. Crosby Kemper III is the executive director and CEO of the Kansas City Public Library. Previously he served as the chairman and CEO of UMB Financial Corporation and UMB Bank.

Stephen Brauer is the chairman and CEO of Hunter Engineering Company.

James G. Forsyth III is president of Moto, Inc.

Ethelmae Humphreys is the chairman of Tamko Building Products in Joplin.

Michael Podgursky is professor of economics at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Bevis Schock is a lawyer in private practice in Saint Louis.

Menlo Smith is CEO of Sunmark Capital Corp.

STAFF

Sarah Brodsky is a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute.

Rebecca Bruchhauser is the Show-Me Institute's director of development.

Eric D. Dixon is the Show-Me Institute's editor.

Jason Hannasch is the vice president of the Show-Me Institute. He previously served as the executive director of Citizens for Home Rule and Empower Saint Louis.

Marcia Jackson is the office manager at the Show-Me Institute.

