



Californians Would Pay for Real Education Reform

New America Media, Commentary, Steven A. Rosell and Isabella Furth, Posted: Nov 18, 2008 [NT Review it on NewsTrust](#)

Despite economic hard times, Californians from varied backgrounds would put more money into public schools--but only if it supports real, systemic reforms, according to research from Viewpoint Learning. Steven Rosell is president and Isabella Furth is a project manager at Viewpoint Learning.

Six weeks after legislators passed a state budget patched together with accounting tricks, one-time revenue boosts and crossed fingers, California is back in the hole. The future looks grim, and more cuts are coming. Significant education reform seems impossible. But don't underestimate Californians' willingness to back significant, long-term reforms to California's K-12 school system. They are ready to make difficult choices and real sacrifices to get a system that works.

Californians' attitudes about education reform were revealed in recent research we did, sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. We conducted daylong dialogues with representative samples of Californians of all ethnicities, incomes and political leanings. To their own surprise, participants found significant common ground based on a number of shared values. Californians want an education system that will prepare our children for good jobs and full participation in our democracy. They see the goal of education as giving kids a firm grasp of the basics, while allowing each child to achieve his or her fullest potential. Despite their differences, participants agreed on many basic goals and strategies. For example:

- Give more support to disadvantaged students. Many education experts support allocating additional dollars to low-income and non-English speaking students. Participants in our dialogues supported this idea, but followed a different path to get there. Most were not initially motivated by a specific desire to help disadvantaged kids. Instead, they began from the position that the current system is not meeting the needs of many students – rich or poor, immigrant or native, gifted or challenged. They wanted a system in which all children can develop their full potential. Only after arriving at this conclusion did they begin to think about whether the playing field was level for all. Their support for more funding for poorer kids and English learners came out of this broader sense of fair play — making sure that everyone has the resources and support they need to achieve. Put in this context even those who objected to illegal immigration agreed that English learners in public schools need and should get additional support.
- Give teachers more autonomy – and hold them accountable for results. When asked early on about strengthening teacher accountability – rewarding exceptional teachers with merit pay and/or making it easier to dismiss teachers who repeatedly fail to improve their students' learning – participants were wary. Student learning was the most important objective, but many felt that current accountability measures scapegoat teachers by holding them responsible for failures they can't control. Instead they approached the issue by considering how to improve student outcomes. They felt that teachers are the ones who know best how to reach the students in their classrooms, and they wanted teachers to have much more authority to make those decisions. If teachers had that authority, then it made sense to hold them more accountable for their performance as long as the evaluation system is fair.
- Will pay more, but only for a better system. Many began from the position that there is plenty of money in the system – that waste and mismanagement are the only problem. But as they compared what California spends per student to other states, they began to conclude that more money would eventually be needed. Californians of all incomes, ethnicities and political orientations were willing to pay more but only if the current system is reformed. They wanted leaders to start with low-cost reforms and to make school spending more transparent and accountable. Then, if new money is needed, they would be willing to pay.

Californians supported these and many other conclusions across ethnic, income and liberal/conservative lines. Some differences did appear: conservatives were less enthusiastic about paying more taxes; Latinos placed an especially high priority on college preparation; and low-income people more strongly supported targeting funds to disadvantaged students. But these were matters of degree, not fundamental differences.

These viewpoints emerged after a long day of weighing choices and wrestling with tradeoffs. They show where Californians could go given leadership and a chance to work through the options. But they also show that the public is ready to begin a serious conversation with the state's elected leaders about the future of K-12 education. Californians don't want another quick fix. They know that crossed fingers won't dig us out of the hole. They are willing to start small. But they want straight talk and a long-term commitment to reform.

The complete report is available at <http://www.viewpointlearning.com/publications/reports.shtml>

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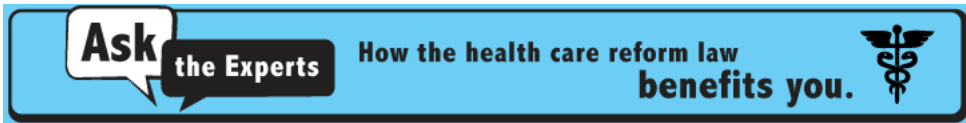
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