



**Checked Out: Ohioans' Views on Education 2009**  
*A Survey Conducted for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute & Catalyst Ohio  
by the FDR Group*

**Key Takeaways:**

**1) Ohioans are frustrated with the performance of their public schools.**

Thirty-nine percent say that over the past two or three years the quality of the public schools in their local area has stayed the same, while 29 percent think they have gotten worse and 22 percent say better. African Americans provide a harsher verdict with 49 percent saying their local schools have gotten worse. If money were not an issue, half of parents with K-12 students would send their children some place other than a traditional district school

**2) Ohioans have a shallow understanding of education issues.** Even though Ohio currently spends about \$17 billion a year on public K-12 education – almost \$2,000 for every adult in the state – residents know little about the decisions being made by lawmakers and others on their behalf. For example, despite endless discussion of “DeRolph” within policy and education circles, nearly two-thirds of respondents could not say whether Ohio’s Supreme Court has ruled the school-finance system constitutional or unconstitutional. Fact: the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional four times since 1997, and much of the education debate in the Statehouse over the last decade has focused on bringing Ohio into compliance with these court decisions.

School choice is another blind spot. Though four of America’s top ten charter cities (based on these schools’ share of the K-12 market) are in Ohio, few residents know little about these alternative public schools—and more than half admit it.<sup>1</sup> Among the Ohioans who might especially benefit from charter schools, barely one in five African Americans (21 percent), big-city dwellers (22 percent), and parents of school-age kids (21 percent) say they know a great deal or quite a bit about them. Ohioans know even less about the state’s EdChoice program which provides vouchers to thousands of children in failing public schools. Only 10 percent of respondents know a great deal or quite a bit about EdChoice, while 68 percent know little or nothing. (These results are nearly identical to 2007.)

**3) Ohioans trust the professionals closest to children to make important decisions about schools and education.** When it comes to school spending and school decisions, residents of Ohio trust local school districts and school leaders more than elected state officials. They’re far more likely (47 percent) to trust their local school district to decide how to spend tax money on public schools than to trust the governor (3 percent), the legislature (4 percent), or the State Board of Education (17 percent). (Twenty-two percent would trust individual schools.) This

would seem to fly in the face of Governor Strickland's school-funding plan, which would limit local decision-making and mandate far more spending decisions from the state.

Ohioans trust school leaders to make staffing decisions in their schools—even though collective-bargaining contracts usually make that very difficult. An overwhelming 87 percent favor “giving local public schools more freedom to fire teachers that aren't performing” and only 11 percent oppose this. Two-thirds of Ohioans favor giving principals far more authority to run their schools—and terminating their contracts if school goals are not reached. Half (51 percent) think public schools would improve if principals could choose their teachers and had more direct say over work rules.

Yet no matter who is in charge, Ohioans are genuinely skeptical about the power of schools to succeed with children from tough backgrounds. Forty-six percent believe that good teachers can succeed with poor students whose parents are uninvolved parents; 48 percent say it is too difficult to overcome such barriers.

**4) Ohioans are conflicted about paying more for education.** They want greater fairness in school funding but don't want to pay for it with higher taxes. Fully 88 percent of Ohioans say it is important to “even out” education spending across school districts – 62 percent says it's *very* important (including 82 percent of African Americans). But when asked if they'd personally be willing to pay more in taxes to equalize spending across districts, 55 percent said no, versus 42 percent who would. (63 percent of African Americans say they'd personally be willing to pay more in taxes.)

**5) Ohioans doubt that new spending will help kids.** Only 22 percent believe that if Ohio spent more on its public schools, “the money would actually get to the classrooms and improve education.” The vast majority (74 percent) predict that the money would “get lost along the way.” This percentage has gradually risen—from 69 percent in 2005 and 71 percent in 2007. This mounting doubt about the impact of new spending on education also plays out locally. When Ohioans are asked about spending on the public schools in *their* districts, they are consistent: 44 percent believe it should increase; 44 percent want it to stay about the same; and 9 percent would decrease it. These numbers have not changed since 2007. African Americans, however, are again more likely than the public at large to support increased spending in their districts—by a convincing 67 percent to 44 percent margin.

