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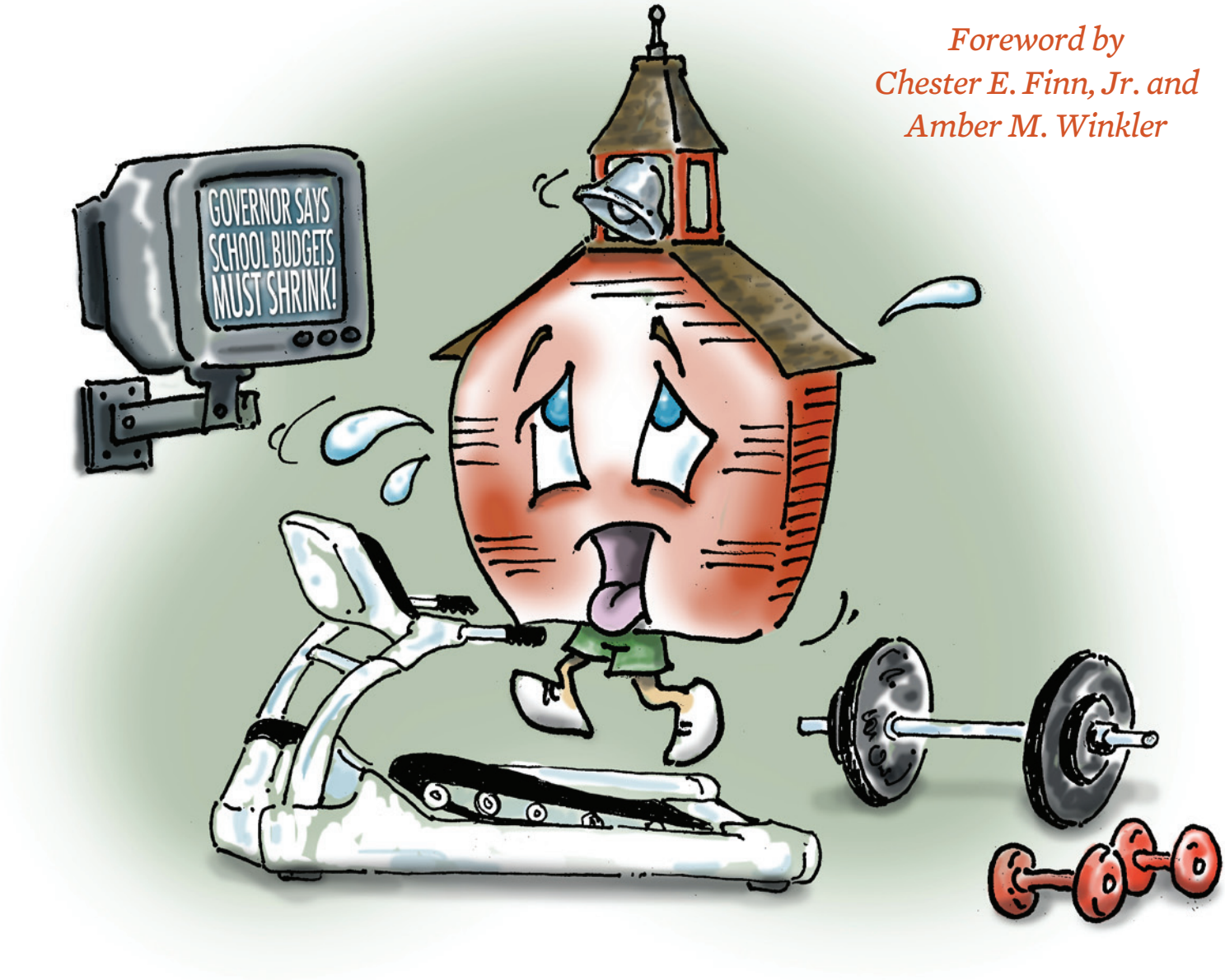
How Americans Would Slim Down Public Education

By Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett

Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Winkler



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Contents

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Foreword

By Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Winkler

In November 2010, Education Secretary Arne Duncan delivered a highly publicized address at the American Enterprise Institute. His message? Tough economic times lie ahead: "I am here," he said, "to talk today about what has been called the New Normal. For the next several years, preschool, K–12, and postsecondary educators are likely to face the challenge of doing more with less."

Twenty months later, it's clear that we are not yet out of the fiscal woods. Depressed housing values have meant lower property taxes for schools; voters have balked at passing local levies; federal "stimulus" dollars have dried up; health care costs for education staff (and everyone else) are ballooning; lock-step salary schedules and contractually obligated pay increases for teachers (and other school employees) mean little slack in the budget; precariously funded pension systems have caused states to shift some of the load to localities, school districts, and even future retirees themselves. Once limited to a handful of budget-conscious superintendents and state officials, discussions about how to curtail costs are taking place in virtually every district and school across America.

Might there be a silver lining to this economic cloud? Secretary Duncan thinks so:

> *My message is that this challenge can, and should, be embraced as an opportunity to make dramatic improvements. I believe enormous opportunities for improving the productivity of our education system lie ahead if we are smart, innovative, and courageous in rethinking the status quo. It's time to stop treating the problem of educational productivity as a grinding, eat-your-broccoli exercise. It's time to start treating it as an opportunity for innovation and accelerating progress.*

He's right—or so we think. Opportunities worth seizing are indeed within reach. But which ones should be seized most firmly? And which will the public back? It little avails an education leader or elected official to suggest a well-crafted (and, for some, doubtlessly painful) trade-off if voters balk, parents rebel, and the community grumbles.

If public education in the United States must curb its total caloric intake, what diet regimen is most apt to win public support? We decided to find out. The pages that follow report results from a nationally representative survey of American adults, roughly one-quarter of whom are parents of school-age children. We asked them to wrestle with many of the same budgetary trade-offs that face today's school boards and superintendents.

Few people enjoy dieting. We didn't expect cheers to greet the prospect of education budget cuts. But this national survey makes clear that the jeers can be minimized, because the American public supports many (though not all) of the tough calls that district leaders will need to make.

When trade-offs are unavoidable in education budgets, here's what most people would favor:

1) Shrink the administration

A broad majority (69 percent) supports "reducing the number of district-level administrators to the bare minimum" as a good way to save money "because it means cutting bureaucracy without hurting classrooms." Only 20 percent say it's a bad way to save money "because districts need strong leadership and good leaders cost money."

2) Freeze salaries to save jobs

Nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) say freezing salaries for one year for all district employees is a good way to save money "because the district can avoid laying off people." Far fewer (33 percent) say "it's a bad way to save money because labor contract commitments should be kept."

3) If teachers must be laid off, base it on their effectiveness, not years of service

About 3 in 4 (74 percent) say that those with poor performance should be "laid off first and those with excellent performance protected"; only 18 percent would have "newcomers laid off first and veteran teachers protected."

4) Opt for larger classes taught by excellent teachers rather than smaller classes with instructors of unknown ability

A convincing 73 percent to 21 percent majority would choose to have a larger class with twenty-seven students—provided it is "taught by one of the district's best performing teachers"—over a smaller class with twenty-two students "taught by a randomly chosen teacher."

5) Move from traditional pensions to individual retirement plans

Just over half—53 percent—say it's a good way to save money "because it's how retirement works for most people today"; 17 percent approve but only for new school employees; 20 percent think it's a bad way to save money "because employees will be paying more for retirement benefits that are not guaranteed."

We also find in these data broad support for a variety of other cost-saving measures, such as closing schools and merging districts; upping class sizes in non-core subjects such as art, music, and physical education (but not math, science, and reading); and replacing special education programs that do not help students learn or that are very expensive.

But two possible budgetary diets find little favor with the American public: shortening the school year and shrinking the non-teaching staff. And survey respondents are divided when it comes to charging fees for after-school sports and extracurricular activities, making use of blended learning opportunities (where students learn both on the Internet and in face-to-face classrooms), and having students study in "virtual" (i.e., wholly online) schools.

What do we make of these findings?

First, Americans show a great deal of common sense relative to smarter education spending. We find in these results a populace well aware that its schools are in financial straits. They spurn easy fixes, recognizing the futility of "rely[ing] on tax increases to close

the deficit." They think districts could get by with fewer administrators; teachers could forego raises in order keep their jobs; stronger instructors teaching larger groups of pupils trump small classes; layoffs (when unavoidable) should be determined by effectiveness, not longevity; responsible retirement savings begin with the individual; and the quality of special education, like everything else in education, should be gauged by outcomes, not inputs. That all makes sense to us, too.

Second, at the same time, the public has a couple of its priorities askew when it comes to education cost savings. Sure, there are grounds for caution about digital learning. It's new—and like many innovations, has sometimes over-promised and under-delivered. But online and blended learning, properly done, are among the most promising of the "opportunit[ies] for innovation and accelerating progress" that Secretary Duncan referenced. They can save money in the education budget, too, and yield more bang for the available bucks—just as the astute application of technology has done in nearly every other sector of our lives.

We also question the public's judgment regarding the value of non-teaching staff, an employment category that has ballooned in recent years within public education. Consider this: The number of teachers in U.S. schools grew by 43 percent from 1986 to 2009. (Student enrollments rose by just 24 percent over this time period.) But the "instructional support staff" working in our schools increased by a staggering 150 percent![1] How much of this growth is truly necessary for school effectiveness? And is it more valuable than employing (and retaining) better teachers?

