

Parent Attitudes About Education in Arizona: 2004

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Introduction

Arizona public education has been transformed over the past twenty years by legislation, litigation, and ballot initiatives. These changes have affected virtually every aspect of public education in Arizona and no one has a larger stake in the condition of Arizona's schools than parents. Therefore, parental opinions about the quality of Arizona's schools and the extent to which parents support major reform initiatives are important to consider when shaping future education policies.

The Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), a collaboration of Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona, conducted a statewide telephone survey to get parents' perspectives on the condition of education in the state. From March 17 to March 27, 2004, a statewide random sample of 400 Arizona parents and an additional statewide sample of 355 Hispanic Arizona parents with children attending a traditional public, charter, or private school were interviewed. The results offer a snapshot of Arizona parent opinion in 2004.

AEPI will conduct the survey annually, making it possible to identify trends in parent opinion over time. The annual snapshot of Arizona parent opinion will be useful to policy makers as the state continues its efforts to improve the quality of education available to Arizona students.

Overview of Results

Since 1990, Hispanics have been the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in Arizona.¹ There is considerable speculation about how the increasing number of

Hispanic families and students will influence Arizona schools. One of the most significant findings of the survey is the degree to which Hispanic and non-Hispanic parents agree about educational issues. There are very few differences between the statewide sample of all parents and the statewide sample of Hispanic parents.

Survey results suggest that parents are, in general, pleased with their children's schools and teachers, which could explain why parents favor supportive actions to assist low-performing schools. Parents support school accountability and testing, but they prefer to provide assistance, such as improvement plans, to low-performing schools instead of imposing punitive consequences such as replacing school personnel. They also favor providing additional financial and educational support rather than withholding funding from schools that do not meet state academic standards.

This is consistent with their view that the biggest challenge facing Arizona's schools is inadequate funding. The perceived lack of adequate resources for public schools may in part explain why parents, despite rating private schools highly, are firmly opposed to spending tax dollars on either tuition tax credits or vouchers to send children to private schools.

With regard to charter schools and their impact on other public schools, parents are inclined to view charter schools favorably. Almost a quarter of all respondents, however, have no opinion of charter schools. In addition, more parents regard charter schools as either having a negative effect or no effect on traditional public schools. These findings suggest that although Arizona has one of the most expansive charter school laws in the country, parents are not well informed about charter schools and may not consider them a significant factor in the state's education system.

Interestingly, most parents cite non-school factors as the reasons for the lack of student academic success. They tend to regard family factors as the primary cause of low test scores and student dropout rates, which is another potential explanation for why parents do not favor punitive actions toward low-performing schools. This perspective places parents at odds with policy makers who regard school policies and practices as the most important factors in student performance and who favor imposing punitive sanctions on schools that do not perform adequately.

On the issue of early education, survey responses suggest that parents may soon apply increasing pressure on policy makers to expand early education programs in the state.

Parents' views about schools are strongly shaped by their direct experiences. They are most likely to get information about schools from the schools themselves via school meetings, school communications, or from their children. Schools also encourage parental involvement, which creates additional opportunities for the type of contact that influences parental opinion.

Print media is another important source of information. It is likely, however, that media reports play a larger role in shaping parental views toward schools their children *do not* attend. This might help explain why parents view the schools their children attend as being of higher quality than schools in general. Parental views of their children's schools are likely a more accurate picture of the perceived quality of education in the state than their view of the quality of schools in general.

Survey Results

The 2004 Arizona parent opinion survey consisted of forty-eight questions covering a variety of key education policies and practices. The complete survey, including respondent demographic information, is contained in the technical appendix (available on the web at: <http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/AEPI/EP1SL-0404-101-AEPI-app.doc>). For presentation purposes, the survey results have been grouped into eight categories:

1. Educational Quality
2. Standardized Testing
3. School Accountability
4. School Choice
5. Minority Student Achievement
6. Language Acquisition
7. Early Education
8. Information Sources/Parent Involvement

In the tables that follow, all numbers represent percentages.

Educational Quality

Arizona parents perceive the schools that their children attend more favorably than Arizona public schools in general. This dichotomy is consistent with national

studies of parental opinion.² Nearly three-fourths of Arizona parents grade the school their oldest child attends an “A” or a “B”. Only twenty-eight percent of Arizona parents grade all Arizona public schools a “B” or better and only four percent grade them an “A”.

Table 1: Grading Arizona Schools

	A	B	C	D	F
What grade would you give to the school your oldest child attends?	30	42	19	4	2
What grade would you give to the job public schools in Arizona are doing?	4	24	43	13	4

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples. (2) Ratings are presented excluding the “don’t know” category.

Additionally, parents hold a highly favorable opinion of their oldest child’s teacher(s). Approximately eighty-two percent of parents grade their oldest child’s teacher(s) an “A” or “B”.

