

Parent Attitudes about Education in Arizona: 2005

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Introduction

In 2004 the Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), a collaboration of Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona, conducted its first-annual survey of parents in a systematic effort to capture parent opinion and establish a framework for tracking parent views over time. Assessing parent opinion is important because no one has a larger stake in the condition of Arizona's schools than parents. *Parent Attitudes about Education in Arizona: 2005*, a follow-up to the 2004 report, gives parents statewide an opportunity to make their voices heard on major education issues.

As in 2004, the 2005 survey was conducted via telephone between March 18 and March 26, 2005. The respondents represent a statewide random sample of 398 Arizona parents and an additional statewide sample of 93 Hispanic parents. Results are disaggregated by Anglo and Hispanic parents, making it possible to compare differences in opinion between Arizona's two largest racial/ethnic groups.

A notable difference from last year's survey and report is that the 2005 sample is limited to parents with at least one student attending a public school (district or charter). The 2005 survey is limited to public school parents because the questions pertain to state policies that affect public, and not private, schools. Accordingly, in comparisons between the 2004 and 2005 results, the 2004 results have been recalculated to include only the responses of public school parents. The 2005 survey includes several questions from the 2004 version, as well as a number of revised and new questions.

Overview of Results

Parental opinion remained consistent over the past year. Although there are notable shifts in parental opinion from the 2004 survey, none of the differences are statistically significant.

Parents continue to be pleased with their children's schools and teachers. Specifically, parents identified teaching basic academic skills and meeting the needs of all learners as two areas where schools are doing a particularly good job.

Parents favor the use of standardized testing to hold schools accountable and prefer to provide assistance to "underperforming" schools instead of punishing them. A slim majority of parents remain supportive of students passing AIMS as a prerequisite of high school graduation, but there is increased sentiment against high-stakes testing for students.

Arizona, like many states, has two functioning school accountability systems, state and federal. Arizona officials commonly point out the merits of the state system, Arizona LEARNS, over the much-criticized federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). However, more parents are aware of NCLB than Arizona LEARNS. Despite the substantial public criticism of NCLB, over 50 percent hold a favorable view of the federal school accountability system.

Arizona parents regard inadequate funding as the biggest challenge facing Arizona's schools. In addition, parents do not point to school-related policies and practices as the primary cause of low test scores and student dropout rates. They tend to view home and family factors as more likely reasons for student academic difficulties.

The majority of parents continue to oppose private school vouchers, perhaps because they do not regard providing public dollars to private schools as a means of improving public schools. Compared to last year, considerably more parents expressed

this belief. Support for tuition tax credits, however, has increased compared to last year. Arizona parents have many school choice options available including the largest concentration of charter schools in the country. Therefore, it is not surprising that Arizona parents report that there is sufficient choice available to find the best school for their child. Surprisingly, parents are not well informed about charter schools and do not consider them a significant factor in the state's education system.

A majority of parents believe it is more beneficial academically for non-English speaking students to be placed in classrooms where only English is spoken rather than in classrooms where both English and their native language are spoken. Hispanic parents are less likely to agree with this policy than Anglo parents.

As the debates continue in legislative circles about the merits of full-day kindergarten, over 75 percent of parents have expressed their support for publicly-funded, full-day kindergarten with an even higher level of support among Hispanic parents.

Finally, parents report a high level of involvement in their children's school and almost two-thirds have reviewed the school report card published by the Arizona Department of Education.

Survey Results

The *Parent Attitudes about Education in Arizona: 2005* survey consists of 46 questions covering some of the most important policies and issues in public education. The complete survey and responses are in the technical appendix (available on the web at: <http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/AEPI/Survey/EP5L-0504-101-AEPI-app.pdf>). Survey results are grouped into eight categories:

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

In the tables that follow, all numbers represent percentages.

Educational Quality

In rating their schools, the opinions of Arizona parents exhibit a pattern consistent with parents nationally.¹ Arizona parents perceive the schools that their children attend more favorably than Arizona public schools in general. More than three-fourths of Arizona parents grade the school their oldest child attends an “A” or a “B” while only 39 percent of Arizona parents grade all Arizona public schools an “A” or a “B.”

Table 1: Grading Arizona Schools

	A	B	C	D	F	No Opinion
What grade would you give to the school your oldest child attends?	36	42	17	3	2	1
What grade would you give to the job public schools in Arizona are doing?	7	32	37	10	5	9

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples. (2) The “A” response category includes responses that rated schools either an “A” or “A+.” (3) Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Additionally, parents hold a highly favorable opinion of the Arizona teachers responsible for their children’s education. Seventy-seven percent of parents grade the teachers in the school their oldest child attends an “A” or a “B”.