Third, taxpayers, at least in some cases, want to have their cake and eat it too. If forced to choose between pay cuts and layoffs, for example, 74 percent prefer cutting *all* teacher salaries by 5 percent versus laying off 5 percent of the instructional staff. At the same time, however, 67 percent favor "extending teachers' workday by one hour and using the time to collaborate with other teachers and tutor students." Sure, we can try to wring more productivity out of our historically inefficient system of public education. But maybe not by demanding that all teachers do more while earning less. Wouldn't laying off 5 percent—preferably the least effective 5 percent—preserve morale and inspire confidence in the remaining teachers, who'd continue to see their hard work rewarded? Further, insisting that all teachers work harder on a shrinking paycheck could give credence to anti-reform rhetoric: that rank-and-file teachers *need* labor unions to protect their wages and working conditions. And declining wages are not a good formula for attracting the best and brightest into teaching.

Mostly, though, Americans are pretty sensible about how to slim down public education. The big challenge is turning those sound views into prudent yet forceful action. Public sentiment alone doesn't shed the budgetary pounds. There's lot of hard work ahead, many calories to be burned, much strength and endurance to be mustered. Dynamic, visionary, yet astute leadership is also going to be needed—the budgetary equivalent of personal trainers and daily exercise regimens. Such leadership must make the case for efficiency and adherence to its new diet-and-fitness plan. If not, public education will lumber under the burden of its own weight—and fail to make the gains in speed, agility, and stamina that it so clearly needs to do its vital job under today's fiscal conditions and educational demands.

Acknowledgments

Generous support for this project was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and also by our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. We also gratefully acknowledge the continuing interest of the Searle Freedom Trust in Fordham's ongoing efforts to identify workable ways of "stretching the school dollar."

Special thanks go to the FDR Group, led by veteran survey researchers Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett. This project, like so many undertaken by Farkas and Duffett, showcases their diligence, accuracy, and reader-friendly analyses. We're long-time fans of their work but they don't take that for granted! We're grateful for another fine product.

We're thankful also to Marguerite Roza, senior scholar at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), who offered guidance on the survey questions. Shannon Last served as our adept copy editor; Alton Creative put together the nifty design; and David Flanagan fashioned our cover illustration. At Fordham, Executive Vice President Michael Petrilli gave feedback on report drafts, Ty Eberhardt and Joe Portnoy capably handled dissemination, and Matt Richmond skillfully managed report production.

Executive Summary

With public school budgets pinched and educational demands rising, "business as usual" is becoming less and less tenable in American schools. Taxpayers, parents, teachers, principals, and students are expected to do more with fewer resources. But what's the best way to go about slimming down and shaping up our system of public education? Which cost-saving strategies trim the bottom line while safeguarding the interests of kids? Which might have a better chance of succeeding in the court of public opinion?

How Americans Would Slim Down Public Education addresses these questions and more. We asked respondents to grapple with various cost-cutting measures and budgetary trade-offs that district leaders are facing in today's harsh economic climate. Results are based on 1,009 interviews conducted in March 2012 with a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of adults eighteen and older. (The statistical margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points). Below is a summary of key findings.

■ *The public is aware of the impact of the nation's economic challenges on their local public schools, and they don't believe things are going to get better any time soon. They are far more likely to think that solutions lie in cutting costs than in raising taxes or taking a wait-and-see approach. Yet the verdict is mixed on the schools' capacity to manage money efficiently.*

- » 62 percent describe their local district's current financial situation as very or somewhat difficult, with 77 percent of these individuals reporting that the financial challenges will last for quite a while.
- » Almost half (48 percent) say that, if their own district were facing a serious budget deficit, the best approach would be "to cut costs by dramatically changing how it does business"; 26 percent would want to "change as little as possible and wait for times to get better"; just 11 percent would want to raise taxes.
- » 47 percent say their district has a mixed record on money management, 28 percent believe it has been "careful and efficient," and another 18 percent believe that it has been "wasteful and inefficient."

■ *The public approves a number of specific cost-cutting measures. These include:*

- » Reducing the number of district level administrators to the bare minimum (69 percent say it's a good idea).
- » Closing or combining schools that have declining student enrollment (63 percent favor).
- » Merging small school districts so they share things like the superintendent's office, bus services, and clerical help (63 percent say this is a good idea).
- » Freezing salaries for one year for all district employees (58 percent approve).
- » Shifting school staff from guaranteed pensions to individual retirement plans (53 percent say it's a good idea).
- » Reducing all teacher salaries by 5 percent as opposed to laying off 5 percent of the teaching staff (74 percent prefer the former, 14 percent the latter).

■ *If teachers must be let go, however, their effectiveness should drive layoff decisions, even at the expense of losing seasoned instructors or increasing class size. Still, the public much prefers limiting class size in the core subject areas than in other subjects.*

» By a 74 percent to 18 percent margin, respondents believe that teachers with poor performance should be "laid off first and those with excellent performance protected" rather than have "newcomers laid off first and veteran teachers protected."

» By a 51 percent to 39 percent margin, the public would lay off a veteran teacher with *average* performance before a new teacher with excellent performance.

» By a 73 percent to 21 percent margin, respondents would prefer a larger class with twenty-seven students "taught by one of the district's best performing teachers" over a smaller class with twenty-two students "taught by a randomly chosen teacher."

» When it comes to elementary schools, a 59 percent majority would rather increase the size of music, art, and gym classes by six students and hold class size steady in regular classrooms, compared with 34 percent who would prefer to increase class size by two students across all classrooms (findings are similar at the high school level).

■ *When it comes to budget cuts, special education is not immune as far as most Americans are concerned. That's not to say the commitment of Americans to educate children with special needs is waning—it's not. But they have concerns about the growth, cost, and effectiveness of serving these kids well.*

» The overwhelming majority of the public, 83 percent, believes that "the public schools have a moral obligation to educate kids with special needs and learning disabilities, even if it's more difficult and expensive to do so."

» 76 percent believe that "too many students are being mislabeled as having special needs when they just have behavior problems or weren't taught well in the first place."

» 71 percent believe that special education programs should be "evaluated according to whether they help students learn—when students don't learn, the programs should be replaced."

■ *Of eleven possible cost-cutting strategies that districts might deploy, just two were rejected by a majority of survey respondents:*

» By a 66 percent to 24 percent margin, the public rejects "shortening the school year by requiring employees to take unpaid days off."

» By a 70 percent to 23 percent margin, the public disapproves of "reducing non-teaching staff such as aides, librarians and school nurses to the bare minimum."

■ *In three other areas, the public is split about cost cutting: charging fees for sports and extra-curricular activities, utilizing non-certified teachers in certain subjects, and making more extensive use of virtual education.*

» 23 percent say "charging fees for after-school sports and extra-curricular activities" is a good way to save money; 32 percent say it's good but only if low-income youngsters get financial help; and 39 percent say it's a bad way to save money.

» People are evenly divided (49 percent to 48 percent) over a proposal to "hire local artists and fitness trainers part time for art, music, and gym classes instead of using full-time teachers."

» 46 percent would stay away from "blended classes" (which incorporate Internet-based learning with instruction by flesh-and-blood teachers) while 42 percent would make more use of them.

» 32 percent say that virtual schools (where students take some or all classes online and do much of their work over the Internet with online teachers) are generally a bad idea; 21 percent say they're a good idea, and 40 percent say they're a good option but only for students who have difficulty in traditional schools.

Introduction

"The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults."

—Alexis de Tocqueville

American public education faces multiple challenges these days, with demands for stronger student achievement, more choices, greater accountability, more effective teaching, more rigorous academic standards, and other reforms—all at a time of increasingly tight budgets. In their quest for quality cum productivity, education leaders must make difficult trade-offs and painful choices. In a democratic society, however, it's practically impossible for governmental bodies to make such choices—and have them stick—without a reasonable level of public support. Which gives rise to the question: Are Americans who are most apt to be affected by these decisions in our communities—parents, taxpayers, and voters—ready to confront and endorse tough trade-offs in their schools?

In this survey, we asked them to do so. We drew a randomized, nationally representative sample of adults eighteen and older; a total of 1,009 responded in March 2012. To supplement the survey findings and pilot its content, we also conducted four focus groups: in Frisco, Texas; Los Angeles, California; the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio; and Fairfield County, Connecticut. Via the focus groups and questionnaire we gauged the extent to which people are willing to trim the education budget when that meant the loss or reduction of specific programs or personnel. For instance, if teachers must be let go, which ones? Are larger classes ever acceptable?

We found Americans willing, for the most part, to grapple with such challenges and oftentimes to support difficult reductions. From adopting new retirement plans to merging small school districts, the public is open to different ways of doing things, willing to change business as usual in order to cut costs and save money. The survey results challenge the view that today's Americans are given to wishful thinking, happy to live in an unsustainable world of spend more, tax less, and avoid sacrifice.

This report includes four sections. First, we lay the groundwork for how the public perceives the current economic landscape. Then, in consecutive sections, we explain which cost-cutting measures they approve, reject, and are divided over. We close with a few implications for education leaders; the appendix includes more information on the methodology as well as complete survey results.