Table 2: Grading Arizona Teachers

	A	B	C	D	F
What grade would you give the teacher or teachers who are teaching your oldest child?	44	38	14	2	1

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples. (2) Ratings are presented excluding the “don’t know” category.

Parents were asked to identify one area in which Arizona public schools are doing a particularly good job. The format of the question was open-ended, meaning that parents were not provided pre-determined options to guide their response. The open-ended format helps to uncover patterns of parental opinion and could be a factor in the substantial percentage of parents who did not provide a response to this question. Since parents could identify any area they wished, the consistency of the responses is a sign of a cohesive parental opinion. Those parents who gave a response other than “no opinion” to the open-ended question were most likely to indicate that “teaching the basics” is the area in which public schools are doing a particularly good job.

Table 3: Areas Where Arizona Public Schools Do Well

Is there one area where you think the public schools in Arizona are doing a particularly good job?	
Teaching the basics	34
Providing high quality teachers	10
Quality arts and fine arts programs	9
Motivating students	6
Good physical education and athletic programs	5
No opinion	35

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples. (2) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the six most often cited responses are listed.

Parents have well-formed opinions about the challenges facing Arizona public schools. Parents identified “lack of funding, resources” and factors associated with lack of funding such as overcrowded schools, large classes, and low pay for teachers as the biggest challenges facing Arizona public schools. Taken together, these factors were by far the most often cited challenge for schools.

Table 4: Challenges Facing Arizona Schools

What do you think is the biggest single challenge that the schools in your community face?	
Lack of funding, resources*	59
Lack of discipline	9
Keeping good teachers	8
Lack of parental involvement	6
No opinion	1

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and Statewide Hispanic-parent samples. (2) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the four most often cited reasons are listed.³ (3) *Overcrowded schools, large classes, and low pay for teachers are combined under this heading.

Standardized Testing

Standardized tests are the central academic performance indicator in both the state and federal school accountability systems (Arizona LEARNS and the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act). The prevalence and significance of standardized tests in the school accountability system is evidence that policy makers consider test results as perhaps the most important indicators of school academic performance. Arizona parents agree; they are strongly in favor of using standardized test results to judge school performance.

Table 5: Using Standardized Tests to Evaluate Schools

	Favor	Oppose	No Opinion
Do you favor or oppose using statewide tests to determine how schools are performing?	70	20	10

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Beginning with the Class of 2006, Arizona students must pass Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) to graduate from high school. The majority of Arizona parents approve of using AIMS to determine whether students should receive a diploma. They are, however, somewhat less supportive of using tests as a graduation requirement than they are of using tests to assess the overall quality of schools.

Table 6: Using AIMS as a Graduation Requirement

	Approve	Disapprove	No Opinion
Do you approve or disapprove of requiring students to pass the AIMS test before they can graduate from high school?	58	33	9

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

School Accountability

State and federal school accountability policies require that schools classified as “low-performing” because of low student test scores take certain actions to improve student performance. Sanctions of increasing severity are applied if schools continue to be classified as “low performing.” In general, parents prefer to help rather than to punish low-performing schools. For example, parents approve of providing more state funds to low-performing schools and are opposed to withholding funds from these schools. Parents clearly support the policy of requiring low-performing schools to implement an improvement plan. They are, however, opposed to more punitive actions such as removing teachers or principals.

Table 7: Actions Directed Toward Low-Performing Schools

If a school one of your children is attending scored low on the statewide tests, would you favor or oppose each of the following:			
	Favor	Oppose	No Opinion
Require the school to develop and implement an improvement plan	86	8	6
Provide more state funds to the school	66	16	18
Replace the principal	30	41	29
Replace the teachers	30	50	20
Withhold funds from the school if they don't improve	23	66	11

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

School Choice

Arizona has implemented school choice options in the form of public charter schools and private school tuition tax credits. In addition, legislators have, at various times, proposed private school vouchers. Tuition tax credits and private school voucher plans provide public-funding for students to attend private schools.⁴

Overall, parents grade charter schools favorably and think highly of private schools. The most noteworthy finding, however, is that slightly over half of Arizona parents have no opinion about the quality of charter or private schools. Parents are either not knowledgeable about these schools or have not formed a judgment. Since Arizona’s charter school initiative has been in place and widely publicized for almost a decade, the lack of parental opinion about charter schools may indicate that Arizona parents do not consider charter schools a significant factor in the state’s public education system.

Table 8: Grading Charter and Private Schools

	A	B	C	D	F	No Opinion
What grade would you give to charter schools?	7	19	12	4	3	55
What grade would you give to private schools?	20	23	4	1	0	52

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Forty-one percent of parents believe charter schools either have no effect or a negative effect on other public schools while thirty-six percent feel they have a positive effect. Twenty-three percent expressed no opinion. These findings suggest that parents do not likely view charter schools as a mechanism for improving other public schools.

