

October 6, 2008

**To:** League of Education Voters (LEV) and Partnership for Learning (PFL)  
**From:** Davis, Hibbitts, & Midghall (DHM)  
**Re:** Washington Statewide Communications Survey Summary

## I. Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to assess perceptions of Washington's K-12 public education system and test strategic messages and communications.

A telephone survey was conducted August 26 to September 10, 2008 of 900 Washington residents, including 600 registered voters and 150 African American and 150 Latino residents. Most questions were asked of all 900 respondents. The survey was also divided into two subsamples of 300 voters, 75 African American, and 75 Latino residents to independently test different communication strategies.

There was significant consensus of responses across demographic subgroups throughout the research. Distinctions that did arise were differences in degree, not in type, and broke along traditional lines. Both African American and Latino respondents, but particularly African Americans, reported more items as top priorities and usually felt more intense or passionate about them than did voters generally.

### Key Findings:

## II. Best Language and Imagery

**Most Important Concerns:** Voters' responses centered on four issues, three related to student preparation and one to the adequacy of school funding: too many students *unprepared to enter college* (26%), *unprepared to enter the workforce* (24%), and *graduating without basic life skills* (18%). Twenty-three percent (23%) said *insufficient funding for public education* was their most important concern.

**Most Disturbing/Significant Education Facts:** Thirteen facts about public education were tested for how disturbing or significant they were to respondents. On a 1-5 scale (with 1 not at all disturbing/significant and 5 very disturbing/significant) one-half or more of voters rated three facts as "5" or very disturbing/significant:

- Students can *graduate with straight A's and still not get into a Washington university* (53%);
- *The state has no way of knowing whether teachers are teaching in their area of study* (52%);
- Washington's ranking of *46<sup>th</sup> among the 50 state for class size* (49%).

Facts in the bottom tier, with one-quarter or less of voters rating any as very disturbing/significant:

- *In six years, eight of ten jobs in Washington that pay enough to support a family will require additional education or training beyond high school* ( 22% - although many more Latinos (51%) and African Americans (40%) rated this as very disturbing/significant);

- *Yearly tuition at the best private schools is over \$25,000, while public schools receive \$8,800 in funding per student (25%);*
- *Meeting high school graduation requirements does not ensure the graduate took the right courses to get into a 2 or 4 year public college (25%).*

When ranked, five facts were chosen as the most disturbing/significant by approximately one in ten voters or more. Only two of these—Washington ranking 46<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states for class size and currently the state has no way of knowing whether teachers are teaching in their area of study—were also found in the top tier of most disturbing/significant education facts.

**Most Urgent Education Goals:** Of 14 goals for public education presented to rate priority, four were in a top tier:: a combined 88% of voters thought *making sure all students are readers by third grade* was an urgent or high priority; three-fourths saw *making sure teachers receive ongoing, high quality training, and closely monitoring and supporting students who are at risk of dropping out of high school* as urgent/high; and 69% that *compensating teachers based on experience, performance, workload, and not just seniority* was an urgent or high priority.

Bottom tier issues were thought by fewer than one-half of voters as an urgent or high priority.: 48% said *increasing dual enrollment options* and *requiring stronger and more frequent evaluation of teachers*; 46% that *raising graduation standards so all students have the option of applying to one of Washington’s publicly funded universities*; 44% rated *paying science and math teachers more to compete with businesses*; and alone at the bottom, 29% found *additional financial and student performance data* making it easier to compare school districts an urgent or high priority.

When choosing two top priorities, *making sure all students are readers by third grade, compensating teachers based on experience, performance, and workload,* and *making sure teachers receive on-going, high quality training tied to student achievement* were the most important education goals for respondents. All were also in the top tier of urgent or high priority public education goals.

**Specific Message Testing:** An array of specific messages were tested. In terms of overall goals, Washington voters have high aspirations for their schools: 60% said Washington’s K-12 public education system *should aim to be among the very best in the country*. Support was also strongest for language describing graduation requirements that successfully prepare students for a range of opportunities after high school – 56% strongly favored preparing all students for *life after high school, whether that is a university, college, career/technical school, or work*.

Stronger support for broader language—life after high school—was validated with 64% of voters reporting that graduation requirements *should prepare students for the most opportunities for their future—college or work*, compared to 21% who said high school graduation requirements *should be the same as the minimum college entrance requirements*.

Three of nine messages about expectations for public education generated significant, intensive support from one-half or more of voters who said they “strongly” agreed with them:

- *Every teacher should have an experienced mentor (59%);*
- *The state should be responsible for fully funding basic education (58%);*
- *Washington’s bottom tier ranking in teacher pay, student funding, and class size means it’s time to invest in our schools (52%).*

Two messages received the lowest assessment of agreement: only 22% said it's more important to be ready for college, *even if it means taking a little more time to earn a diploma* and 29% that high school graduation requirements should be *the same as the minimum college entrance requirements*.

A significant majority (79%) supported the state working with schools to figure out how to improve them rather than the *state taking over schools that have failed to meet their goals for several years*.

**Willingness to Pay More Taxes and Fees:** There was consistent strong support to pay more in taxes and fees to address the concerns, facts, and goals presented (as well as prioritizing education funding over other state services when budget cuts are necessary). Sixty-three percent said they were willing to pay more to prepare young people for life after high school and 57% for college preparation. Two-thirds of voters said they were willing to pay more in taxes and fees to address the facts about education they found most disturbing or significant and three-fourths supported paying more to help reach the education goals they felt were urgent. African Americans, Latinos, women, younger voters (18-34), Democrats, affluent respondents, and King County voters were more likely to support more taxes and fees.

### **III. Most Trusted Messengers**

Teachers were, by far, the most trusted source of information about public education: 42% of voters said they had a great deal of trust, and over three-quarters (79%) that they had a great deal or fair amount of trust, in what teachers had to say. There was also a great deal or fair amount of trust in those with the most direct relationship with schools: principals (79%), Washington State PTA (74%), parents (68%), and local school boards (68%).

### **IV. Observations and Conclusions**

There are high aspirations, urgency, issues that galvanize attention, and professed willingness to entertain tax and fee increases to improve public education in Washington. There is also strong consistency on messages across subgroups, including Latinos and African Americans.

Respondents are most responsive to language that sets forth goals or defines the outcomes of stronger graduation requirements. This willingness to rally around goals is validated by increased numbers saying they are willing to pay more when presented with such goals.

Graduation requirements described as ensuring success solely for college preparation or economic competitiveness aren't the best way to rally the most people to support and improve public education. Voters are more consistently responsive to language that incorporates options, including preparation for work or career and life. In fact, this more expansive notion of preparation also has higher percentages of voters willing to pay more in taxes and fees for graduation requirements to accomplish it.

Ensuring quality teachers is a consistent, central area of concern for all voters – and crucial to their support and motivations for education improvement.

Adequate school funding as a general concern remains an issue for many.

As we have seen consistently, those closest to schools every day are the messengers voters have the most confidence in. Teachers, especially, are consistently very powerful messengers with the public.