

How Californians View Education Standards, Testing and Accountability: Results from the Third PACE/USC Rossier Poll

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California is in the midst of sweeping education changes. The state is rolling out the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and a new system of assessments. Voters approved a temporary statewide tax increase that will provide additional funding to schools after years of spending cuts. The Legislature adopted a new system for funding schools (the Local Control Funding Formula, or LCFF) that shifts resources to school districts that enroll lots of poor students and English learners, while granting local districts tremendous control over their budgets and spending. After years of budget cuts and policy stagnation, how do Californians view their education system and the changes that are now underway?

This brief presents the findings from the latest Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and University of Southern California Rossier School of Education poll of California voters on education issues, which was conducted by MFour/Tulchin Research in August 2013. This is the third in a series of PACE/USC Rossier polls. The findings from our earlier polls were summarized in a 2012 policy report (<http://www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/PACE%20USC%20Poll%20Aug%202012.pdf>). Findings from all PACE/USC Rossier polls are available on the PACE

website (<http://www.edpolicyinca.org/polls>). This most recent poll surveyed registered voters' opinions regarding a variety of education-related topics, including standardized tests, curriculum, teachers, evaluations and accountability, the general direction of the state and state education, Governor Brown's job performance in handling education, Proposition 30 and school funding.

Californians Strongly Support Student Testing

Standards-based accountability has been a major part of California education policy for well over a decade. The heart of the accountability system is a set of content standards and corresponding student achievement tests to measure student performance. Under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, California's schools are evaluated based on the percentage of students scoring proficient on annual mathematics and English Language Arts assessments in grades 2-8 and 10. California has sought a waiver from some of NCLB's testing and accountability provisions. Waivers have been granted by the U.S. Department of Education to over 40 states, but California's proposal has not been approved. Thus, NCLB and its annual testing requirements remains the law of the land in California.

On top of NCLB, since 1999 California schools have operated under the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA), which holds schools accountable for their performance on the Academic Performance Index (API). The API gives each school a numerical score based on student performance on standardized tests in mathematics, English Language Arts, science, and history/social studies. API scores can range from 200 to 1000. Both NCLB and the PSAA thus put standardized testing at the center of California's system for holding schools and teachers accountable.

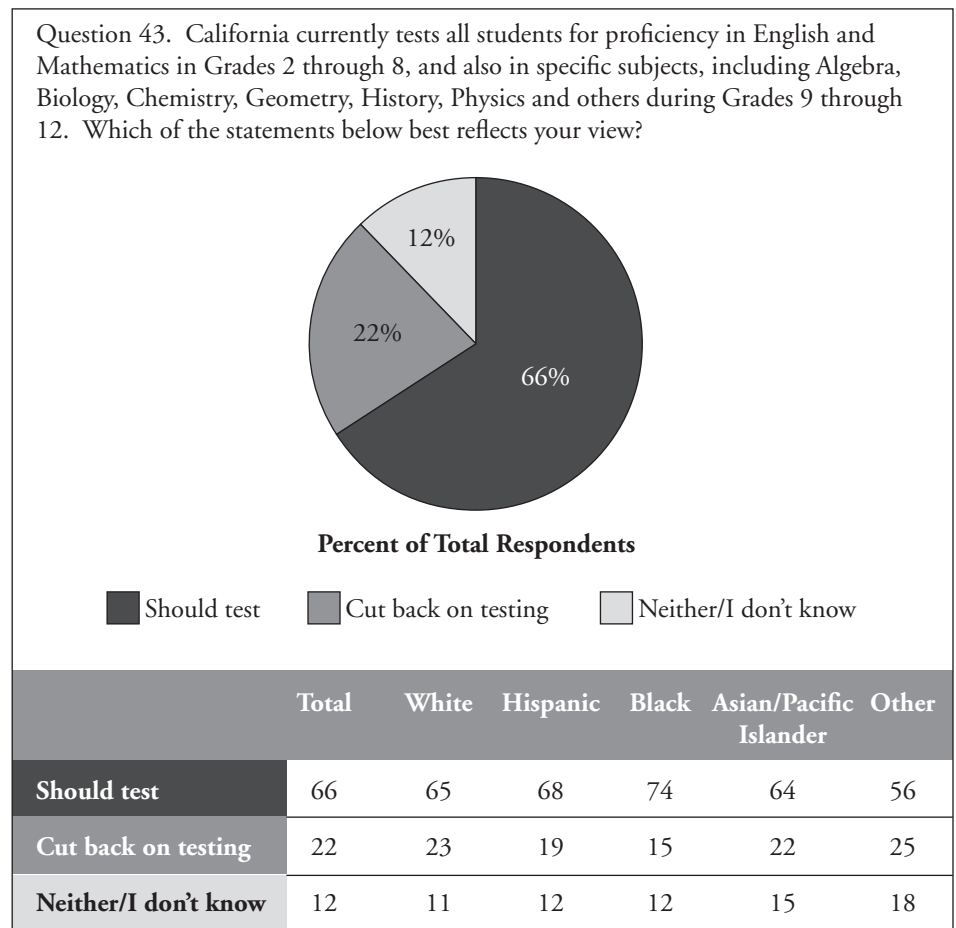
Several recent policy changes promise to reduce the central importance of standardized testing in California's accountability system. First, Governor Brown signed legislation (SB 1458) that aims to limit the weight of standardized test scores in the calculation of the API. SB 1458 requires that test scores constitute no more than 60 percent of the API in high schools, and calls for the inclusion of alternative measures of school performance (e.g., graduation rates) in the Index. The Governor also signed another piece of legislation (AB 484) that calls for a moratorium on test-based accountability as California makes the transition to new assessments aligned to the CCSS. In addition, the statutory language governing the implementation of the Governor's LCFF

includes a requirement that local school districts develop Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) that must measure progress toward eight state priorities, among which performance on standardized tests is only one.

Despite these policy changes, however, California voters are strongly

supportive of standardized testing as a means of evaluating students and teachers. Two-thirds of our respondents support current or expanded testing levels, while less than one-quarter feel that testing should be cut back. Broadly, these results are consistent across all demographics included in the survey.

