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Californians Willing to Pay More Taxes to Improve Public Education, New Statewide Survey Says

Parents, Students Demand More Accountability, Local Involvement in Spending

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Californians are willing to pay more taxes to improve public education, according to a survey released today by Parents and Students for Great Schools, a coalition of leading grassroots and advocacy organizations.

In the statewide survey, titled *Now That We Have the Facts*, 86 percent of survey respondents said they would be willing to pay more taxes to improve California schools if certain conditions are met, including increased accountability, transparency and local involvement in deciding how education dollars are spent.

Elizabeth Alvarez, who has four children in public school and is active in San Jose PACT (People Acting in Community Together), an affiliate of PICO California, shares that point of view. “Nothing is more important than my children’s education. I would even be willing to pay more in taxes to improve my children’s schools — but first I’d want to know that the money was going to be well spent,” Alvarez said.

Martha Sanchez, a mother of three students in the Los Angeles public schools and a member of California ACORN, agrees. “Our children shouldn’t be the victims of good and bad budget years,” she said.

Parents and Students for Great Schools conducted the survey in the wake of *Getting Down to Facts*, a collection of 22 studies on school finance and governance conducted by Stanford University researchers, to give students and adults from California’s low- and middle-income communities a voice on education reform. The release of the survey comes as the agenda is being set for the state’s next legislative session, which Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has declared the “Year of Education Reform.”

“California is gearing up for a major debate on education reform in 2008, and parents and students have vital input to offer,” said Liz Guillen, director of legislative and community affairs at Public Advocates. “To make sure our education system is meeting the unique needs of each community, we need to give those most directly affected — the parents and students themselves — an active role in shaping how dollars are spent and priorities are organized.”

Other key findings from the Parents and Students for Great Schools report include:

- ∞ Eighty-two percent of respondents said that students should graduate from high school prepared for college or a skilled job; passing the high school exit exam is not enough.
- ∞ Ninety percent of parents and 62 percent of students expressed concern about high drop-out rates among low-income students and students of color.
- ∞ When asked to rank priorities for how to spend new dollars targeted at improving student achievement, respondents said that providing qualified and effective teachers and offering more support for students, such as counseling and tutoring, were the two most important priorities.
- ∞ Over 90% of respondents said they expect policy-makers to take action if research shows, as the Stanford studies did, that California’s education system needs additional funding and that education funding should be used more efficiently.

For students, adequate preparation for college is of paramount concern. Sylvester McKinley, a senior at Long Beach Polytechnic Academy of Achievers and Leaders and a youth leader with Californians for Justice, described his frustration, shared by many of his peers, with the lack of information he's received about the requirements for college.

"Here in Long Beach, when the school district asked students what their goal after high school is, over 77 percent said they wanted to go to a four-year college," McKinley recalled. "But only 3 out of 10 students actually graduate with the classes needed to apply a UC or CSU college."

"A lot of students don't know about the required classes," he continued. "I didn't find out about them until last year — the eleventh grade! Even though I'm taking them now, I won't be able to finish them all before I graduate, and I will have to make some up in community college."

Parents and Teachers for Great Schools surveyed 5,600 individuals in 25 counties from San Diego to rural Colusa County (40 miles north of Sacramento), and convened town hall meetings in Los Angeles and Oakland that drew approximately 500 parents, students and community members.

Martha Sanchez, who helped facilitate the town hall meeting in Los Angeles, emphasizes that for many years, the opinions of people from her community have been ignored when it comes to education reform.

"But it's our kids whose futures are on the line," she says. "It's time for the state to take action — and this time, we want a seat at the table when big decisions about education are being made."

The survey was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and research assistance was provided by UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA).

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About Parents and Students for Great Schools

Parents and Students for Great Schools is a coalition of leading grassroots and advocacy organizations — California ACORN, Californians for Justice, PICO California and Public Advocates — working to ensure that students and parents have a voice on education reform. The coalition works from two basic premises: (1) every child in California deserves the opportunity to succeed in school, and (2) California schools must respond to the needs and expectations of those most directly affected: parents and students.

For more information, please contact the individuals below:

California ACORN (www.california.acorn.org) is an affiliate of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a national grassroots, community-based organization of low- and moderate-income families working together for social justice and stronger communities. California ACORN is composed of 37,000 member families in 22 cities throughout California. For more information, contact Corina Vasare at 510-866-5117 or caaisj@aisj.org.

Californians for Justice (www.caljustice.org) is a statewide, grassroots organization dedicated to building power in communities that have been pushed to the margins of the political process. For more information, contact Solomon Rivera at 323-899-6794 or solomon@caljustice.org.

PICO California (www.picocalifornia.org) is part of the PICO National Network of faith-based community organizations and represents 450,000 families in 73 cities throughout the state. PICO works to create innovative solutions to pressing community issues and build a legacy of leadership in communities. For more information, contact Roberta Furger at 510-703-6357 or roberta@picocalifornia.org.

Public Advocates (www.publicadvocates.org) is a nonprofit civil rights law firm that challenges the systemic causes of poverty and discrimination by promoting civil rights through advocacy, litigation and partnership with low-income communities, people of color and immigrants. It served as a lead counsel for the landmark *Williams v. California* education equity case. For more information, contact John Affeldt at 415-595-9563 or jaffeldt@publicadvocates.org.