When Times Are Tough

The nation's persistent economic challenges have led to unaccustomed austerity in public finances, diminished budgets, and service cutbacks. Americans know it because they've been living through it. In this survey, 82 percent report that their local economy was hit hard by the recent recession; 59 percent have witnessed layoffs and cutbacks in local government services.

> *"I've noticed on Main Street, all the local merchants are just moving out. There's just empty storefront after empty storefront."*
>
> **—Fairfield County, CT**

> *"As far as budgets and cutting, the city council balanced the budget last year, but they did that just by raiding the rainy day fund. I don't know how many tens or hundreds of millions they took out of that, but they said, 'Okay, we're done. We balanced it.' But we have the same problem this year coming up."*
>
> **—Cincinnati suburbs, OH**

What districts should do: End business as usual

Americans recognize that their local school budgets have been affected by these very same problems, with 62 percent reporting that their district's "current financial situation" is difficult. The question quickly becomes: What should be done?

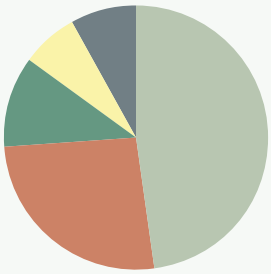
Assuming their school system faced a serious budget deficit, respondents were asked to choose the best of three potential remedies. Twenty-six percent wanted to defer the problem, choosing to "change as little as possible and wait for times to get better" (Figure 1).

Fig **1**

End Business as Usual

Which would be the best approach for your district to take if it was facing a serious budget deficit?

- **48%** Cut costs by dramatically changing how it does business
- **26%** Change as little as possible; wait for times to get better
- **11%** Rely on tax increases
- **7%** Something else
- **8%** Don't know



Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.

It's not surprising that even fewer—only 11 percent—chose the "rely on tax increases to close the deficit" option. Raising taxes is never popular, and least of all after a prolonged economic downturn with reduced family incomes and wider unemployment. But resistance to raising taxes on behalf of the public schools is not only driven by economic difficulties. The public is also concerned to some extent that its schools do not use money efficiently and that more

money does not translate into better schools. Only 18 percent say their district has been "wasteful and inefficient" in how it spends money but another 47 percent say its record in this realm is mixed. Twenty-eight percent believe that it has been "careful and efficient" (data not shown).

> *"I think what we've learned time and time again is you don't improve the quality of education by just throwing money at it. Money is not the answer for having a good quality education."*
>
> **—Frisco, TX**

> *"There is enough money in the school system. It's just not spent wisely, the school system is not budgeting correctly."*
>
> **—Los Angeles, CA**

The response garnering much stronger support than raising taxes or maintaining the status quo is for the district to "cut costs by dramatically changing how it does business" (48 percent preference). The sense among Americans is that the budgetary difficulties facing schools will be with them for a long time—and that band-aids will not cure anything. In fact, the overwhelming majority who respond that their district's current financial situation is difficult believe that tough times will "last for quite a while" in their districts (77 percent), not "end shortly" (11 percent).

The financial stress that America's families and communities face, the sense that the situation won't improve quickly, and the suspicion that more money is not the answer add up to this conclusion in the minds of many: Business as usual is not sustainable for our public schools. But if change is the order of the day, what guidance would citizens give district leaders and other policymakers? What cutbacks and reforms do they rally behind—and which do they merely tolerate, disagree about, or reject outright?

Cost-Cutting Measures that the Public Approves

Citizens would balance the district's books by moving from traditional defined benefit pensions to individual retirement plans, reducing employee salaries (including teacher salaries), and shrinking central office staff. They would rather avoid teacher layoffs but, if these are necessary, they want quality and effectiveness to be the guide, not seniority. And they offer concrete guidance for where class size should go up and by how much. Special education programs, in their view, should not be exempt from scrutiny or spending reductions.

Move from traditional pensions to individual retirement plans

Most respondents support shifting district employees from guaranteed pensions to individual retirement plans: 53 percent say it's a good way to save money "because it's how retirement works for most people today"; an additional 17 percent approve but only for *new* school employees. Just 20 percent think it's a bad way to save money "because employees will be paying more for retirement benefits that are not guaranteed."

People reason that cutting benefits is better than losing jobs. But even more important is their sense that this is the norm in today's workforce: virtually all employees are responsible for their own retirement savings. "If we have to do it, why shouldn't they?" is their thinking.

> *"At least get rid of the defined benefit plan. I mean everybody else in America that's not working for the government has to pay into their own 401K, has to do an IRA, do something to save up for their retirement."*
>
> **—Cincinnati suburbs, OH**

> *"I know in our experience, my family, there's been slight pay cuts in certain positions, and loss of benefits, 401s taken away. So I don't see where the teachers should be any different."*
>
> **—Cincinnati suburbs, OH**

But some who support pension changes also argued that it would be unreasonable to throw out the retirement rules for workers who had been in the system for awhile. They looked for a way—fairer and less disruptive in their view—to phase in benefit changes.

> *"You start screwing around with somebody's pension that they had to put fifteen, twenty, thirty years in there? Their retirement's already in their mind. Then you're going to take that away? No. But if it's the newcomers—restructure."*
>
> **—Fairfield County, CT**

Freeze salaries to save jobs

Nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) say freezing salaries for one year for all district employees is a good way to save money "because the district can avoid laying off people." Far fewer (33

percent) say it's a bad way to save money "because labor contract commitments should be kept" (Figure 2).

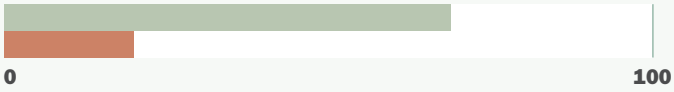
Fig **2**

Support for Cost-Cutting Measures

In school districts facing serious budget deficits, is this a good way or a bad way to save money?

Reducing the number of district level administrators to the bare minimum

69% A good way because it means cutting bureaucracy without hurting classrooms
20% A bad way because districts need strong leadership and good leaders cost money



Freezing salaries for one year for all district employees

58% A good way because the district can avoid laying off people and it is temporary
33% A bad way because labor contract commitments should be kept

Changing guaranteed pensions to individual retirement plans

53% A good way because it is how retirement works for most people today
20% A bad way because employees will be paying more for retirement benefits that are not guaranteed
17% A good way but only for new school employees

In dire economic times, people believe it's important to protect jobs—and if doing so means deferring or suspending pay increases, so be it.

> *"Taking a pay cut and laying off people is a last resort. I'd go with the pay freeze for the foreseeable future. I've gone to different companies as a consultant. I've seen that all over the place. It's very common."*
>
> **—Los Angeles, CA**

Increase teacher productivity

We pushed respondents to wrestle with this direct trade-off for teachers in particular: a pay freeze or job cuts. Almost 3 in 4 (74 percent) say that, if they had to choose, they would prefer reducing all teacher salaries by 5 percent over laying off 1 teacher in every 20 (Figure 3). Again, people are attracted to what seems to them the least damaging alternative for teachers—and for students.

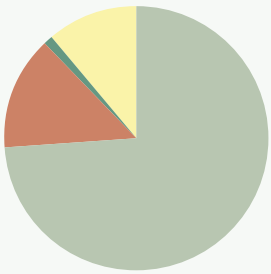
Fig **3**

Save Jobs, Cut Salaries

If you had to choose, which would it be?

- **74%** Cut all teacher salaries by 5 percent
- **14%** Lay off 5 percent of teachers
- **1%** Depends on the grade level of the students
- **11%** Don't know

Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.



"Laying teachers off is the last resort. The kids suffer. Class sizes get bigger. The classroom numbers will go up. You're better off cutting salaries and saving their jobs."

—Fairfield County, CT

What's more, the public broadly supports a straightforward proposal that asks more of teachers: 67 percent favor "extending teachers' workday by one hour and using the time to collaborate with other teachers and tutor students"; only 27 percent are opposed (6 percent "don't know") .

Reduce central office administrators

A broad majority (69 percent) support "reducing the number of district-level administrators to the bare minimum" as a good way to save money "because it means cutting bureaucracy without hurting classrooms." Only 20 percent say it's a bad way to save money "because districts need strong leadership and good leaders cost money" (11 percent say "neither" or "don't know").

In contrast with teachers, administrators are not directly associated with classrooms and student achievement in the public's mind. Rather they trigger visions of bureaucracy and paperwork. Moreover, as some superintendents draw eye-catching salaries, it's easier for people to visualize saving money by going after that budget line.

"Take a look at the number of superintendents, the assistant superintendents, the deputy superintendents who are making $150,000 or more. There's a lot of money being spent—if you take a look at what teachers are getting that's the least amount of money that's being exhausted."

—Frisco, TX

"They show in the paper the wages of some of these top administrators. Then I'm like, 'Wow.' Some of them have a pretty penny up there. They're in the couple of hundred thousand range."

—Fairfield, CT

"It's the administration—how many superintendents do you need per district? It's not the teacher salaries; it's all up here at the top."

—Cincinnati suburbs, OH

In the focus groups, participants would routinely bring up cuts to the central office without prompting from the moderator. But education insiders might respond that this is wishful thinking since it would not address the most significant driver of costs in the district budget, namely teacher salaries.[2] So we asked about that next.