Figure 1. Should California Test All Students for Proficiency?



Both federal and state accountability systems assign the greatest weight to students' test scores in math and English Language Arts. Some advocates have argued that the emphasis on standardized test scores has pushed educators to focus solely on tested subjects at the expense of a broader, more well-rounded curriculum, and to focus on what Governor Brown has characterized as "quiz-bits of information" at the expense of deeper understanding. Voters nevertheless remain confident that standardized tests are an essential check on the performance of schools.

The poll results suggest that voters of all types support grade-by-grade testing.

- Nearly two-thirds of California voters said students should be tested at every grade level to ensure they are progressing, as opposed to 22 percent of voters who said California should cut back on testing.
- Among parents with school-aged children, 66 percent said California should test students in each grade level and 25 percent said the state should cut back.
- Strong support for standardized testing does not depend on party affiliation. Seventy-one percent of Republicans supported testing at each grade level and 20

percent supported cutting back. Sixty-five percent of Democrats favored testing at each grade level, while just 21 percent said that tests should be cut back. Among voters with no party preference, 63 percent favored testing at each grade level and 25 percent favored cutting back.

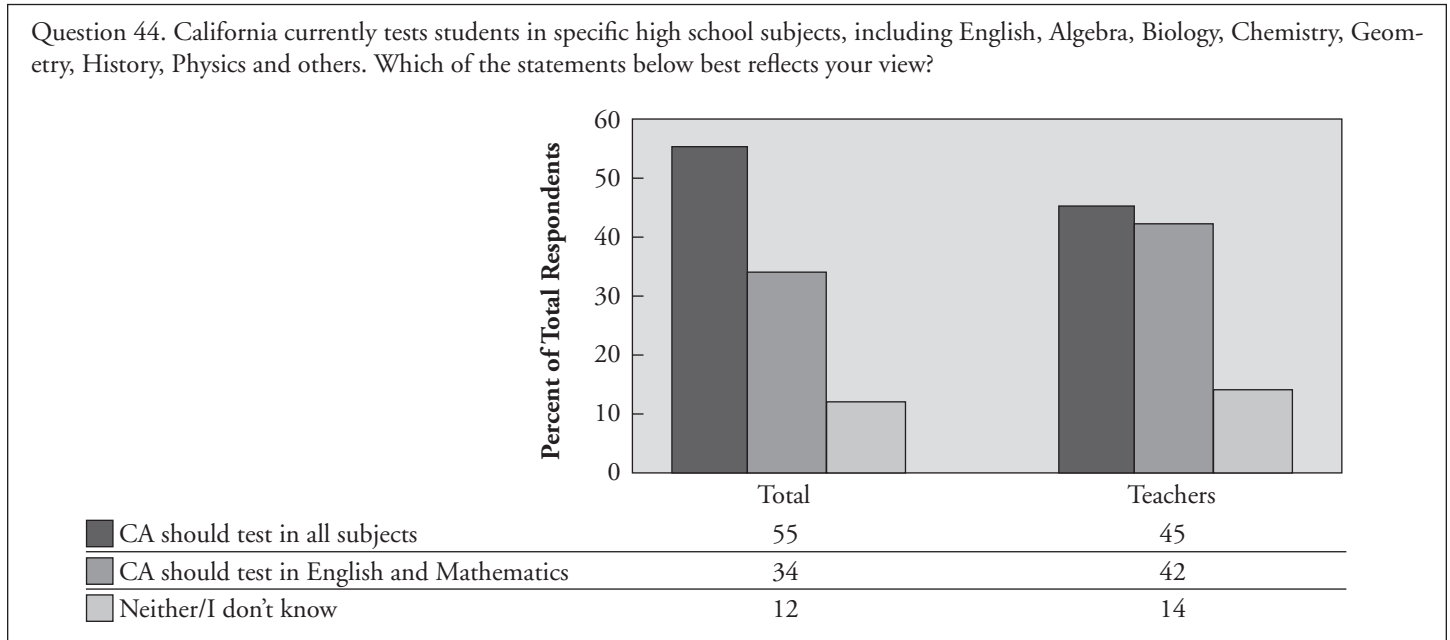
- Support for testing is consistent across demographic groups. The strongest support for testing is among Hispanic (68 percent) and Black (74 percent) Californians, and the weakest support is among respondents of other races (56 percent).

These results are broadly in line with national poll results released earlier in the year. For instance, an Associated Press/National Opinion Research Council (AP/NORC) poll asked parents whether their students' schools had too many standardized achievement tests, with only 26 per-

cent saying too many (61 percent said about right, 11 percent said too few). Together these results suggest that roughly two-thirds of respondents across polls think testing is important.

Support for standardized testing across high school subjects is also high. Voters across all demographic groups would also like to see high school students tested in all subjects. The PACE/USC Rossier poll found 55 percent of California voters supported testing high school students in all subjects. Thirty-four percent of voters wanted high school students tested in only English and mathematics, preferring to leave assessment in other subjects up to teachers. Teachers in the sample demonstrated lower levels of support for testing high school students in all subjects (45 percent) and a higher level of support for testing in English and mathematics only (42 percent).

Figure 2. Should California Test Students in All High School Subjects?



As noted, Assembly Bill 484 authorizes the Superintendent of Public Instruction not to produce API scores for schools and school districts during the state’s transition to a new assessment system aligned to the CCSS. In 2014-15, computer-adaptive assessments developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) will be field tested, but scores on the SBAC tests will not be reported as an official measure of school progress.

While there are understandable complications arising from the transition to Common Core, the results of our poll seem to suggest that Californians think the legislature is going too far by putting a hold on

testing and public accountability in 2014. The large majority of respondents expressed clear support for annual testing as a necessary criterion for judging the performance of schools and students.

Voters Know Very Little About the Common Core State Standards

Voters know very little about the CCSS, which California has adopted along with 45 other states. The standards represent a major step forward in standards-based accountability policy, as the vast majority of American students will now receive an education guided by the same set of standards. Furthermore, most experts believe the CCSS are

as good as or better than the state standards they replace. California is now in the process of implementing the CCSS, which are expected to be fully in place in the 2014-15 school year.