**6) Ohioans support national academic standards, standardized testing, and fiscal transparency.** Sixty-two percent endorse the idea of a single national academic standard and a single national test for American students. The same percentage supports evaluating schools and districts on a report card that relies on student test scores because it “calls attention to problems that need to be addressed.” Fifty-eight percent, however, also find merit in Governor Strickland's proposal to change the report card by adding an evaluation of whether districts receive enough money and spend it effectively.

**7) Ohioans support charter schools and school-based flexibility.** Although most residents admit to limited knowledge of charter schools, when provided a short description of this reform, 52 percent favor it and 38 percent are opposed. (This is unchanged since 2007.) When asked what the state should do by way of closing charter schools, 58 percent say it should close only the worst ones. Twelve percent say all charter schools should be closed while 23 percent would not close any. What's more, in contrast to the governor's recent budget proposal seeking to cut charter-school funding, 69 percent of Ohioans think that these schools should get the same resources as district schools (down slightly from 74 percent in 2007).

Ohioans strongly support the core principles by which charter-schools are supposed to operate, such as "giving local public schools more flexibility to design curriculum." 81 percent favor this idea and only 18 percent oppose it. Additionally, Ohioans support tying teacher pay to classroom effectiveness, not years of service. By a 69 percent to 15 percent margin, state residents prefer paying teachers according to their "performance and how effectively they teach" over "years of service and the degrees they've earned." Ohioans also support (72 percent) "paying higher salaries to teachers who work in tough neighborhoods with hard-to-reach students" and (66 percent) "paying higher salaries to teachers who specialize in hard-to-fill subjects such as science or mathematics."

**8) Ohioans see school choice as a lifeline for children.** Though their knowledge of vouchers is limited, 52 percent believe that school vouchers "are a lifeline for kids who can finally escape failing public schools" vs. 37 percent who think vouchers "will help only a few kids and make things worse for most students who are left behind."

By 52 percent to 39 percent, Ohioans are more likely to think "charters and vouchers give parents more choices and push district schools to improve" than that they "drain resources from district schools and undermine them." On this question, sentiment is considerably stronger among African Americans (67 percent).

**9) Ohioans are skeptical toward virtual schools, single-gender schools, and for-profit companies running public schools.** Three in four (75 percent) believe that virtual schools ("schools that get state funding and allow students to do their work at home over the Internet, under adult supervision") are a poor or fair idea, while just 21 percent say they are an excellent or good idea. Despite greater public comfort with the Internet in general in recent years, opposition to virtual schooling has slightly increased since 2005. Nor do Ohioans favor single-gender schools. As for profit-making firms running charter schools, they tend to support Governor Strickland's position: 45 percent would put a stop to the practice altogether while 41 percent would approve only those companies that are doing a good job. African Americans, however, are less willing to eliminate the for-profit approach (33 percent), preferring the more pragmatic approach of allowing it to continue for companies that prove effective (50 percent).

**10) Ohioans would support state-funded pre-school for needy children, offer all-day kindergarten, and extend the school day or year.** State-funded pre-school gets moderate support with 42 percent saying it is a good idea all around and another 39 percent saying it is a good idea if it helps children get academically ready for school. Mandatory all-day kindergarten is supported by 62 percent of all Ohioans, and 84 percent of African Americans. A small majority (53 percent) favor “increasing the amount of time students spend in the public schools by extending the school year or the school day,” while 45 percent oppose such policies.

### **Conclusion**

Ohioans make clear when asked that nobody, and no one party, should think they have a clear mandate to re-arrange public education in Ohio according to their pet ideology or the special interests of their supporters. Ohioans are interested in pragmatic solutions to the state’s education problems and they care about what changes will ultimately cost them as taxpayers.

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<sup>i</sup> Dayton, Youngstown, Cleveland and Toledo. Todd Ziebarth. “Top 10 Charter Communities by Market Share,” October 2008, The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.