Address teacher costs and productivity

Trimming school budgets by freezing salaries or cutting administration can take you only so far, experts say. Hence we asked respondents to wrestle with teacher layoffs, explaining to them in the survey: "Imagine you're in charge of your school district during tough economic times. You've already made cuts in administration and non-teaching staff. Now you have to think about the cost of teacher salaries and benefits since they're the biggest part of the budget." If there's no choice but to lay off some teachers, what principles should determine who stays and who goes?

Ensure that teacher quality trumps seniority

If teacher layoffs must happen, respondents indicate that the most important factor should be classroom effectiveness, not years of service. Almost 3 in 4 (74 percent) say instructors with poor performance should be "laid off first and those with excellent performance protected"; only 18 percent would have "newcomers laid off first and veteran teachers protected" (Figure 4).

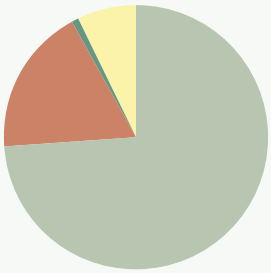
Fig **4**

Effectiveness Trumps Years of Service

If you had no choice but to lay off teachers, which would be a more important factor?

- **74%** Effectiveness: Lay off poor performers first and protect excellent performers
- **18%** Years of service: Lay off newcomers first and protect veterans
- **1%** Depends on the grade level of students
- **7%** Don't know

Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.



Seniority simply fails to impress people as a decision rule for holding onto (or dismissing) employees. Focus group participants were more likely, though not always, to associate new teachers with enthusiasm and veteran teachers with stagnation. But what they really wanted to ensure was that effective instructors would be protected, regardless of years of service.

> *"Years are years. What did you do through those years?"*
>
> **—Fairfield, CT**

"Who is the better performer? Even though this person may have more seniority…who is the better performer?"

—Cincinnati suburbs, OH

"You evaluate the teachers, and if you have somebody that's in there for ten or fifteen years and they're just not cutting it, and you have this young person coming in, hire them and get rid of them."

—Fairfield, CT

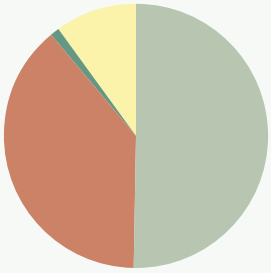
By 51 percent to 39 percent, the public would even lay off a veteran teacher with *average* performance before a new teacher with excellent performance (Figure 5).

Fig **5**

More Evidence that Effectiveness Trumps Years of Service

If you had to choose, which of these two teachers would you lay off?

- **51%** A veteran teacher with 20 years' experience and average performance evaluations
- **39%** A new teacher with 2 years' experience and excellent performance evaluations
- **1%** Depends on the grade level of students
- **10%** Don't know



Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix. Percentage may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

The public—including parents—typically see teachers as credible and trusted school employees. So it may seem paradoxical that ordinary Americans appear so quick to disregard their years of service when times are difficult and cuts need to be made. But both attitudes—venerating the profession and dismissing seniority—are driven by the same core value: concern with what's best for kids.

"If you have experience and you've been a mediocre teacher for twenty-five years, I think maybe it's time you got to get some fresh blood in there. I'm going to blow up that last in, first fired. You might have just hired a 22- or 24-year-old teacher who the kids love, terrific in teaching, has new methods, and has gotten the kids to learn, and you're going to get rid of that teacher? That's not fair."

—Frisco, TX

Measure teacher quality, even if it's hard to do

Echoing current policy debates, focus group participants quickly got into a discussion of how to determine what makes a teacher great in ways that are fair and not simplistic. They began constructing their own evaluation systems. Often, they wanted to take the background of students into account, and were unimpressed with using test scores as the sole indicator of effectiveness. Yet results still mattered to them.

"There has to be a way to evaluate the teacher, strictly the teacher herself. Is she doing what she's supposed to be doing, number one—is she doing her job? Then number two, you'd still want to know if the kids are learning. But those would be two different things."

—Los Angeles, CA

"I took a stand for evaluations, but I was not talking about taking the test scores alone. If I said, 'Tell me your top three teachers from your elementary or high school experience,' every one of you could do that immediately. Why? It wasn't because your test scores were so great or if they really taught math so well. It was the inspiration. It was the relationship. It was the passion. It was the whole thing. I don't know how you put that into an evaluation, but that to me is a sign of who needs to be kept."

—Los Angeles, CA

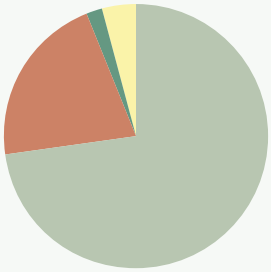
Fig **6**

Effectiveness Trumps Class Size

If you had to choose between these two options, which would it be?

- **73%** Larger class of 27 students taught by one of the district's best performing teachers
- **21%** Smaller class of 22 taught by a randomly chosen teacher
- **2%** Depends on the grade level of students
- **4%** Don't know

Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.



Excellence trumps smaller class size

Most states put specific limits on the number of students in classrooms.[3] But while opinion surveys routinely show that class size is a leading public concern, they rarely capture the specifics behind that concern. Our results indicate that citizens make some important distinctions and might be a lot more flexible on class size than one would expect.

For example: what does "larger class size" actually mean to people? Focus group participants said the phrase elicited worst-case scenarios of classrooms overflowing with unruly students and unhappy teachers. But when actual numbers of students were specified, preferences became more flexible.[4]

"I think there's not a problem if you increase the size four or five students but you don't want to see it ten or fifteen students. You have to draw a line: Okay, we can put a few more in there but we don't want it beyond this level."

—Fairfield, CT

So we anchored the survey questions with specific numbers, twenty-two versus twenty-seven students, to portray more concrete (and, in most places, more realistic) scenarios and intentionally pitted teacher quality against class size. A convincing 73 percent to 21 percent majority would rather have a larger class with twenty-seven students—provided it is "taught by one of the district's best performing teachers"—than a smaller class with twenty-two

students "taught by a randomly chosen teacher" (Figure 6). Focus group respondents tended to agree:

> *"The teachers I remember were ones that inspired me, and it was relational. So I would rather have a teacher who's passionate and great, and make the class a little bit larger, than to have a teacher who's average."*
>
> **—Los Angeles, CA**

> *"I would want to compare what teachers of the different subjects are doing, like, how do our math scores compare, and who are those teachers? How do our history scores compare, and who are those teachers? Find the better ones—two, three, four, five—and if it came down to laying off two or three and maybe having a larger class, it would be worth it to have a larger class, but to have a better teacher in that class."*
>
> **—Fairfield, CT**

In order to consider raising class size, focus group participants sometimes wanted to know more about the students. Are they behind academically or high achieving? Well or poorly behaved? Younger or older?

> *"You can have a larger class size, but it also has to deal with the children themselves. If you got a group of thirty very intelligent kids, then yeah, it will work, but if you got a group of children who require individual help, it's not going to work."*
>
> **—Fairfield, CT**

> *"If you could split it up to where the lower grades get smaller classes and get more attention. When you get into high school, you can get bigger classes because their attention span is a little bit longer."*
>
> **—Frisco, TX**

Protect core subjects if class size must go up

Finally, if teachers have to be let go and class size has to increase, Americans want districts to protect smaller classes in core subjects such as math, science, and reading. This does not mean that the public devalues courses like music, art, and physical education. It's only that, when painful choices must be made, they want them to be guided by a subject-area hierarchy rather than distribute pupil increases willy-nilly across all classrooms.

For example, if an elementary school must lay off teachers, a 59 percent majority would rather increase the size of music, art, and gym classes by six students and hold class size steady in core academic classrooms. Thirty-four percent would rather increase class size by two students across all subjects and classes.[5]

Close schools, merge districts

Proposals to close schools or merge districts often generate intense battles and vociferous opposition. In contrast, the survey data suggest a public that is much more open, at least in the abstract, to pursuing efficiency in these ways.

For example, by a 63 percent to 25 percent margin, respondents say that a good way to save money is to merge small school districts so that they share the superintendent's office, bus services, and clerical help (Figure 7). By a 63 percent to 30 percent margin, Americans favor closing or combining schools with declining enrollments.

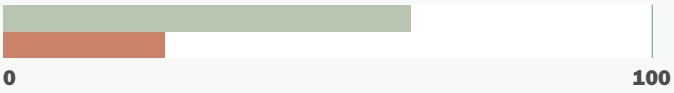
Fig **7**

Close Schools, Merge Districts

If your school district was facing a serious budget deficit, is the following a good way or a bad way to save money?

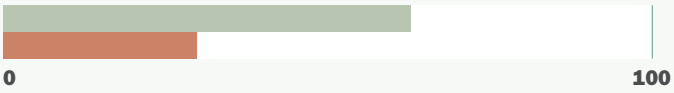
Merging small districts so that they share things like the superintendent's office, bus services, and clerical help

63% A good way because it reduces administrative costs and improves efficiency
25% A bad way because many places depend on the district for a sense of community



How much do you favor or oppose this idea for lowering school district costs and improving productivity: Closing or combining schools with declining enrollment?

63% Strongly or somewhat favor
30% Strongly or somewhat oppose



Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.

In one community where we held a focus group, the school district was known for keeping its schools in small buildings "so there's more teacher-student communication," as one participant put it. But times were getting tougher and it didn't seem sustainable to him:

> *"I don't know if you can afford to do that going forward. Every time we build a new high school here it's over 130 million dollars. You wonder how long can we continue to do that and at some point we may be faced with a decision [that] we can't keep doing this."*
>
> **—Frisco, TX**

Close Up: Is Special Education Spending Sacred?