Only 23 percent of respondents reported knowing “a little bit” and 6 percent “a great deal” about the standards, with the remaining 71 percent not knowing much or not knowing anything at all about them. Given the ambitions of the CCSS and the challenges involved in their implementation, these results show a troubling lack of knowledge about California’s new standards and what they will mean for the state’s students.

When we presented some of the most common reasons for support and opposition to the CCSS we found greater support for the CCSS than opposition, with 36 percent supporting California’s adoption and 25 percent opposing. Clearly, however, the fact that so many Californians remain unaware of the CCSS and uncertain in their support for them means that state and local education officials will need to make a positive case for change in the next several years as they move toward full implementation of the new standards.

Beyond the CCSS, our poll found that most voters want schools to expand their instructional focus

beyond reading and mathematics. While most voters want schools to spend more time on reading and writing (68 percent) and mathematics (65 percent), Californians would also like to see an increase in time spent on teaching personal finance (70 percent), science (62 percent), computer skills (58 percent), music and art (54 percent), health and physical fitness (53 percent), and civics and government (49 percent).

Voters Want Teacher Accountability Coupled with Enhanced Support

The PACE/USC Rossier poll shows that California voters have a great

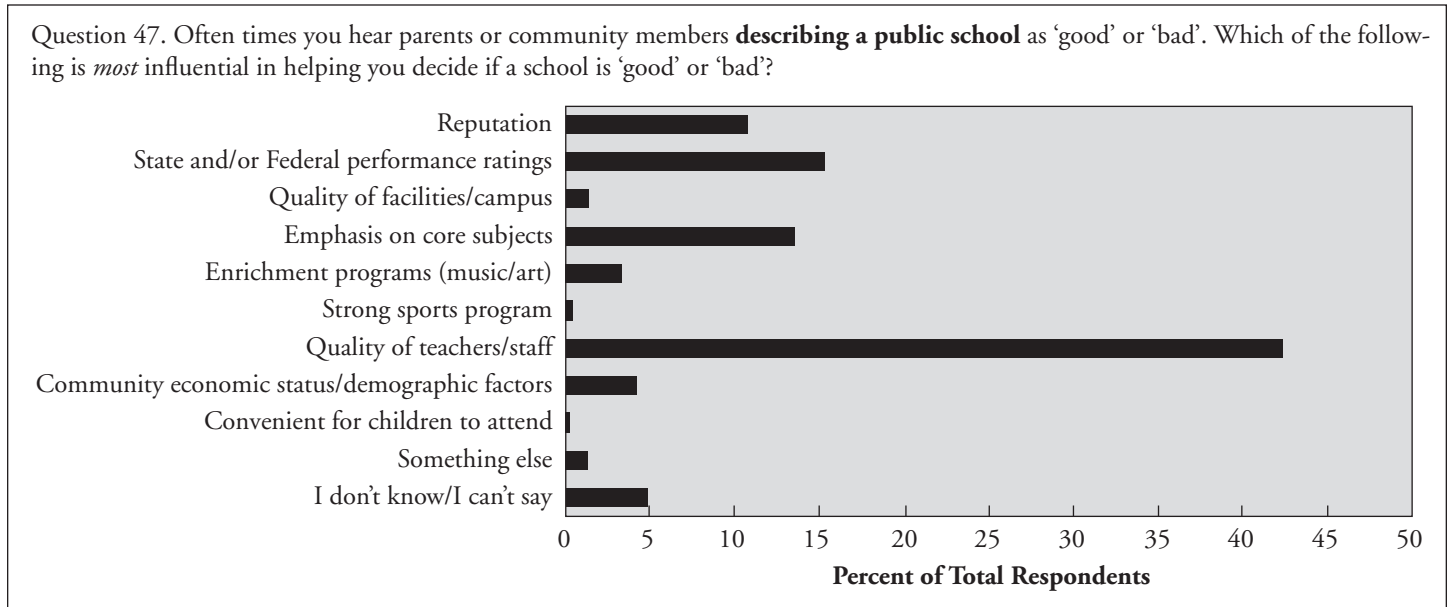
deal of respect for teachers. They want to reward high-performing teachers, and they want to provide additional training and support for teachers who need it. At the same time, however, they also want teachers to be held accountable. Californians believe their teachers play a critical role in a child’s education as well as the success and failure of a school. When asked to identify the single most influential factor in determining whether a public school is “good” or “bad,” 42 percent of California voters affirmed that the quality of teachers and staff is the most significant factor.

Table 1. Are California Public Schools Teaching Students What They Need to Know?

Questions 31-39. There are many subjects California public schools can educate students on before they graduate. Please read each of the following subjects and indicate whether you think California public schools are teaching students what they need to know on the subject, whether you think the schools should be spending more instruction time on the subject, or whether you think they are spending too much instruction time and money on the subject.

	What they need to know (%)	Should spend more time (%)	Spending too much time (%)	I don't know (%)
Tech/Computer skills	28	58	5	8
Reading/Writing	24	68	2	7
Mathematics	25	65	2	7
Science	27	62	3	9
Health/Physical Fitness	31	53	7	9
Music/Art	28	54	8	11
Personal Finance	15	70	2	13
Civics and Government	34	49	5	11
Vocational Training	20	61	3	16

Figure 3. How Do You Decide if a School is Good or Bad?



The question whether student performance on standardized tests should be considered in the evaluation of individual teachers is intensely controversial, in California and nationally. According to the PACE/USC Rossier poll, California voters believe that student performance on standardized tests should play a sizable role in evaluating a teacher’s effectiveness. Forty-three percent of voters said teachers should be judged equally on their students’ standardized test results, assessments of their classroom performance and peer evaluations. Only 10 percent said student performance on standardized tests should not be used to evaluate teachers at all.