Arizona parents have a clear opinion about the effect of providing public funds to private schools. Forty-six percent of parents think that providing public funds for private schools will have a negative effect on public schools. The remaining parents who expressed an opinion are roughly split between the opinion that there is no effect on public schools or that the effect is positive.

Table 9: Perceived Effect of Charter and Private Schools on Public Schools

	Positive	Negative	Little or None	No Opinion
The effect of setting up charter schools	36	15	26	23
The effect of providing public dollars to private schools	23	46	20	11

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Considerably more parents oppose providing public money for private schools than favor providing it. The sentiment against providing public money for private education is consistent across two different types of public policies: tuition vouchers and tuition tax credits.

Table 10: Support for Tuition Vouchers and Tuition Tax Credits

Do you favor or oppose:	Favor	Oppose	No Opinion
Using tax dollars to provide tuition vouchers to students who want to attend private schools?	38	50	12
Using public money in the form of tax credits to support sending children to private schools?	38	49	13

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Minority Student Achievement

The gap in achievement between minority and majority students is one of the most persistent problems in American public education. It is, therefore, of interest to learn if Arizona parents believe there is an achievement gap in Arizona and what the reasons for it may be. A considerable percentage of parents have no opinion about the performance of minority students on the state tests, an indication that these parents may not have adequate information to make a determination.

Table 11: Perception of Minority Student Academic Achievement

	Same	Better	Worse	No Opinion
When minority students take statewide academic tests, do you know how they perform compared to non-minority students?	23	1	36	40

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Most parents expressing an opinion believe that minority students perform worse than non-minority students. This perception is consistent with state test results; minority students as a group score lower than non-minority students.⁵

Table 12: Reasons for Test Score Differences Between Minority and Non-Minority Students: Academic vs. Other Reasons

Minority students sometimes do not perform as well on academic tests as non-minorities.			
	Academic Factors	Other Factors	Don't Know
Do you feel this difference is due mainly to differences in the quality of education they receive or to other factors?	8	78	14

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Parents who expressed an opinion feel strongly that the difference in test scores between minorities and non-minorities is due mainly to non-academic factors. Overall, Arizona parents attribute academic achievement differences between minority and non-minority students to home background factors.

Table 13: Non–Academic Reasons for Minority and Non–Minority Test Score Differences

What is the main reason for the difference between minority and non-minority student academic achievement?		
	Statewide All-parent	Statewide Hispanic-parent
Home background, lack of parental involvement	37	39
Language barriers	25	29
Cultural differences	17	11
Socio-Economic disadvantages	12	8

Notes: (1) This question was asked only to respondents who felt differences in test scores were due to non-academic factors. (2) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the four most often cited reasons are listed.⁶

Parental opinion about the achievement gap is contrary to the underlying assumptions of current educational policy. Legislators and administrators at all levels tend to consider the school as the sole or central agent responsible for closing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students and have embedded these views in Arizona laws and policies.

Parents also identified non-academic factors, such as home background, as the main reasons that students drop out of school.

Table 14: Reasons Why Students Drop Out of School

What do you think is the single biggest reason high school students drop out of school before finishing their education?	
Home background, lack of parental involvement	30
Student lacks interest in school	11
Lack of motivation	11
Need to make money	10
Drug use/abuse	5

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples. (2) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the five most often cited reasons are listed.⁷

A large majority of parents feel that minority students are treated the same or better than non-minority students in school.

Table 15: Treatment of Minority Students in School

	Same	Better	Worse	No Opinion
How do you think minority students in the school your oldest child attends are treated compared to non-minority students?	70	10	10	10

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Language Acquisition

English is not the primary language for almost seventeen percent of Arizona public school students. These students are referred to as English Language Learners. In 2000, Arizona voters passed Proposition 203, requiring that after one year virtually all English Language Learners be placed in classrooms where only English is spoken. Thirty-nine percent of parents do not know the requirements of this law, and twenty percent of parents incorrectly believe that instruction for English Language Learners is to be conducted in both English and Spanish. Forty-one percent correctly responded that the law requires English Language Learners to be put in classes where only English is spoken.

Table 16: Awareness of Legal Requirement for English in the Classroom

	Both English and Spanish	English Only	Don't Know
Do you know which system the law in Arizona requires?	20	41	39

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Contrary to the legal requirements, however, most parents prefer to have English Language Learners in classrooms where both English and the students' native language

are spoken. This suggests that state policy may be out of alignment with parental opinion on this issue.

