Mind the Gap

by Jim Shaw

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What’s hot and what’s not?

So what do the American people think about current public education issues?

For 46 years the annual PDK/Gallup poll has measured public attitudes toward public education. It is fair to say the PDK (Phi Delta Kappan Magazine) survey is the gold standard of public opinion education surveys. The PDK survey helps us understand American public values and opinions regarding important issues in public education.

What’s hot, then?

Public charter schools, local public schools, local school boards, and teachers are hot. According to the survey, 70 percent of Americans support public charter schools. Sixty-seven percent of public school parents and 50 percent of all Americans give their local public schools a grade of A or B. Over half of Americans say local school boards should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in the public schools, and a majority of Americans (64%) said they trust teachers.

In short Americans put local control and teacher quality at center stage in public education.

Well then, what’s not hot?

Vouchers, standardized tests, the Common Core standards, President Obama, the nation’s public schools, financial support for public schools, and a college education are not.

Americans are skeptical about standardized tests such as the state tests or the ACT. Eighty-nine percent think that earning a grade of A or B is very or somewhat important, but only sixty-eight
percent think performing well on standardized tests is very or somewhat important. Sixty-one percent oppose using standardized test scores to evaluate teachers. Sixty-eight percent of American public school parents and 54 percent of Americans say standardized tests are not helpful to teachers.

The controversial Common Core standards and the federal role in education are also in trouble. Sixty percent of Americans oppose Common Core standards that have been adopted by more than 40 states and supported by President Obama and only 27 percent give him a grade of A or B in his role in supporting public education. While most Americans give good grades to their local public school, only 17 percent grade the nation’s public schools A or B. Americans also think that the biggest problem facing public schools is the lack of financial support. Perhaps most surprising is the declining belief (from 75 to 50 percent) that a college education is very important.

The principle of federalism—the American distrust of big government and the emphasis on local control—mean that public education must reflect local public values and opinions. When it comes to public education, the voice of the people is important. Local control and teachers are valued. Standardized tests, national standards and the federal control is less valued.