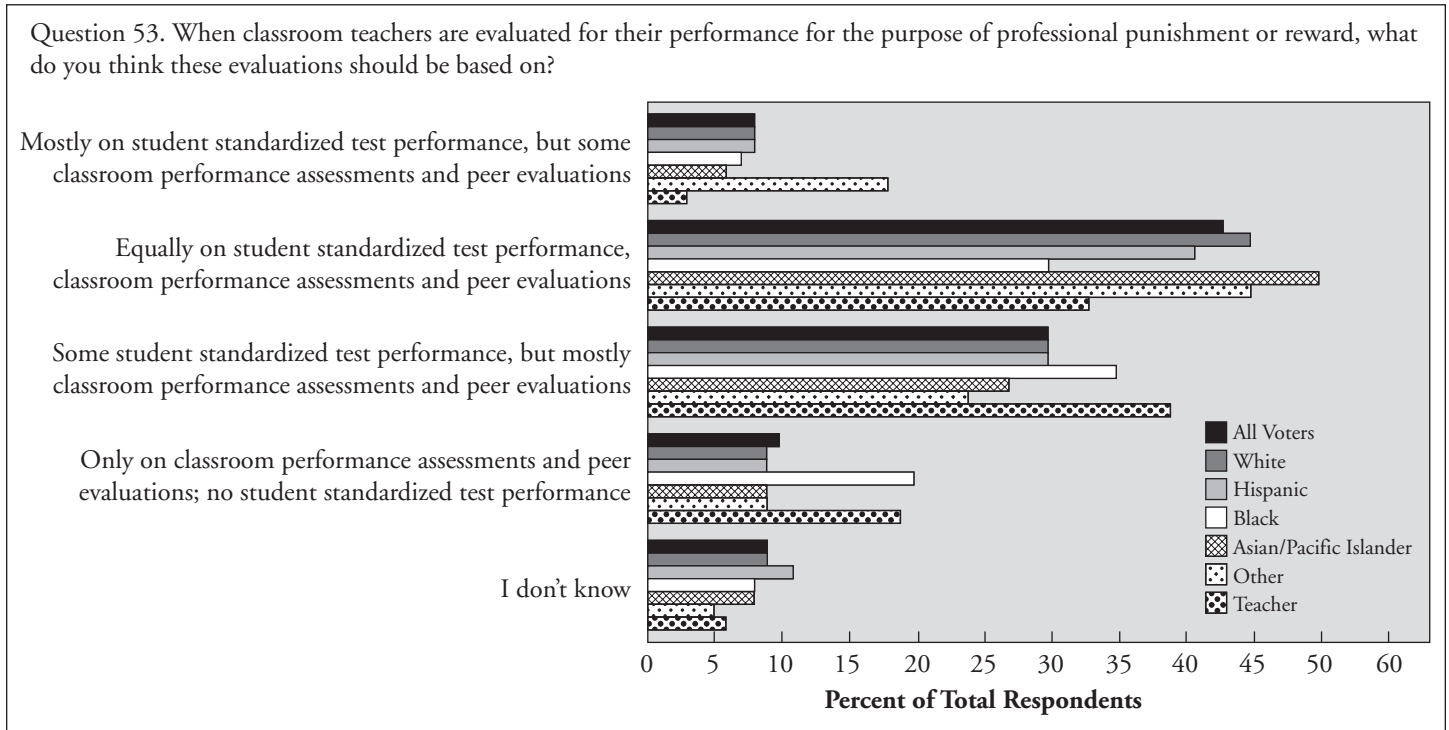
Support for relying at least in part on

standardized test scores holds across demographic categories, including whites (45 percent), Hispanics (41 percent), Blacks (30 percent), Asian/Pacific Islanders (50 percent) and others (44 percent). Teachers also support including standardized tests in teachers’ evaluations (33 percent), though more support evaluations that are based mostly on classroom and peer assessment (40 percent) with a smaller portion (19 percent) favoring only classroom and peer assessment.

The U.S. Department of Education has pushed aggressively to encourage states to include student performance on standardized tests in their systems for evaluating teachers. Eligibility for Race to the Top

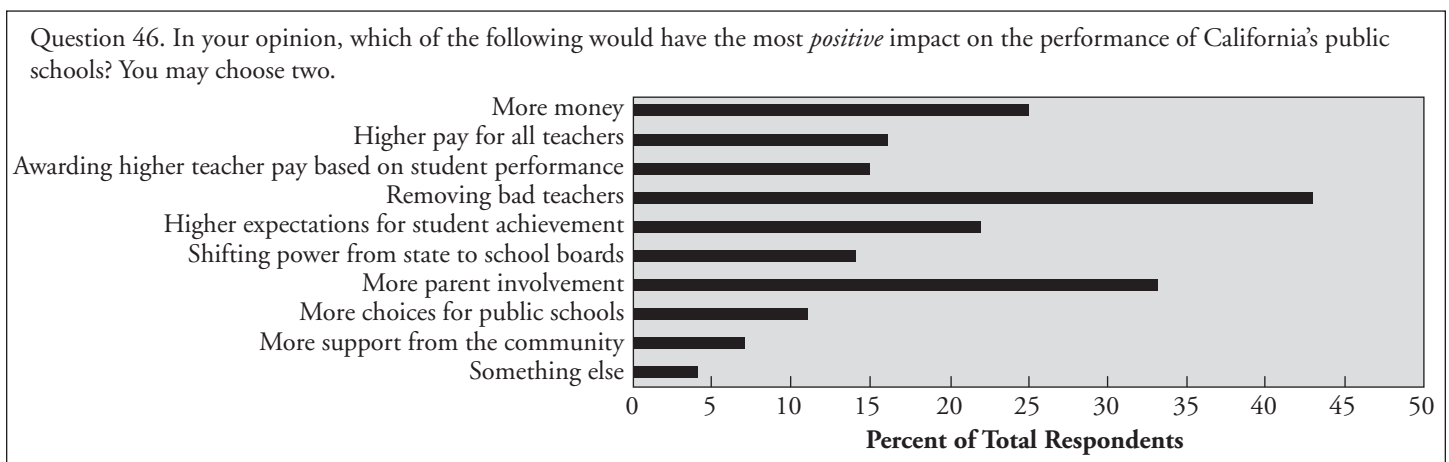
(RTT) grants was based in part on the requirement that student learning growth as measured by standardized test scores be part of the formula used in teacher evaluation systems. More recently federal officials have offered waivers freeing states from some of the most onerous requirements of the NCLB law, on the condition that they develop teacher evaluation systems based in part on standardized test scores. California has refused to meet this requirement, and the state has consequently received neither RTT dollars nor an NCLB waiver. Despite the state’s refusal, however, California voters clearly support some level of inclusion of test scores in the formula used to hold teachers accountable.