One area that receives significant school expenditures also happens to be rife with sensitivity and political advocacy: special education (i.e., the education of children with disabilities). Indeed special education spending comprised an estimated 21 percent of all education spending in 2005 (the most recent data available). Further, 41 percent of all increases in education spending between 1996 and 2005 went to fund it.[6]

When it comes to budget cuts, is special education immune as far as most Americans are concerned? Is there a way to do right by children with special needs while recognizing that the taxpayer's pocket is not bottomless? Alternatively, have harsh economic times triggered any resentment that this category of students receives protected status while other youngsters must make do with less?

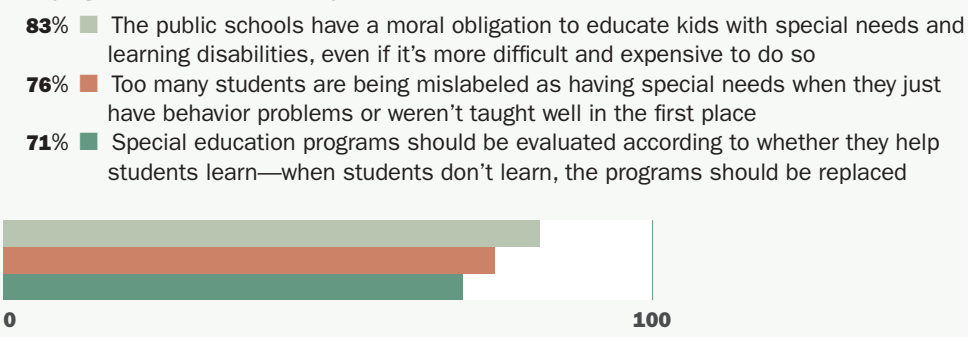
We took these questions to the public. Regardless of economic circumstance, their commitment to educate students with special needs is strong and morally based. More than 8 in 10 (83 percent) believe that "the public schools have a moral obligation to educate kids with special needs and learning disabilities, even if it's more difficult and expensive to do so" (Figure 8).

Fig **8**

Views on Special Education

How close does each statement come to your view?

% saying statement comes "very close" or "somewhat close"



> *"That's just the luck of the draw. You're dealt cards, you have a child like that, you take care of him. You love them as much as you love the other ones. Now that child is going to school, he's entitled to an education. That's part of being a citizen, you've got to pay for it."*
>
> **—Frisco, TX**

But people have come to suspect that something is amiss with the growth in the number of students in the special education category. More than 3 in 4 (76 percent) say

"too many students are being mislabeled as having special needs when they just have behavior problems or weren't taught well in the first place."

One focus group respondent in the Cincinnati suburbs explained:

> *"I apologize if I offend anybody—I think that there are children who are over-medicated. They're given way too many excuses, and there's not enough discipline."*
>
> **—Cincinnati suburbs, OH**

Americans also don't believe that special education budgets should be immune to challenge. They want districts to be critical consumers of special education services, believing it is legitimate to ask whether spending and services are efficacious. Fully 7 in 10 (71 percent) indicate that special education programs should be "evaluated according to whether they help students learn—when students don't learn, the programs should be replaced."

> *"They should still have metrics. This is not a babysitting service and they should still be here to learn like every other kid."*
>
> **—Frisco, TX**

> *"I don't think it's untouchable. I think those children that have those special needs deserve an education. However, if the whole school budget is under pressure, I think that piece has to be under pressure as well."*
>
> **—Fairfield, CT**

> *"You still have to ask the tough question, what are we getting for our money? What's the accountability? What progress are they making? If you're just throwing money away then you have to make changes."*
>
> **—Frisco, TX**

Still, the public is not clamoring to change federal law prohibiting districts from considering the costs of special education services: 44 percent say districts should be allowed to weigh costs when they choose those services; 47 percent say the law should be left as is.

Grappling with difficult trade-offs in special education

We tested how the public wrestles with tensions relative to ethical obligations, emotional sensitivities, costs, and efficacy in special education. For example: "Imagine that a district is facing this scenario: John is a blind eighteen-year-old who suffered traumatic brain injury as a baby. He rarely responds to instruction and has been unable to learn more than a few words. Because the district doesn't have the ability to meet his needs, it sends him to a residential facility that costs the district $100,000 a year."

Faced with a decision about how to handle John's care, the public falls on the side of efficacy and cost by a greater than 2 to 1 margin. More than 6 in 10 (62 percent) say that

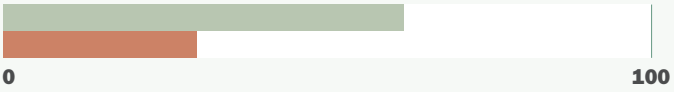
Fig **9**

Cost Limits, Even for Special Education

Imagine that a district is facing this scenario: John is a blind eighteen-year-old who suffered traumatic brain injury as a baby. He rarely responds to instruction and has been unable to learn more than a few words. Because the district doesn't have the ability to meet his needs, it sends him to a residential facility that costs the district $100,000 a year. Which comes closer to your view?

62% This is going too far—the student deserves help but there has to be a limit on the costs

30% This is appropriate—the student has suffered enough and deserves as much help as he needs, regardless of costs



"this is going too far—the student deserves help but there has to be a limit on the costs"; 30 percent say "this is appropriate—the student has suffered enough and deserves as much help as he needs, regardless of costs" (Figure 9).[7]

A parent in one focus group illustrated how she thought about such a scenario as she recalled this experience:

> *"My son's preschool class had two handicapped children. One was blind but she was learning just like everybody else. She was an active part of the class. There was another student who couldn't even sit up. They would carry him to the classroom, set him on pillows on the floor. He couldn't eat a snack with the kids. He couldn't talk or interact. He couldn't learn. Both children had a school aide that stayed with them throughout the day. You could see the benefit to the girl being there. But I just wondered what the benefit was to the other child. I just don't think the child knew the difference."*
>
> **—Cincinnati suburbs, OH**

Rejected Proposals

It's evident that Americans are not living in a dream-world of spend more, tax less, and reject sacrifice. The public rejected just two cost-cutting measures for school districts out of eleven that we posed. But resist two they did.

Don't shorten the school year

By a decisive 66 percent to 24 percent margin, the public rejects shortening the school year by requiring employees to take unpaid days off. People see this as a bad way to save money "because teachers and students will spend less time in school" rather than a good way to save money "because it can be done quickly without laying off workers" (Figure 10). In the focus groups, respondents said they did not want students to lose learning time.

> *"But the kids have less school then, right? How is that benefitting the child?"*
>
> **—Los Angeles, CA**

Don't cut support staff

By a similarly large margin (70 percent to 23 percent), the public also rejects "reducing non-teaching staff such as aides, librarians, and school nurses to the bare minimum." Americans think this is a bad way to save money "because these employees provide essential services to the schools and kids"; they don't buy the argument that "cutting these services won't hurt classrooms."

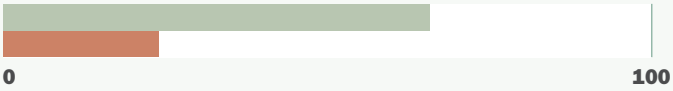
Fig **10**

Rejected Cost-Saving Proposals

In school districts facing serious budget deficits, are the following good or bad ways to save money?

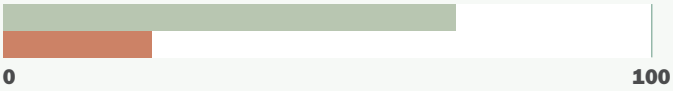
Shortening the school year by requiring employees to take unpaid days off

66% A bad way because teachers and students will spend less time in school
24% A good way because it can be done quickly without laying off workers



Reducing non-teaching staff such as aides, librarians, and school nurses to the bare minimum

70% A bad way because these employees provide essential services to schools and kids
23% A good way because cutting these services won't hurt classrooms



Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.

"They've had huge cuts in the schools. They laid a lot of teachers off. They took out all the nurses in all the schools, which is really serious with the needs the children have in schools today."

—Cincinnati suburbs, OH

It is instructive to contrast the public's earlier eagerness to cut "central administration to the bare minimum" with their aversion to cutting support staff. People can visualize how librarians and nurses work with kids and contribute to their well-being; it's harder for them to see how superintendents and other district administrators do so.

Split Decisions

In a few cases, the public was clearly divided over possible education cuts. When it came to trimming extracurricular costs, utilizing non-certified teachers in certain subjects, and making more use of online learning, we found no clear majority.

Sports and extra-curricular activities

Even when districts are in financial distress, the public is reluctant to cut sports and extra-curricular activities. A slender majority emerges in support of fees for sports and other activities, but only if low-income kids are helped to pay such fees.

Only 23 percent say charging fees for activities is a good way to save money "because it allows the schools to focus resources on academic subjects." Another 32 percent say it's a good way to save money only if financial help is provided to low-income youngsters. Nearly 4 in 10 (39 percent), however, believe it's a bad way to save money "because kids gain a lot from sports and activities" (Figure 11).