Table 17: Preference of Language Use in the Classroom

	Both English and Native Language	English Only	Don't Know
Which do you prefer: putting students in classrooms where both English and the student's native language are spoken or classrooms where only English is spoken?	56	31	13

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Early Education

Governor Napolitano's advocacy of universal, voluntary full-day kindergarten has propelled early education into the headlines. Given the visibility of this issue, several questions were framed to gauge parental opinion about early education. The sample does not represent all Arizona parents because only parents with children under six years old were asked to respond. Therefore, the results are suggestive and not definitive. Nevertheless, parental opinion on early education suggests that this issue is worthy of investigation in a future statewide survey. Of the parents with children under six, eighty-one percent indicated that their eligible Arizona children either attend part-day kindergarten or do not attend at all.

Table 18: Kindergarten Attendance

	Full-day	Part-day	Does not attend
Do any of your children attend kindergarten? (statewide all-parent sample)	19	18	63
Do any of your children attend kindergarten? (statewide Hispanic-parent sample)	12	18	70

Note: Results are suggestive only.

Of the parents who currently do not enroll their children in kindergarten or enroll their children in a part-day kindergarten program, eighty percent would enroll their children in a free full-day kindergarten program if one were available.

Table 19: Likelihood to Enroll Child in Kindergarten

	Yes	No	Not sure
Would you enroll your child or children in full-day kindergarten if it were available at no cost to you?	80	12	8

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Similarly, most parents who currently do not enroll their children in a preschool program would do so if such a program were available at no cost.

Table 20: Likelihood to Enroll Child in Pre-School

	Yes	No	Not sure
Would you enroll your child or children in a pre-kindergarten early education program if it were available at no cost to you?	86	6	8

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Information Sources

Parents rely upon varied sources to get information to develop their opinions of public schools in their communities. The most cited sources of information about schools are related to the schools themselves. The most common primary sources of information are contact with schools and communications from the school. The newspaper is the most common secondary source of information. Interestingly, few parents rely on television as a source of information. These communication patterns should be of particular note to policy makers who may consider press contacts, such as print coverage and news conferences, as an effective means of communicating public policy to parents. Survey findings suggest that policy makers should build school-based mechanisms for

communicating with parents and that they should be aware that schools have an opportunity to shape how messages are communicated to parents.

Table 21: Sources of Information About Public Schools

Where do you get most of your information about what goes on in the public schools in your community?	
First hand experience, meeting at school	21
Communication from school	18
Newspapers	17
Talking with children, other students	16
Communication with teacher or administrator	8
Television	3

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples. (2) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the six most often cited reasons are listed.⁸

Parents reported that schools encourage their involvement. The interactions among school personnel, students, and parents create additional opportunities for the type of contact that influences parental opinion.

Table 22: School Encouragement of Parental Involvement

	Very involved	Somewhat involved	Not very involved	No opinion
Does the school your oldest child attends encourage you to be involved in his or her education?	63	28	8	1

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the statewide all-parent and statewide Hispanic-parent samples.

Summary

Arizona parents think the schools their children attend and the teachers who teach their children are doing a good job. They report schools encourage them to be involved. When students don't succeed academically, parents don't tend to lay the blame at the school house door.

Accountability gets high marks from parents and they support the AIMS testing program. When schools don't succeed, parents want them to be helped not punished. They support school improvement plans and additional resources but not the removal of principals and teachers.

The biggest challenge facing Arizona schools is lack of money, according to parents. Perhaps that is why they do not favor spending tax dollars to support students attending private schools.

In the controversial area of English language instruction, parents support providing instruction in both a child's native language and in English. This puts them at odds with current Arizona policy.

Although too few parents of children under six were surveyed to allow for a definitive conclusion, the results suggest that parents would utilize early education and all-day kindergarten if they were available.

It is especially noteworthy that Hispanic and non-Hispanic parents hold very similar views about public education in Arizona.

Notes and References

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, United States Census 2000 and Census 90, January and March 2002. Retrieved January 21, 2004, from <http://www.census.gov/>
- ² Rose, L. C. & Gallup, A. M. (2001, September). The 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. Phi Delta Kappa International. Retrieved February 10, 2004, from <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kimages/kpoll83.pdf>
- ³ See the technical appendix for complete data (<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/ AEPI/EP SL-0404-101-AEPI-app.doc>).
- ⁴ Arizona also has a public school tuition tax credit program. It was not included in the survey.
- ⁵ Arizona student assessment results are available online at <http://www.ade.az.gov/standards/>
- ⁶ See the technical appendix for complete data (<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/ AEPI/EP SL-0404-101-AEPI-app.doc>).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*

APPENDIX

ARIZONA EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVE

Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), a collaborative project of Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona, was launched in September 2003. AEPI utilizes the expertise of faculty at Arizona's public universities to provide policy makers and the public with high quality information about Arizona education policy and practice.

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