Figure 4. How Should Classroom Teachers Be Evaluated?



Voters identify the quality of teachers and staff as the most important factor in judging the excellence of a school. They further believe that removing bad teachers from the classroom would have the single most positive effect on school performance. Forty-three percent of voters agree that removing bad teachers would be the most positive step toward school success, while 33 percent support more parent involvement, 25 percent support more money for the schools and 22 percent back higher expectations. (Participants were allowed to indicate their top two responses.)

Figure 5. What Would Have the Greatest Positive Impact on School Performance?



Despite their support for teacher accountability, voters' responses indicate that their first reaction to problems with school and student performance is to support struggling teachers. A plurality of voters indicated they prefer utilizing additional support and training (42 percent) over making it easier to fire teachers who "repeatedly fail to perform at acceptable levels" (29 percent). Nineteen percent do not support

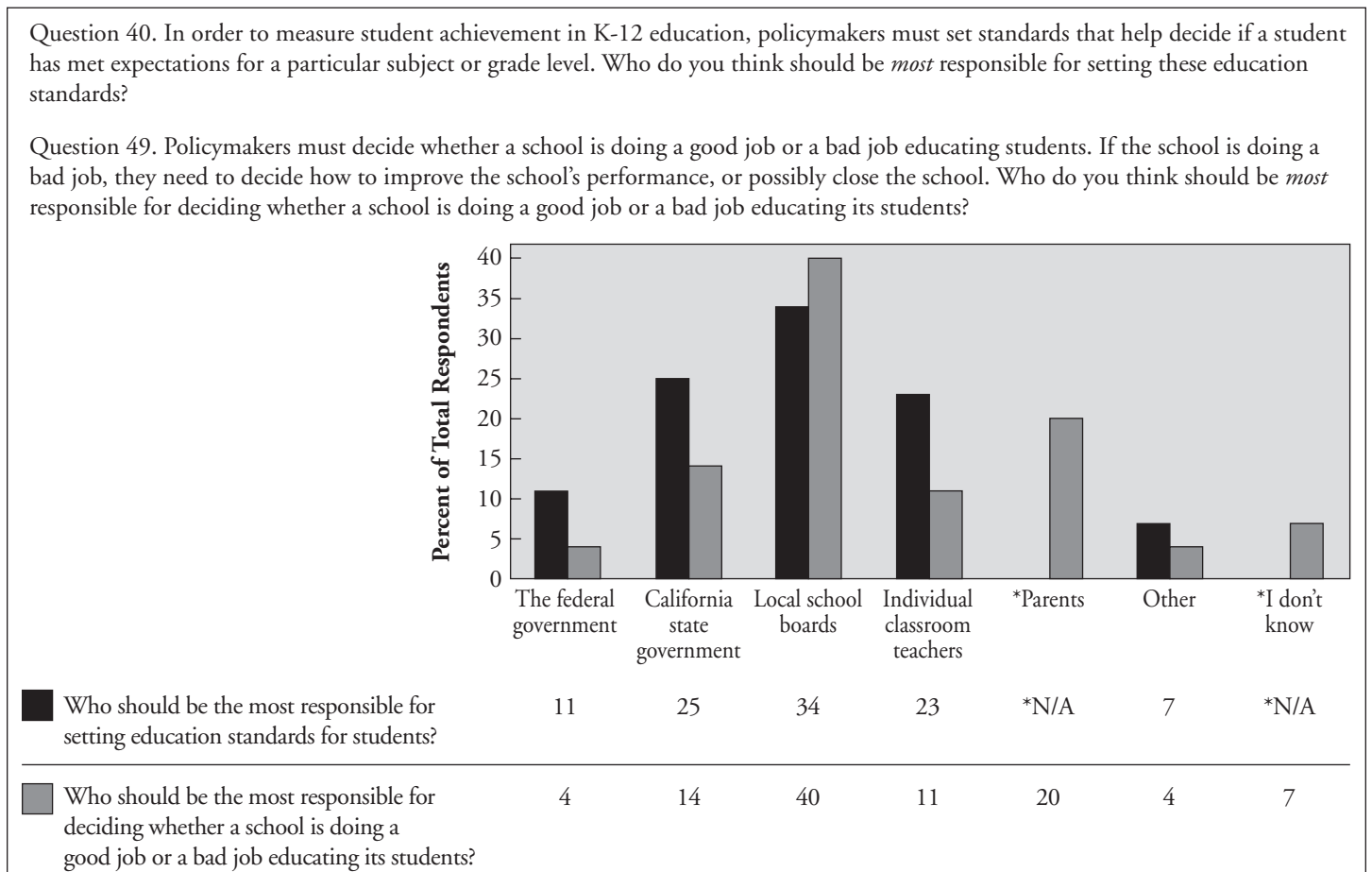
either option, and the remaining 10 percent were undecided.

Voters Continue to Support Additional Funding for Schools, as well as Local Control

PACE/USC Rossier polls have consistently shown that California voters have far more confidence in local than in state officials to make good decisions about education, and far

more confidence in both local and state officials than they have in the federal government. These findings are confirmed in our most recent poll, where nearly three times as many respondents believe that the responsibility for holding schools accountable should reside with local school boards as with state government (40 percent versus 14 percent). Only 4 percent of voters believe that the federal government

Figure 6. Who Should Be Most Responsible for Setting Standards and Evaluating Performance?



*Note: These responses were not options for the question referring to standards.

should exercise this responsibility. On the question of who should be responsible for setting standards, voters' preference for local control is weaker but still significant. Thirty-four percent believe that standards should be set at the local level, and 25 percent believe that the state should play this role. Eleven percent believe that standards should be set nationally.

Voters are equally consistent in their view that California spends too little on education. In our most recent poll, 68 percent of voters agree that the state should be spending more on education, while 22 percent be-

lieve that the schools have enough money. Among parents of school-aged children, 81 percent believe that the state needs to spend more on education.