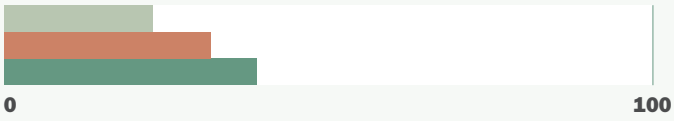
Fig **11**

Mixed Views on Sports and Extra-Curriculars

In school districts facing serious budget deficits, is this a good way or a bad way to save money:

Charging fees for after-school sports and extra-curricular activities

23% A good way because it allows the schools to focus resources on academic subjects
32% A good way but only if low-income kids get financial help
39% A bad way because kids gain a lot from sports and activities



Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix.

"The parents who have a kid that wants to play sports, and they just can't afford to pay the $400.... Something else has to get cut to keep these kids off the street and to give them that social interaction."

—Fairfield, CT

"You have to decide what is absolutely necessary. Sports scholarships get you into college. They also teach responsibility and discipline. But people are going to have to figure out a way to pay the costs."

—Cincinnati suburbs, OH

If the focus groups are any indication, many communities are accustomed to fundraising pleas from schools. The following quote is from a woman who helps run the fundraising effort:

"There are five or six kids on the team who have a big problem because we do have fees. Those coaches raise those kids up by their bootstraps and they give them support and they get them through. The coaches themselves are wonderful people that are giving themselves to these kids. I set up payment plans for the kids. They don't have to pay. I just say, 'Hey, if you have some problem come to me.' We work it out."

—Frisco, TX

Americans are also divided 49 percent to 48 percent over a proposal to hire "local artists and fitness trainers part-time for art, music, and gym classes instead of using full-time teachers" (Figure 12). Against the promise of financial savings, respondents weigh concerns that professionals need to be trained in teaching youngsters and handling classrooms.

"You have to know what you're doing; you need training. Not everyone can just walk into a school and know how to handle kids, and make sure things are safe."

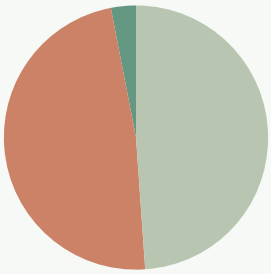
—Fairfield, CT

Fig **12**

A Public Divided on Hiring Local Experts in Place of Teachers

How much do you favor or oppose this idea for lowering school district costs and improving productivity: Hiring local artists and fitness trainers part-time for art, music, and gym classes instead of using full-time teachers?

49% Strongly or somewhat favor
48% Strongly or somewhat oppose
3% Don't know



Virtual education

Attitudes toward virtual (also known as "online") education are also divided. Some people are dismissive, some enthusiastic, and some willing to consider it under certain conditions. In the focus groups, participants routinely said that this may well be the future of education as technology improves and comfort levels rise. But their comments—and the survey data—indicate that Americans are not yet fully comfortable with virtual education. Forty-six percent would stay away from "blended classes," described as both learning on the Internet and "in face-to-face classrooms with teachers," while 42 percent would make more use of them (Figure 13). Parents with children in K-12 are more likely than non-parents to favor greater use of blended classes (51 percent versus 38 percent).[8]

In assessing virtual education, the public's metric is not "will it save money?" or "will it give school districts more flexibility in managing teachers?" Rather, its questions are: "Is this an effective way to teach students or will kids goof off or cheat?" "Will social skills suffer?" Americans aren't sure.

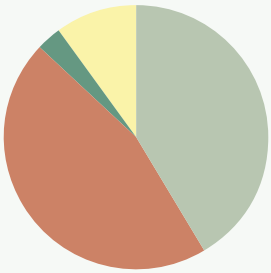
Fig **13**

Split on Blended Classes

Some schools offer blended classes that include both learning on the Internet and in face-to-face classrooms with teachers. Do you think the public schools should:

- **42%** Make more use of blended classes, because they're flexible, cost-effective, and allow students to learn at their own pace
- **46%** Stay away from blended classes, because students have less interaction with other students and less direct supervision by teachers
- **3%** Neither/Something else
- **10%** Don't know

Note: Question wording may be edited for space. Complete text and data are available in the appendix. Percentage may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.



"There's no learning, because you can cheat that way. I know some people that instead of them going to college, they're taking classes online. They can find other ways to get answers."

—Fairfield, CT

"I assume it'd be some type of a hybrid. It would probably need some supervision, teachers occasionally popping their head in the door to make sure the kids are actually working."

—Fairfield, CT

"I think it's important to go back and say, 'Why do we have education in the first place?' Because public schools in America were started to form citizens, not to just get your degree. To me, that's the problem with online [learning]—it's the relational part of being in the classroom and learning to get along with people you don't share the same views with and learning to deal with other kids, the social aspect."

—Los Angeles, CA

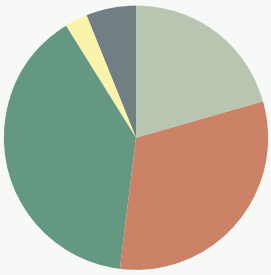
Fig **14**

Undecided on Virtual Schools

There are also virtual schools, where students take some or all of their classes online. Students do much of their work over the Internet and the teacher is online. Do you think that virtual schools are generally:

- **21%** A good idea
- **32%** A bad idea
- **40%** A good option, but only for students who have difficulty in traditional schools
- **3%** None of these/Something else
- **6%** Don't know

Note: Percentage may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.



We also asked respondents what they thought about students taking some or all of their courses in virtual schools.[9] In these courses, the students do much (or all) of their work over the Internet and interact with the teacher online. Twenty-one percent believe that taking courses in virtual schools are a good idea, 32 percent say they're a bad idea, and 40 percent

say they are a good option but only for students who have difficulty in traditional schools (Figure 14). Again, parents with children in school are more likely to favor this idea, but only for struggling students (48 percent to 36 percent).

> *"But I was just thinking that if you took your gifted kids, you could create a virtual classroom, because you've already got the focus there. You've already got the drive."*
>
> **—Los Angeles, CA**

> *"I know some of the teachers. They teach from their home. There's a Web cam [so] that the students can see them. It has been very successful. They have a high graduation rate, and there's tens of thousands of students so as far as that goes, it's worked."*
>
> **—Cincinnati suburbs, OH**

We hypothesized that survey respondents who had online learning experience (35 percent had taken a course online) would be more likely to support virtual education than those without it. But this was not the case. Forty-four percent who have taken an online course want schools to make more use of blended classes, but so do 40 percent of those without such experience. And while 21 percent who took an online course think virtual schools are a good idea, the percentage of those who hadn't was also 21 percent.

Conclusion

What's a district leader to do?

Public support is clear and strong for taking a long, hard look at education spending. From closing schools, to holding special education accountable for results, to accepting some expansion of class size, the survey portrays a public that would stand with district leaders who need to balance their budgets. Make the tough calls, Americans seem to be saying, prioritize spending, let go of unsuccessful programs and ineffective teachers. We will support you.

In fact, across our four focus groups, only one of more than forty participants resolutely refused to entertain any cuts to the education budget: "Get the money from the federal government," he said. "Go someplace else." Virtually everyone else engaged in realistic, thoughtful discussion about making school budgets work with diminished resources.

Can leaders count on the public?

Still, superintendents and school boards may be forgiven for looking askance at the evidence of support implied by survey results such as these. As these leaders can attest, almost any course or extra-curricular activity they try to cut, any school building they try to close, any reduction in benefits they try to make, will activate a vocal constituency that fights to defend it. Press coverage of education is replete with stories of districts gripped by such conflict. People are apt to say they support sacrifice until the sacrifice is theirs to make.

This dynamic played out in our focus groups: Someone would suggest that, in tough times, it made sense to reduce, say, French or music, and several participants would agree. Then someone else would describe how studying French or music was critical to a child's education and should not be touched—but sports, *well*, maybe that was expendable...

It's a familiar and indeed universal political problem that pits public interest against self-interest. Those who oppose change may be few in number, but they are often faster to organize, more united, and more strident because their direct interests are threatened. Meanwhile, the general public whose interests are indirect and broad—the sort of folks surveyed here—remains quiescent.

Perhaps the public support expressed here is best understood as a helpful precursor to well-planned action by leadership, a source of reinforcement in times of need. Just because majorities say that they support budget cuts does not mean that they will show up during Tuesday evening's school board meeting to support those cuts. But leaders should be reassured and even emboldened by the knowledge that the strident opposition that *does* show up is most probably a small minority, and not reflective of the general will.

Can the public count on its leaders?

Perhaps it's also fair to ask whether today's leaders have the capacity to press their respective publics to confront tough choices that need to be made. That's no small undertaking. For

starters, leaders must convey to their communities the seriousness of the district or state budget crisis. In part, that means presenting accurate data in easily understood terms. But they also need to confront wishful thinking and avoidance on the part of citizens—and to confront self-interest for what it is, particularly when the interests of adults in the system threaten to overwhelm those of children. In times of trouble, leaders have to engage the public, forthrightly explain the problems and the policy choices at hand, and rally the collective interest. Where the public fails to rally, perhaps it's because some leaders have developed bad habits: a penchant for vague platitudes, short-term solutions, and interest-group politics.

Still, let them not forget that there is latent support for tough decisions that make sense relative to education spending. Yes, it will take courageous leadership to elicit that support in ways that counterbalance private interests. But these results show a public that is capable of grappling with such competing interests. Who will prod them to stand by their convictions?