Table 2: Grading Arizona Teachers

	A	B	C	D	F	No Opinion
What grade would you give the teachers in the school your oldest child attends?	40	37	15	5	1	2

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples. (2) The “A” response category includes responses that rated schools either an “A” or “A+.”

Forty-two percent of parents believe there is a specific area where Arizona schools were doing a particularly good job. Parental opinion about where schools are doing a good job was collected using an open-ended question with no pre-determined

categories. Parents identified “teaching the basics” and “addressing the needs of all students” as the two specific areas where Arizona schools perform particularly well.

Table 3: Where Arizona Public Schools Do Particularly Well

Is there one area where you think the public schools in Arizona are doing a particularly good job?	
Teaching the basics (reading, writing, education in general)	41
Addressing the needs of all students, including Special Education and Gifted	18
Providing high-quality teachers	7
Quality arts and extra-curricular programs	5
Testing	4

Notes: (1) Percentages calculated excluding no opinion, missing, or don’t know responses. (2) Individuals could provide more than one response and all responses were coded. (3) Percentages calculated based on the number of responses. (4) Fifty-eight percent of parents did not believe that public schools are doing a particularly good job in a specific area. (5) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the five most often cited responses are listed.

Parents most often identified “lack of funding, resources” such as overcrowded schools, large classes, and low pay for teachers as the biggest challenges facing public schools. Lack of parental involvement and quality of education are a distant second.

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	43
Lack of parental involvement	8
Quality of education, standards	8
Lack of discipline	7
Keeping good teachers	5

Notes: (1) Percentages calculated excluding no opinion, missing, or don’t know responses. (2) Individuals could provide more than one response and all responses were coded. (3) Percentages calculated based on the number of responses. (4) Percentages do not equal 100 because only the five most often cited responses are listed.

Standardized Testing

Standardized tests have become the most visible public method by which school performance is judged and presented to parents. Standardized tests are the central academic performance indicator in both the state and federal school accountability systems (Arizona LEARNS and NCLB, respectively). Arizona parents continue to favor strongly the use of 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?	68	24	8

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples.

In the past year, NCLB has come under heavy criticism and Arizona state leadership have praised the results of Arizona’s school accountability system, Arizona LEARNS, as a more “comprehensive and fair” determinant of school performance.² Many more parents, however, are aware of the federal NCLB accountability system than the state accountability system. Over 65 percent of parents are familiar with NCLB compared to less than 20 percent who are familiar with Arizona LEARNS. Despite heavy public criticism of NCLB, a majority of parents have favorable opinions of the federal law.

Table 6: Opinion of NCLB

	Very Favorable	Generally Favorable	Somewhat Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable	No Opinion
From what you have heard or read about NCLB, what is your opinion of the act?	12	43	30	13	2

Next spring, students in the Class of 2006 will become the first Arizona students required to pass Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) to graduate from high school. Since the 2004 survey, two prominent events have occurred which could impact parental opinion of AIMS as a graduation requirement. First, the high school results have been reported twice and, in the lowest performing academic area, forty-nine percent of the Class of 2006 has not passed the math test.³ Second, the legislature has engaged in vigorous debate about proposed bills that range from eliminating AIMS as a graduation requirement to alternative methods for students to receive a diploma other than passing AIMS. The test results and public debate about AIMS may be responsible for the declining support for AIMS as a graduation requirement. A slim majority of Arizona parents still approve of using AIMS to determine whether students should receive a diploma. Compared to the 2004 results, however, support for AIMS as a graduation requirement declined eight percent. This shift in parental opinion, although not statistically significant, is noteworthy.

Table 7: Using AIMS as a Graduation Requirement

	Favor	Oppose	No Opinion
Do you approve or disapprove of requiring students to pass the AIMS test before they can graduate from high school?	51	42	7

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples.

As policy makers have grappled with alternatives to the current high-stakes AIMS policy, proposals to award dual diplomas have received considerable attention. Under such a plan, students would receive some type of differentiated diploma based on whether or not they passed the AIMS test. Parents are strongly opposed to a differentiated diploma according to a student’s AIMS test results.

Table 8: Alternative Diplomas Based on AIMS Results

	Favor	Oppose	No Opinion
Do you favor or oppose awarding students a different type of diploma based on whether or not they pass the AIMS test?	22	67	11

School Accountability

State and federal school accountability policies impose sanctions of increasing severity to schools that are continually classified as “underperforming.” In general, parents prefer to help rather than to punish low-performing schools. For example, parents approve providing more state funds to low-performing schools and are opposed to withholding funds from these schools. Although, parents feel strongly that underperforming teachers should be replaced.