The voters' approval of Proposition 30 in November 2012 raised the state's sales tax by a quarter of a percent for four years starting in January of 2013 and increased income taxes for people who earn at least \$250,000 by up to 3 percentage points for seven years. Proposition 30 prevented deep "trigger cuts" in California's education spending in 2013, and is expected to produce significant new revenues for schools

over the next several years. Thus far, however, voters have not seen much impact from Proposition 30. Our poll data show that 54 percent of voters believe that Proposition 30 has had no effect on public schools, while 20 percent say it has helped. The poll also indicates a low level (22 percent) of support for continuing both taxes beyond their sunset date. Nevertheless, a bare majority (51 percent) supports extending one or both of the taxes, and only a third of respondents want neither tax extended. These results may reflect the fact that it is too early to see the full effects of the funding that Proposition 30 provides.

Table 2. Proposition 30 Effects on Education

Question 27. Last year California voters passed Proposition 30, which increased state sales taxes by one-quarter of a percent for four years and increased income taxes for seven years on those earning more than \$250,000. Most of the money raised by these tax increases was intended for education. From what you can see, has the passage of Proposition 30:

	All Voters (%)	Republicans (%)	Democrats (%)	No Party Preference/ Other (%)	Teachers (%)	
Proposition 30	Helped public schools	20	13	28	14	37
	Hurt public schools	5	5	4	5	4
	Had no effect	54	67	41	59	42

Question 28. Under Proposition 30, the one-quarter percent state sales tax increase will expire after four years and the income tax increase for those earning more than \$250,000 will expire after seven years. Should California lawmakers work to extend these tax increases to fund education, or should they let the tax increases expire as planned?

	All Voters (%)	Republicans (%)	Democrats (%)	No Party Preference/ Other (%)	Teachers (%)	
Lawmakers Should	Extend income & sales	22	14	30	19	39
	Extend income only	25	20	30	22	25
	Extend sales only	4	2	4	5	0
	Let both expire	34	54	18	37	26

Note: The response "I don't know" is not included in the table.

In 2007, the “Getting Down to Facts” studies were published. The “Getting Down to Facts” project included several careful analyses of California’s systems for governing and funding schools (<http://cepa.stanford.edu/gdtf/overview>). Taken together, the studies pointed toward two main conclusions: California needed to do a better job of steering resources to the schools and students who needed them most; and the state needed to reduce the administrative burdens that it placed on local educators and give local officials more autonomy and responsibility in their schools and school districts. In recent decades California has funded local school districts under a system that attached a substantial share of state funding to specific categorical spending programs, which strictly limited local flexibility in the allocation of education spending. The Legislature’s adoption of a new LCFF for education in the 2013-14 state budget marks a dramatic move toward both of the goals identified by the “Getting Down to Facts” project.

LCFF completely revamps the way K-12 education is funded in California. The LCFF provides:

- A base grant for each local education agency (LEA) based on daily attendance.
- A 20 percent supplemental grant for each high-needs student (English Language learners, students from low-income families, and foster youth) enrolled in the LEA.
- An additional concentration grant of up to 50 percent of the base grant for each high-needs student in LEAs where such students represent more than 55 percent of the enrollment in the LEA.

According to the Legislative Analysts Office, school districts must satisfy three main requirements under the LCFF. Districts will now be required to use their supplemental and concentration funds to:

- First, “increase or improve services for EL/LI pupils in proportion to the increase in funds apportioned on the basis of the number and concentration of unduplicated pupils.” How exactly this will be implemented will be defined by the State Board of Education.
- Second, class sizes in K-3 classrooms should be 24-1, unless collective bargaining agreements conflict with this requirement and then the district is required to comply with the collective bargaining agreement.
- Finally, districts must maintain their Home-to-School Transportation spending.

Also, under the new rules, districts are required to adopt LCAPs that disclose how funds will be spent to provide high-quality educational programs.

While voters support locally-controlled funding, most (63 percent) are unaware of recent changes in the way the state allocates money to the local districts. This is true across party lines. Teachers are far more aware (55 percent) of these changes than most Californians, and they are strongly though not overwhelmingly supportive of the new policy direction.

When presented with arguments for and against the adoption of the LCFF voters are divided in their responses, in significant part along party lines. A strong plurality of Democrats think that the LCFF is a good idea, while an even stronger plurality of Republicans think it is a bad idea. Voters who decline to state a party preference are more evenly divided on the question.

The changes brought about by the LCFF shift primary control over education budgets to local school boards. This shift of responsibility for budgeting from the state to the local level is consistent with the voters’ view of who is the most responsible for judging the quality and performance of their schools.

Table 3. Views on the Governor’s Local Control Funding Formula

		All Voters (%)	Republicans (%)	Democrats (%)	No Party Preference/ Other (%)	Teachers (%)
<p>Question 29. Governor Brown and the state Legislature changed the way California funds its public schools. The Local Control Funding Formula approach gives school districts more control over how they spend education dollars and reallocates money to school districts with more high-needs students. Were you aware or unaware California had adopted this Local Control Funding Formula?</p>						
Local Control Funding Formula	Aware	30	29	29	33	55
	Not aware	63	68	63	57	43
	I don’t know	7	4	7	10	1
<p>Question 30. Not everyone agrees with Governor Brown’s Local Control Funding Formula approach. Please read the following statements and indicate which you agree with most.</p>						
		All Voters (%)	Republicans (%)	Democrats (%)	No Party Preference/ Other (%)	Teachers (%)
Arguments For and Against the LCFF	Mary says the Governor’s Local Control Funding Formula plan is a <i>good idea</i> because all California public schools will get more money than they received last year, but school districts with the highest concentrations of high-needs students will get additional funds to spend as they need, because concentrating funds on these critical school districts will have the greatest impact.	30	17	42	22	45
	Sally says the Governor’s Local Control Funding Formula is a <i>bad idea</i> because only some school districts will benefit, while other districts, even if they have high-needs students and middle class communities that saw substantial cuts during the recession, won’t get any of the additional funds. California education dollars should be shared equally among all school districts, not a select few.	31	45	24	29	23
	Neither	18	21	13	24	16
	I don’t know	21	17	21	25	16