Appendix A: Methodology

The findings in *How Americans Would Slim Down Public Education* are based on 1,009 interviews conducted by telephone with a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of adults eighteen and older. The fielding took place between March 9 and March 29, 2012. The interviews averaged approximately eighteen minutes.

The margin of error for a survey of 1,009 is plus or minus 3 percentage points; the margin of error increases for sub-groups within the sample. For example, the national random sample generated 214 completed interviews with parents of public school students in grades K-12. When the study reports the views of this subsample, the margin of error is plus or minus 7 percentage points.

To ensure a random sample of households, the study employed a dual-frame landline/cell phone telephone design. For the landline interviews, we used a standard random-digit-dialing technology. Every household in the United States, theoretically, had an equal chance of being selected, including those with unlisted numbers. For the cell phone interviews, numbers were randomly generated from prefixes assigned to wireless carriers. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, 26.6 percent of U.S. homes had only a wireless phone as of June 2010. A total of 909 interviews were completed on landlines and 100 on cell phones. Survey data are weighted to population parameters in age, race, and education.

To minimize non-response bias, interviews were conducted on each day of the week and at different times of the day. If a respondent indicated a better time for the interview, callbacks were made accordingly. Non-sampling sources of error could also have an impact on survey results. The survey instrument used in this study was extensively pre-tested to ensure that the language was accessible and appropriate to members of the general public, including those who may not be familiar with the topic of public schools. Questions were randomized and answer categories rotated in an effort to minimize non-sampling sources of error. The questionnaire was designed by the FDR Group, and the FDR Group is responsible for the interpretation of the survey data in this report.

Sample was purchased by Scientific Telephone Samples and the telephone interviews and data collection services provided by Clark Research located in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Expert Interviews

In preparation for conducting the focus groups and the telephone survey, the FDR Group interviewed ten local education leaders and national experts to obtain a substantive grounding on the issues at hand. The FDR Group also reviewed recent press coverage and research reports relative to school budget issues.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted in August 2011, one each in Los Angeles, CA; Fairfield, CT; Cincinnati, OH; and Frisco, TX. The focus group participants were recruited to represent the

socioeconomic demographics of the respective communities. They included both men and women, mothers and fathers, individuals of different races/ethnicities, older and younger, college-educated and not. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to gauge the public's understanding of the issues at hand and add context to the survey results. The groups were especially useful in testing and developing the survey instrument, including avoiding verbiage that was hard to understand or misleading.

Characteristics of the Sample

The following table compares demographics of the U.S. population to those in this survey sample.

	Population (%)	Sample (%)
Gender		
Male	49	46
Female	51	54
Race and ethnicity		
African American	13	9
White	72	74
Asian	5	1
Hispanic	16	12
Education		
High school graduate or less	43	37
Some college/2-year degree	29	31
4-year degree or more	28	32
Age		
18-24	13	8
25-44	35	28
45-64	35	42
65-74	9	13
75 or older	8	9
Region		
Northeast	18	17
Midwest	22	28
South	37	35
West	23	21

Source: "2010 Census." US Census Bureau, n.d. Web. 31 July 2012. http://2010.census.gov/2010census

Appendix B: Complete Survey Results

These findings are based on 1,009 interviews conducted by telephone with a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of adults eighteen and older. The fielding took place between March 9 and March 29, 2012. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. An asterisk indicates less than one percent and "[Vol.]" indicates a voluntary response that was not explicitly offered to survey participants. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

Q1 **Overall, how would you say your local economy was affected by the recent recession—was it hit very hard, somewhat hard, mostly unaffected, or did it do relatively well?**

82 NET Hard
39 Very hard
43 Somewhat hard
9 Mostly unaffected
6 Done relatively well
3 [Vol.] Don't know

Q2 **In the past two years, to what extent have there been layoffs and cut-backs by your local government in services like parks or road maintenance—a lot, some, a little, or not at all?**

59 NET A lot/Some
25 A lot
34 Some
24 NET A little/None at all
15 A little
9 Not at all
17 [Vol.] Don't know

Q3 **Thinking about your local public schools, would you say that:**

73 They're an asset to your community and make it a more desirable place to live
17 They're a liability to your community that make it a less desirable place to live
4 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
6 [Vol.] Don't know

Q4 **How would you describe your school district's current financial situation—would you say it's very difficult, somewhat difficult, not too difficult, or not difficult at all?**

62 NET Difficult
19 Very difficult
43 Somewhat difficult
28 NET Not Difficult
20 Not too difficult
8 Not difficult at all
11 [Vol.] Don't know

Limited base: Financial situation difficult (Q4) (n=616)

Q5 Do you think the financial challenges facing your district will end shortly, or do you think they'll last for quite a while?

11 Will end shortly
77 Will last for quite a while
11 [Vol.] Don't know

Q6 Overall, do you think your district has been careful and efficient in how it spends money, wasteful and inefficient, or is it mixed?

28 Careful and efficient
18 Wasteful and inefficient
47 Mixed
7 [Vol.] Don't know

Q7 Which of these do you think would be the best approach for your district to take if it was facing a serious budget deficit?

48 Cut costs by dramatically changing how it does business
11 Rely on tax increases to close the deficit
26 Change as little as possible and wait for times to get better
7 [Vol.] None of these/Something else
8 [Vol.] Don't know

Now I'm going to ask what you think of some ideas for cutting costs in school districts facing serious budget deficits. [Q8–13]

Q8 How about... Freezing salaries for one year for all district employees. Is this:

58 A good way to save money, because the district can avoid laying off people and it's temporary
33 A bad way to save money, because labor contract commitments should be kept
4 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
5 [Vol.] Don't know

Q9 How about... Shortening the school year by requiring employees to take unpaid days off. Is this:

24 A good way to save money, because it can be done quickly without laying off workers
66 A bad way to save money, because teachers and students will spend less time in school
4 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
6 [Vol.] Don't know

Q10 **How about... Merging small districts so that they share things like the superintendent's office, bus services, and clerical help. Is this:**

63 A good way to save money, because it reduces administrative costs and improves efficiency
25 A bad way to save money, because many places depend on the district for a sense of community
4 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
8 [Vol.] Don't know

Q11 **How about... Reducing the number of district level administrators to the bare minimum. Is this:**

69 A good way to save money, because it means cutting bureaucracy without hurting classrooms
20 A bad way to save money, because districts need strong leadership, and good leaders cost money
3 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
8 [Vol.] Don't know

Q12 **How about... Reducing non-teaching staff such as aides, librarians, and school nurses to the bare minimum. Is this:**

23 A good way to save money, because cutting these services won't hurt classrooms
70 A bad way to save money, because these employees provide essential services to schools and kids
3 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
5 [Vol.] Don't know

Q13 **How about... Charging fees for after-school sports and extra-curricular activities. Is this:**

23 A good way to save money, because it allows the schools to focus resources on academic subjects
39 A bad way to save money, because kids gain a lot from sports and activities
32 A good way to save money, but only if low income kids get financial help
2 [Vol.] None of these/Something else
4 [Vol.] Don't know

Q14 **Currently, most school employees are guaranteed a pension after a set number of years. There's a proposal to change this to individual retirement plans, like 401(K) plans. The district would put money into the plan, but employees would also contribute from their salaries and would keep the money if they change jobs. Is this:**

53 A good way to save money, because it's how retirement works for most people today
20 A bad way to save money, because employees will be paying more for retirement benefits that are not guaranteed
17 A good way to save money, but only for new school employees
2 [Vol.] None of these/Something else
8 [Vol.] Don't know

Here's a different kind of question. I'm going to read some ideas for lowering school district costs and improving productivity. Please tell me how much you favor or oppose each. [Q15–18]

Q15 **How about... Extending teachers' workday by one hour and using the time to collaborate with other teachers and tutor students. Do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea?**

67 NET Favor
40 Strongly favor
27 Somewhat favor
27 NET Oppose
13 Somewhat oppose
14 Strongly oppose
6 [Vol.] Don't know

Q16 **How about... Closing or combining schools that have declining student enrollment. Do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea?**

63 NET Favor
31 Strongly favor
32 Somewhat favor
30 NET Oppose
17 Somewhat oppose
13 Strongly oppose
7 [Vol.] Don't know

Q17 **How about... Using parent volunteers instead of school staff for things like monitoring lunchrooms and clerical help. Do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea?**

75 NET Favor
46 Strongly favor
29 Somewhat favor
23 NET Oppose
11 Somewhat oppose
12 Strongly oppose
2 [Vol.] Don't know

Q18 **How about... Hiring local artists and fitness trainers part-time for art, music, and gym classes instead of using full-time teachers. Do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea?**

49 NET Favor
22 Strongly favor
26 Somewhat favor
48 NET Oppose
20 Somewhat oppose
28 Strongly oppose
3 [Vol.] Don't know

Q19 **If you had to choose between laying off 5 percent of teachers OR cutting all teacher salaries by 5 percent, which would you choose?**

14 Lay off 5 percent of teachers
74 Cut all teacher salaries by 5 percent
1 [Vol.] Depends on the grade level of students
11 [Vol.] Don't know

Q20 **Which of these would be a more important factor to you if you had no choice but to lay off teachers? Would it be:**

18 Teachers' years of service: newcomers laid off first and veteran teachers protected
74 Teachers' effectiveness: those with poor performance laid off first and those with excellent performance protected
1 [Vol.] Depends on the grade level of students
7 [Vol.] Don't know