Table 9: Actions Directed Toward Underperforming 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
Provide more state funds to the school	66	24	10
Replace the principal	33	45	23
Replace underperforming teachers	75	16	10
Withhold funds from the school if they don't improve	18	76	7

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples. (2) Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Anglo and Hispanic parents generally agree on the policies toward underperforming schools with the exception of replacing the principal. Anglo parents

are much more likely to favor replacing the principal of an underperforming school than Hispanic parents.

Table 10: Actions Directed Toward Underperforming Schools, by Race/Ethnicity

If a school one of your children is attending scored low on the statewide tests, would you favor or oppose the following:		
	Anglo: Favor	Hispanic: Favor
Replace the principal	46	29

School Choice

Arizona parents have more school choice options than any other state.⁴ Charter schools, open enrollment, and a public and private school tuition tax credit are all part of the education landscape in Arizona. Based on the options provided in current education policy, a high percentage of Arizona parents are satisfied with the school choice options available to them. Sixty-eight percent of parents feel there are sufficient choices available to select the best school for their child.

Table 11: School Choice Options

	Yes	No	No Opinion
Do you feel you have sufficient choices available to choose the best school for your child?	68	30	2

Many parents, however, are either not informed or ill-informed about charter schools. Sixty-six percent of parents had no opinion when asked to grade charter schools and almost 20 percent of parents mistakenly identified charter schools as private schools. The lack of parental knowledge is surprising given Arizona's status as a national leader in charter school choice. Furthermore, Arizona's charter school initiative has been in place and widely publicized for almost a decade. If parents are largely unaware of charter

schools, then the results suggest that when Arizona parents consider school choice, they think of options provided by district schools and they are satisfied with those options.

Table 12: Grading Charter Schools

	A	B	C	D	F	No Opinion
What grade would you give to charter schools?	7	10	8	7	3	66

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples. (2) The “A” response category includes responses that rated schools either an “A” or “A+.” (3) Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 13: Knowledge of Charter Schools

	Public	Private	Don’t Know
Do you know if charter schools are public or private schools?	58	19	24

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

The lack of parental opinion about charter schools may explain why Arizona parents do not consider charter schools as a significant factor in the state’s public education system. Fifty percent of parents feel charter schools have had little or no effect on public schools or had no opinion about the issue. Thirty-one percent of parents, however, believe that the presence of charter schools has had a positive effect on other public schools.

Table 14: Perceived Effect of Charter Schools on Public Schools

	Positive	Negative	Little or None	No Opinion
Do you think charter schools have a positive effect, a negative effect or little to no effect on public schools?	31	19	27	23

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples.

Parents had more solidified opinions about private school vouchers. Fifty-three percent of parents oppose providing public money for private schools and 47 percent of

parents oppose tuition tax credits for private schools. However, compared to 2004, parental support for tuition tax credits has increased by 11 percent.

Table 15: 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	53	9
Using public money in the form of tax credits to support sending children to private schools?	45	47	8

Note: There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples.

Private school voucher proposals made a strong advancement toward becoming reality in the 2005 legislative session. As part of the public debate, proponents of private school vouchers often regard competition for students and money as a reform strategy to improve public schools. Parents, on the other hand, consider providing public money to private schools, through any policy, detrimental to the public school system. Nearly 60 percent of parents believe that providing public dollars to private schools will have a negative effect on public schools. This sentiment is a pronounced change from the 2004 results when 47 percent of parents felt that public dollars for private school vouchers would have a negative effect on public schools.

Table 16: Perceived Effect of Private School Vouchers on Public Schools

	Positive	Negative	Little or None	No Opinion
Do you think providing public money to private schools would have a positive effect, a negative effect or little to no effect on public schools?	22	59	13	7

Notes: (1) There are no statistically significant differences between the 2005 and 2004 statewide parent samples. (2) Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Student Achievement

According to nearly every statewide school achievement statistic, minority students as a group score lower than non-minority students.⁵ Parents were asked a series of questions about the academic opportunities available to minorities and reasons for the lower level of academic achievement among minority students. Statewide, 75 percent of parents believe minorities have the same academic opportunities as non-minorities. Hispanic parents, however, are more likely than Anglo parents to feel that minorities have fewer opportunities than non-minorities. Fifteen percent of Hispanic parents feel minority students have fewer opportunities than non-minority students while only eight percent of Anglo parents share the same sentiment.

Table 17: Academic Opportunities for Minority Students

	Same	More	Fewer	No Opinion
In general, do you think minority students in the school your oldest child attends are given the same academic opportunities as non-minorities, more opportunities or fewer opportunities?	75	15	7	4

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 18: Academic Opportunities for Minority Students, by Race/ Ethnicity

	Anglo		Hispanic	
	More	Fewer	More	Fewer
In general, do you think minority students in the school your oldest child attends are given the same academic opportunities as non-minorities, more opportunities or fewer opportunities?	18	8	4	15

Parents are uniform in the reasons they cite for the minority/non-minority achievement gap and why students drop out of school. 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, namely home background/lack of parental involvement and language barriers. Likewise, parents identified home background/lack of parental involvement as the main reason why students drop out of school.

