



To: Interested Parties
From: Progress NC
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According to a recent Public Policy Polling survey conducted on behalf of Action NC and Progress North Carolina, Tar Heel State voters seem conflicted in their opinions of public education in North Carolina, but voters agree that they don't support right-wing education schemes that would damage public schools.

Public Policy Polling surveyed 580 North Carolina voters from April 25-26, 2013. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 4%.

The conflict

Statement	Strongly Agree	Total Agree
Strong public schools have been a key part of North Carolina's success and help attract good jobs to our state.	48%	75%
North Carolina's public schools are broken.	36%	63%

North Carolina voters agree that education has been a vital part of North Carolina's success. But they also think that the schools are currently broken. Why they think it's broken, however, is key to understanding how to talk about education. Conservative lawmakers would like to think that voters agree with them that public education is actually the problem and that radical changes including vouchers, ending teacher tenure and handing over control of school to for-profit corporations is the solution.

But this survey, and previous research, actually show us that most voters think schools are broken because of years of under-funding, cuts and teacher layoffs. Regardless, everyone agrees that we need to do more to improve student achievement.

We can win the public opinion battle by focusing on the lack of funding and pointing out that right-wing "reform" actually hurts public schools and will jeopardize student achievement.

The public is with us

On the key public policy debates, the progressive opinion is the majority opinion. Don't be shy. We are on the right side here. Progressives should not hem and haw. We have the advantage here and so we should message aggressively. See these four examples:

Issue	Total Support	Total Oppose
State lawmakers want to do away with limits on class size in Kindergarten through 3rd grade. That would allow schools systems to put as many students in a classroom as they want.	21%	73%
State lawmakers are considering a plan to take \$90 million from the public school budget and spend it on a school voucher program that would give a few thousand low-income students grants of up to \$4,000 to pay for private school tuition.	33%	63%
State lawmakers want to reduce the eligibility requirements for North Carolina's Pre-K program designed for at-risk four-year olds. The proposal would cut eligibility for families who earn between 50 thousand and 23 thousand dollars a year, meaning more than 38,000 fewer students would be able to participate in the program.	36%	58%
State lawmakers want to do away with tenure for public school teachers. That means it will be easier for schools to fire teachers with or without cause.	43%	53%

Let's talk about education

We know the public is on our side and we *must* talk about education, but *how* we talk about education is equally as important. When deciding when and how to make contrasts, start with the issues that generate the strongest reactions. See how several different education messages tested, sorted by reaction:

Statement	Strongly Concerned	Total Concerned
Eliminating limits on class sizes means schools will be able to pack as many students as they want into a classroom. Classes with 30 or 40 students are possible.	71%	82%
Lowering class sizes have proven to be better for students, especially those in younger grades by giving time for more one-on-one instruction. Eliminating limits on class size will hurt teacher's ability to teach.	67%	82%
Vouchers are just one example of a move to privatize public education. Privatization means handing over more responsibility for educating our children to for-profit corporations.	60%	74%
North Carolina's public schools are already poorly funded due to years of budget cuts. Private school vouchers will only take more taxpayer dollars away from the public schools.	59%	73%
A voucher program will send taxpayer dollars to private schools that don't have to meet the same standards of financial accountability and student achievement as public schools.	59%	73%

Statement	Strongly Concerned	Total Concerned
Gov. Pat McCrory's budget proposes cutting all teaching assistants in grades 2 and 3. That means a greater burden on the teacher and less one-on-one time with the students.	59%	74%
North Carolina's Court of Appeals has ruled that the state has a constitutional requirement to provide Pre-K to every at-risk 4-year-old. State lawmakers are avoiding their court ordered responsibility by reducing eligibility and underfunding NC Pre-K.	54%	69%
Scientific studies have proven that Pre-K programs are an effective tool in improving student performance. But by raising eligibility requirements for NC Pre-K, state lawmakers are reducing the number of at-risk 4-year-olds who will benefit from the program.	51%	68%
Private school vouchers are a failed idea. Vouchers programs have failed to produce better results in the states where they've been tried.	35%	60%

Increasing class sizes—far and away—produced the strongest reactions, especially the specter of 30 to 40 students in a class. Remember what bill sponsor Sen. Jerry Tillman said in a recent committee meeting, “If you have 30 or 13 (students in a class), I care less.”

Use it to your advantage. Try to tie other education issues back to class size, like this:

Vouchers are a scheme to give public school money to private, for-profit companies. That means public schools will have to raise class sizes to get by with less.