Q21 **If you had to choose, which of these two teachers would you lay off:**

51 A veteran teacher with TWENTY years' experience and AVERAGE performance evaluations
39 A new teacher with TWO years' experience and EXCELLENT performance evaluations
1 [Vol.] Depends on the grade level of students
10 [Vol.] Don't know

Q22 **If you had to choose between these two options, which would it be?**

21 A SMALLER class with twenty-two students, taught by a RANDOMLY chosen teacher from your district
73 A LARGER class with twenty-seven students, taught by one of the district's BEST-performing teachers
2 [Vol.] Depends on the grade level of students
4 [Vol.] Don't know

Q23 **Suppose you had to lay off ELEMENTARY teachers and class size would have to go up. Which would you be more likely to do:**

34 Increase class size by TWO students across ALL classrooms
59 Increase the size of music, art, and gym classes by SIX students, but keep class size the same in regular classrooms
7 [Vol.] Don't know

Q24 **Suppose you had to lay off HIGH school teachers and class size would have to go up. Which would you be more likely to do:**

32 Increase class size by TWO students across ALL classes, regardless of subject
63 Increase class size by SIX students in music, art, and gym classes, but keep class size the same in core subjects like English and math
6 [Vol.] Don't know

Q25 **Moving on to a different kind of question… Some schools today offer "blended" classes that include BOTH learning on the Internet AND in face-to-face classrooms with teachers. Do you think the public schools should:**

42 Make more use of blended classes, because they're flexible, cost-effective, and allow students to learn at their own pace
46 Stay away from blended classes, because students have less interaction with other students and less direct supervision by teachers
3 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
10 [Vol.] Don't know

Q26 **There are also virtual schools where students take some or all of their classes online. Students do much of their work over the Internet and the teacher is online. Do you think that virtual schools are generally:**

21 A good idea
32 A bad idea
40 A good option, but ONLY for students who have difficulty in traditional schools
3 [Vol.] None of these/Something else
6 [Vol.] Don't know

Q27 **Have you yourself ever taken an online course where most of the work was completed over the Internet, or not?**

35 Yes, have taken an online course
65 No, have not
* [Vol.] Don't know

Here are some statements about special education. How close does each come to your view? [Q28–30]

Q28 **How about… Too many students are being mislabeled as having special needs when they just have behavior problems or weren't taught well in the first place. Does this come very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your view?**

76 NET Close
45 Very close
31 Somewhat close
18 NET Not Close
8 Not too close
10 Not close at all
6 [Vol.] Don't know

Q29 **How about... Special education programs should be evaluated according to whether they help students learn—when students don't learn, the programs should be replaced. Does this come very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your view?**

71 NET Close
44 Very close
27 Somewhat close
23 NET Not Close
10 Not too close
12 Not close at all
7 [Vol.] Don't know

Q30 **How about... The public schools have a moral obligation to educate kids with special needs and learning disabilities, even if it's more difficult and expensive to do so. Does this come very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your view?**

83 NET Close
52 Very close
31 Somewhat close
15 NET Not Close
9 Not too close
6 Not close at all
3 [Vol.] Don't know

Q31 **According to federal law, districts are required to provide special education services, but they are not allowed to consider the costs of those services. Do you think districts should be allowed to weigh costs when considering which special education services to choose, or do you think the law should be left as is?**

44 Districts should be allowed to weigh costs when considering which special education services to choose
47 The law should be left as is
9 [Vol.] Don't know

Q32 **Imagine that a district is facing this scenario: John is a blind eighteen-year-old who suffered traumatic brain injury as a baby. He rarely responds to instruction and has been unable to learn more than a few words. Because the district doesn't have the ability to meet his needs, it sends him to a residential facility that costs the district $100,000 a year. Which comes closer to your view?:**

62 This is going too far—the student deserves help but there has to be a limit on the costs
30 This is appropriate—the student has suffered enough and deserves as much help as he needs, regardless of costs
4 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
4 [Vol.] Don't know

Q33 **Are you currently employed full-time, employed part-time, out of work, a homemaker, a student, retired, or something else?**

45 Employed—full-time
11 Employed—part-time
3 Out of work
6 A homemaker
5 A student
26 Retired
4 Something else

Q34 **Do you or does someone in your immediate family currently work in a public school or for a public school district, or not?**

25 Yes, self/family member currently works in public school/district
75 No, does not
* [Vol.] Don't know

Q35 **Are you the parent or guardian of any school-age children in grades Kindergarten through 12th who live with you, or not?**

29 Yes, parent of school-age child
71 No, not a parent
* [Vol.] Don't know

Limited base: Parent of school-age children (Q35) (n=243)

Q36 **Are your children currently in elementary school, middle school, or high school?**

58 Elementary school
36 Middle school
42 High school
3 [Vol.] Something else

Limited base: Parent of school-age children (Q35) (n=242)

Q37 **Which types of schools do your children currently attend—private non-religious school, private religious school, public charter school, or public district school?**

2 Private non-religious school
10 Private religious school
5 Public charter school
87 Public district school
2 [Vol.] Something else

Limited base: Parent of school-age children (Q35) (n=243)

Q38 **Do you have a child who has been identified as a special needs student, or diagnosed with a specific physical, emotional, or learning disability, or not?**

27 Yes, I have a child who has been identified or diagnosed
73 No, I do not
* [Vol.] Don't know

Q39 **Do you own or rent your home?**

79 Own
18 Rent
3 [Vol.] Neither/Something else
* [Vol.] Don't know

Q40 **Stop me when I say the highest level of school you have completed.**

8 Less than high school
29 High school graduate
21 Some college or trade school, no degree
10 Associates degree or 2 year degree
20 Bachelors degree or 4 year degree
12 Graduate or Professional degree
* [Vol.] Don't know

Q41 **Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?**

30 Republican
26 Democrat
30 Independent
12 Something else
2 [Vol.] Don't know

Limited base: Independent (Q41) (n=285)

Q42 **Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?**

32 Republican
26 Democrat
39 Neither
4 [Vol.] Don't know

Q43 **Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, or not?**

12 Yes, of Hispanic origin
88 No, not of Hispanic origin
* [Vol.] Don't know

Q44 **Do you consider yourself to be white, black or African American, Asian, or something else?**

74 White
9 Black or African American
1 Asian
3 Something else
1 [Vol.] Native American
* [Vol.] Don't know
12 Hispanic

Q45 **I'm going to read some ranges of annual household income. Please stop me when I read the one that best describes your total household income in 2011.**

17 Under $25,000
26 $25,000 to less than $50,000
32 $50,000 to less than $100,000
13 $100,000 to less than $150,000
4 $150,000 to less than $200,000
4 $200,000 or more
4 [Vol.] Don't know

Q46 **Is your age group: [READ LIST]**

8 Under 25 years old
12 25 to 34
16 35 to 44
22 45 to 54
20 55 to 64
13 65 to 74
6 75 to 84
3 85 or older
* [Vol.] Don't know

Q47 **Sometimes, we have follow-up questions that allow people to explain their answers more fully. If we have any follow-up questions, may we call you back?**

81 Yes
19 No

Gender

46 Male
54 Female

Region

17 Northeast
28 Midwest
35 South
21 West

Urban

21 Rural
49 Suburban
30 Urban

Endnotes

1 Janie Scull, Matt Richmond, and Dara Zeehandelaar, *The Explosive Growth of Non-Teaching Personnel* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute), forthcoming in September 2013.

2 This disconnect does not appear to be driven by faulty information about salaries—participants did a fairly credible job of estimating teacher and superintendent salaries in the focus groups. It is just that they are not thinking about a complete system, where one hundred teachers making $50,000 would cost $5 million and one superintendent would cost $200,000. They are comparing the salary of one teacher to one superintendent.

3 A majority of states have at least one policy that limits the number of students that may be in a general education classroom, according to the Education Commission of the States; several have relaxed those class-size policies since 2008. *See* http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/infographics/13class_size_map.html.

4 See, for example, William Howell, Paul E. Peterson and Martin West, "The Persuadable Public," *Education Next* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2009), http://educationnext.org/persuadable-public/.

5 The same dynamic is at play at the high school level: If high school teachers have to be laid off, a 63 percent majority would rather protect class size in core subjects like English and math and increase class size in music, art, and gym by six students. Thirty-two percent would prefer to increase class size by two students across all subjects.

6 Janie Scull and Amber M. Winkler, *Shifting Trends in Special Education* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2011), http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/shifting-trends-in-special.html.

7 For all of the questions about special education, we examined separately the views of parents with special-needs children. Surprisingly, they were remarkably similar to those of other parents. The only statistically significant difference between the two groups is relative to the severely disabled student scenario described on page 21. Forty-eight percent of special education parents said this was "going too far" compared with 67 percent of other parents. Comparisons should be treated with caution, however, because of the small sample size: Just 63 parents in the sample said they had a child identified as special needs.

8 Interestingly, the topic of virtual learning is the only one where we found substantive differences between parents and non-parents.

9 Forty states have state virtual schools or a similar state-led initiative. The Florida Virtual School is likely the best known. *See* John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, Butch Gemin, and Chris Rapp, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice* (Durango, CO: Evergreen Education Group, 2011), http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/KeepingPace2011.pdf.