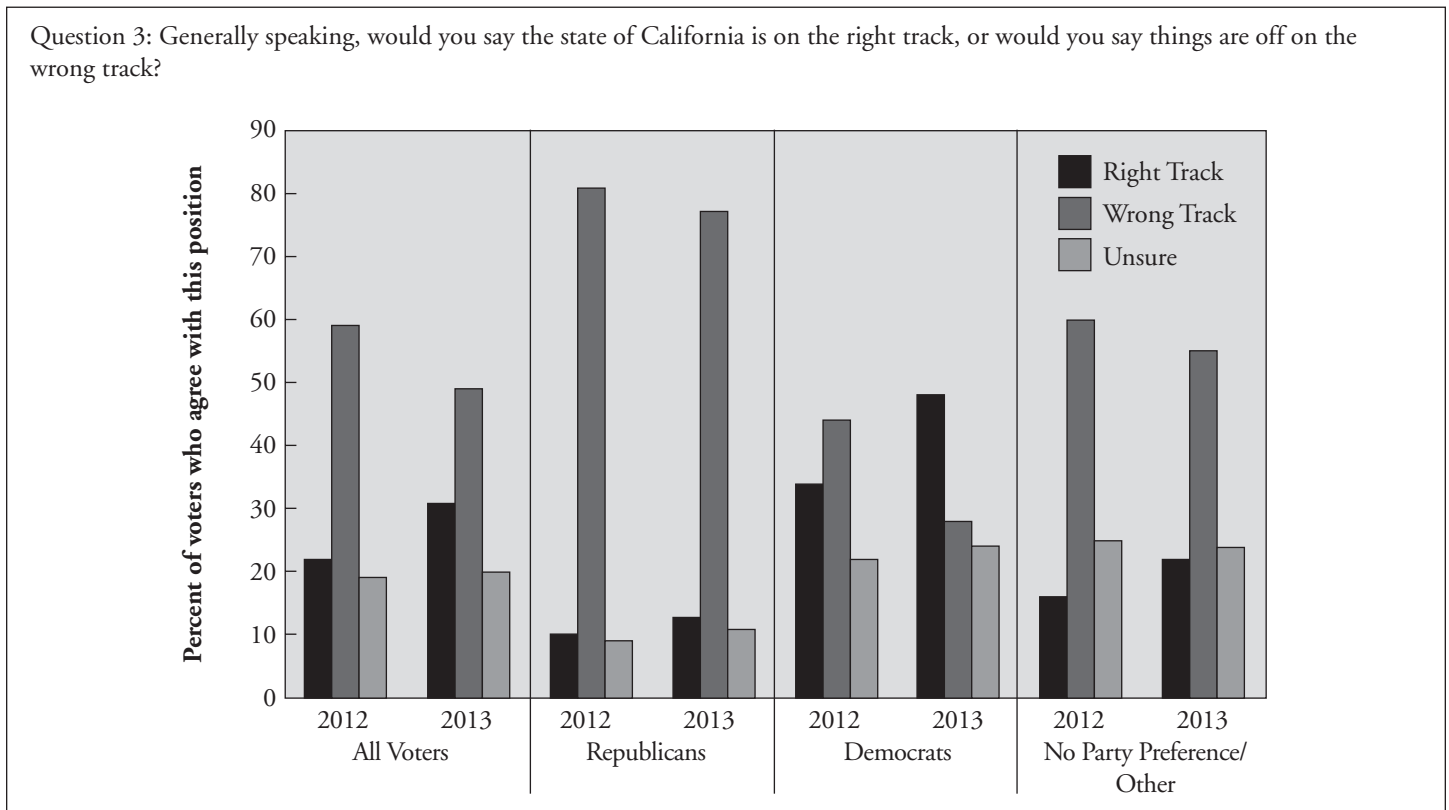
Californians Still See Schools As In Need of Improvement

As California and the nation struggle to recover from the worst economic recession in recent history, voters appear to want more out of state and local governance. Results from this poll indicate 49 percent of registered California voters believe the state is

on the wrong track, while just 31 percent believe we are going in the right direction. This is an improvement over 2012, however, when the numbers were 59 percent wrong track/22 percent right track. When it comes to what the voters consider the most important issues the state needs to address, jobs, education and the economy top the list.

In our August 2013 poll, most voters gave California Schools a grade of “C,” with local schools receiving slightly higher grades. In the August 2012 PACE/USC Rossier poll, voters gave schools more A and B grades, with 15 percent of respondents giving the schools a grade of B or better. In 2013, only 10 percent of voters were willing to grade the

Figure 7. Is California on the Right or Wrong Track?



state that high. At the same time, however, fewer Californians in 2013 gave the schools grades of D or F, and fewer voters responded that the schools have gotten worse (49 percent in 2013 versus 57 percent in 2012). The share of voters who believe that California schools have gotten better nearly doubled, from 7 percent in 2012 to 13 percent in 2013.

Overall, these findings suggest that

California voters are at best uncertain about the state’s future, and more specifically about prospects for the state’s education system. As noted, relatively few voters are aware of the major policy changes that are underway in California, including the adoption of the LCFF and the implementation of the CCSS. There is some evidence from the poll of guarded optimism among voters who are more knowledgeable about recent policy developments. Those

who know something about LCFF are more likely to be supportive of the initiative than voters in general, and those who are knowledgeable about CCSS are more likely to believe that California schools are moving in the right direction. For most voters, though, judgments about these new policies will depend on whether they produce measurable improvements in the performance of schools and students.

Table 4. Evaluating the Performance of California Public Schools and Local Public Schools

Question 12. In the past few years, what grade would you give California public schools?
 Question 14. In the past few years, would you say California public schools have gotten better, worse or have stayed about the same?

	School Grades	2012 Total (%)	2013 Total (%)
State Schools	A & B	15	10
	C	36	45
	D & F	42	39
	I don't know*	7	6
	Gotten better	7	13
	Gotten worse	57	49
	Stayed the same	27	30

Question 13. In the past few years, what grade would you give your local public schools?
 Question 15. In the past few years, would you say your local public schools have gotten better, worse, or have stayed about the same?