Opponents of public schools want to fire teachers. That will cause class sizes to go up.

These issues can also be tied together to form a broader picture of problems in the classroom. For example,

State lawmakers are putting the squeeze on elementary schools. They want to jam 30 or more students into a classroom. They want fewer teacher assistants. And they want voucher money drained from public schools. Students will have less one-on-one time with their teacher. And students will have fewer resources like technology and text books to make up for it.

The early years are the most important for any student. But state lawmakers did not get the message. They want to raise class sizes from kindergarten to second grade. They want to cut teacher assistants. And they want to kick thousands of 4-year-olds out of Pre-K.

Don't be against reform, don't defend the status quo

Remember, a majority of voters believe the schools are broken. They don't want to listen to a defense of the status quo because they think the status quo isn't working. Similarly, we cannot be against reform because voters are looking for change. We cannot cede the mantle of reform to the other side.

Be in favor of progressive reform—like reducing class size! Progressives fought for reforms like reducing class size, Pre-K and increasing teacher pay. We should want more!

Let's invest in NC Pre-K so that every at-risk four-year-old can participate. Getting our youngest students ready to learn by the time they start kindergarten is the best thing we can do to help them achieve future success.

Years of cuts and layoffs have produced a teacher shortage in North Carolina public schools. We need to hire more teachers to reduce class sizes.

Talking vouchers

In March, Civitas released [poll numbers](#) more favorable to private school vouchers:

Civitas Question	Total Favor	Total Oppose
School vouchers are based on the premise that funding should flow not to the school but follow the child. School vouchers allow parents to use tax dollars to pick the best school, even if it is a private school that fits their child. Do you favor or oppose the use of vouchers?	46%	42%
Currently many families with limited incomes are unable to provide quality educational opportunities for their children. Would you favor or oppose the state providing scholarship grants of up to \$4,200 to per year to help families pay tuition, fees, books or other educational expenses at an appropriate school?	65%	28%

But this most recent PPP poll shows the opposition to vouchers increasing by 21% (from Civitas' 42% opposed to 63%), when they learn more details, such as, the money is going to come from the existing public school budget.

By focusing on the financial aspect of vouchers, we can tie it to the rest of the education agenda including raising class sizes. As we know from previous research, the public is already believes that schools are underfunded. We should suggest that vouchers are a drain on public schools.

Other thoughts:

- The accountability argument also tested well. As we know from previous North Carolina research, talking about accountability taps into strongly held personal beliefs.

- When talking about privatization of public education, voters react stronger to the implication that taxpayer money will go to “for-profit corporations.”
- Don’t waste time pointing out that voucher schemes have failed in other states. That argument wasn’t nearly as strong as others.

The War on Schools

PPP also tried combining all the education issues under a single “War on Schools” banner. Over 51% of voters “strongly agreed” with the following statement:

There is a war on public schools going on in North Carolina. Private school vouchers, raising class sizes, less accountability, cutting teaching assistants and poorly paying teachers are all part of a plan to undermine the quality of our public education system.

That may be encouraging, however, there was a great disparity of opinion between the progressive base, the conservative base and moderate/swing voters. The “War on Schools” is a great message for the base, but it’s just so-so for everyone else.

Instead, we suggest connecting the right-wing education plan to the right-wing tax plan. Here are some suggested talking points:

North Carolina public schools are under attack from special interests, for-profit corporations and extreme politicians. Gov. McCrory and state lawmakers want to cut schools and raise class sizes. At the same time, they want to raise taxes on hard-working North Carolina families.

State lawmakers want cut education by raising class sizes, firing teachers and kicking tens of thousands of at-risk kids out of Pre-K, while they give tax loopholes and cash giveaways to special interests.

For years, North Carolina’s schools have been the driver of our economic engine. But when unemployment is over 9%, Governor McCrory is calling for major cuts to our public universities, elementary school classrooms, and even community colleges which retrain workers.

State lawmakers are rewriting the tax code by forcing hard-working families to pay more and allowing special interests to pay less. At the same time, they are wrecking North Carolina’s education system with cuts to public schools and favors to for-profit corporations and private schools.

State lawmakers are using bad math when they make cuts that our kids and families in order to help payback big business and the rich.

Focus on the Future

Finally, let's not forget that voters agree with us that strong public schools have been critical to our economic success. Tap into that. Education is the key to current and future success.

In North Carolina, we all have a shared responsibility to build strong public schools for our economy to succeed now and in the future.

These bad ideas would let private for-profit companies be responsible for our kids education and our state's future.