Table 19: 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?	
Home background, lack of parental involvement	31
Language barriers	25
Socio-economic disadvantages	8
Students not working hard enough	4

Note: Percentages do not equal 100 because only the four most often cited reasons are listed.

Table 20: 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
Don't see how school benefits them, lack of interest	11
Not motivated, lazy, no goals	9
Leave to make money, support families	6
Not prepared academically, get behind and never catch up	6

Note: Percentages do not equal 100 because only the five most often cited reasons are listed.

Language Acquisition

English is not the primary language for almost 17 percent of Arizona public school students. 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. The majority of parents feel it is most beneficial to have students in classrooms where English is the language of instruction as opposed to classrooms that

include the students' native language. While Hispanic parents are split on this issue, more Anglo parents feel much more strongly that English is the most beneficial language of instruction.

Table 21: Beneficial Use of Language in the Classroom

	Both English and Native Language	English Only	Don't Know
Which do you think is most beneficial to students' education, putting students in classrooms where both English and the student's native language are spoken or classrooms where only English is the language of instruction?	36	56	8

Table 22: Beneficial Use of Language in the Classroom, by Race/Ethnicity

	Anglo: English Only	Hispanic: English Only
Which do you think is most beneficial to students' education, putting students in classrooms where both English and the student's native language are spoken or classrooms where only English is the language of instruction?	68	50

Early Education

Full-day kindergarten is one of the most heated legislative issues in the 2005 session. The issue is divided along party lines where Democratic Governor Napolitano has repeatedly advocated for universal, voluntary full-day kindergarten and the Republican legislative leadership stands in opposition. Among all parents, not just those with students in early education, publicly-funded, full-day kindergarten is a popular policy option. Over three-fourths of parents are in favor of full-day kindergarten.

Table 23: Support for Full-Day Kindergarten

	Favor	Oppose	No Opinion
Do you favor or oppose publicly-funded, full-day kindergarten programs?	76	20	4

The support for full-day kindergarten among both Anglo and Hispanic parents is extremely high, with even greater favor among Hispanic parents. Among parents with an opinion on full-day kindergarten, 80 percent of Anglo parents and almost 90 percent of Hispanic parents support full-day kindergarten.

Table 24: Support for Full-Day Kindergarten, by Race/Ethnicity

	Anglo: Favor	Hispanic: Favor
Do you favor or oppose publicly-funded, full-day kindergarten programs?	80	88

Parent Involvement

Parents self-report a high level of involvement in their children’s school. According to parents, 95 percent report being either very or somewhat involved in their children’s school.

Table 25: Degree of Parent Involvement

	Very	Somewhat	Not
How involved would you say you are in your children’s school?	55	40	5

The Arizona Department of Education publishes School Report Cards as an information source for parents about school policies and academic performance. Sixty-four percent of parents have reviewed a School Report Card, but the incidence rate is significantly higher among Anglo parents. While 68 percent of Anglo parents have viewed a School Report Card, only 50 percent of Hispanic parents have done the same.

The preponderance of parents, 79 percent, hold a favorable opinion of the School Report Cards.

Table 26: Opinion of School Report Cards

	Very Favorable	Generally Favorable	Somewhat Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable	No Opinion
What is your opinion of the School Report Cards?	25	54	13	3	5

Summary

Arizona parents think the schools their children attend and the teachers who teach their children are doing a good job. When students do not succeed academically, parents do not blame schools and they feel the biggest challenge facing Arizona schools is lack of funding. This combination of sentiments may explain why parental opinion is more solidified than last year on the negative effect on public schools of providing public money to private schools.

Parents feel there are sufficient options to choose the best school for their child. But many parents remain either uninformed or ill-informed about charter schools.

The use of standardized testing in school accountability policies, such as Arizona LEARNS and NCLB, continues to receive a high level of parental support. A slim majority of parents support the use of standardized tests (AIMS), as a graduation requirement. But after the first class of high school students took the test with high-stakes consequences and the ensuing round of public debate about the future of AIMS, more parents oppose high-stakes testing for students.

Finally, parents consider instruction in English only as beneficial to non-English speaking students and full-day kindergarten has wide support, particularly among Hispanic parents.

Notes and References

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- ⁵ Arizona student assessment results were retrieved April 14, 2005, from: <http://www.ade.az.gov/standards/>

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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