Local Schools	A & B	28	30
	C	37	38
	D & F	27	24
	I don't know*	9	8
	Gotten better	11	12
	Gotten worse	45	37
	Stayed the same	33	41

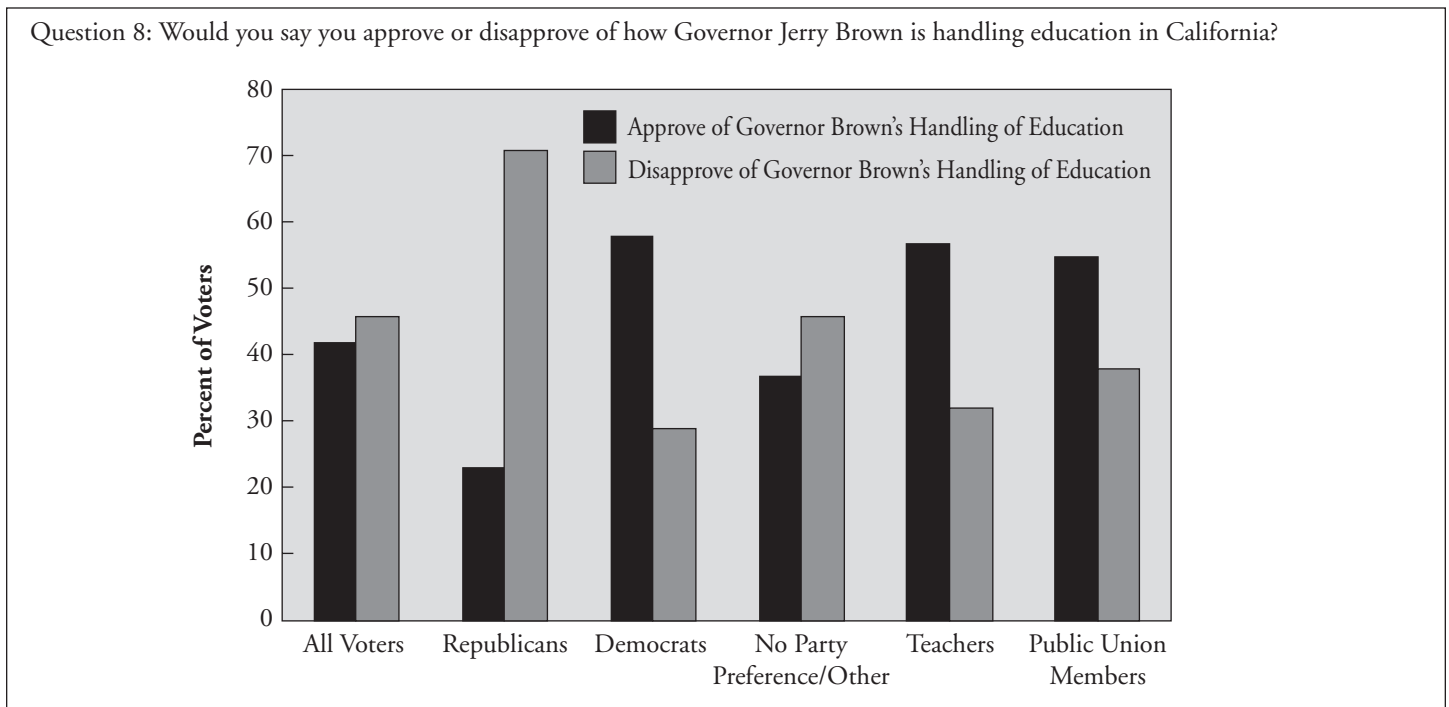
*Note: Response results shown for “I don’t know” apply only to Questions 12 and 13.

Governor Brown has made improving public education in California one of his signature efforts as governor. Yet when asked about how the Governor is handling public education in California, 42 per-

cent of voters said they approved of his work, while 46 percent said they disapproved. This contrasts strongly with the Governor's overall approval rating, which is 55 percent approve/36 percent disapprove.

Teachers, public union members, and Democrats hold much more favorable views toward the Governor's performance on education issues.

Figure 8. Governor's Handling of Education



Conclusions

The results from the PACE/USC Rossier poll reveal several ways in which the views of California voters depart from recent policy initiatives in Sacramento. First, the poll clearly indicates that Californians support strong test-based accountability, with annual testing in multiple subjects. This contrasts with the approach enacted by AB 484,

which cuts back on testing during the transitional period while the CCSS is being implemented in the state's schools.

Second, voters support teachers and believe they are the most important factor in the success of students and schools. At the same time, however, they believe that teachers' performance should be evaluated and that removing bad teachers from the

classroom is the single best way to improve the performance of schools. Thus, contrary to efforts in Sacramento to keep student achievement data out of teacher evaluation systems, California voters believe that evidence of student learning based on test results should be a key element in judgments about teachers' job performance.

Third, despite the enthusiasm and

excitement in policy circles about CCSS and LCFF, California voters know very little about either of these policy changes. If lawmakers believe these policies are important and will lead to improvement in California's schools, they will need to do a better job of making the case to the public. There is an important opportunity to shape public opinion on education policy in the state.

Overall, our results suggest that voters continue to see room for improvement in their public schools. While there are some hints of improved grades from previous years, there is a long way to go before voters believe our schools are truly improving and meeting expectations.

Survey Methodology

The PACE/USC Rossier poll was conducted August 27 to 30, 2013 by MFour/Tulchin Research and surveyed 1,001 registered California voters. The poll was conducted online and allowed respondents to complete the survey on a desktop or laptop computer, tablet or smartphone. The poll was conducted in English and Spanish. The margin of error for the overall sample is +/- 3.5 percentage points.

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About Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center based at Stanford University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Southern California. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to post-secondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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The USC Rossier School of Education (ross-EAR) is one of the world's premier centers for the study of urban education, preparing teachers, educational leaders and scholars who are committed to strengthening urban education locally, nationally and globally. USC Rossier is the school behind the first online Master of Arts in Teaching program from a major research university, which has increased the number of highly prepared teachers graduating from USC Rossier by tenfold in less than three years.

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