

# Phi Delta Kappan

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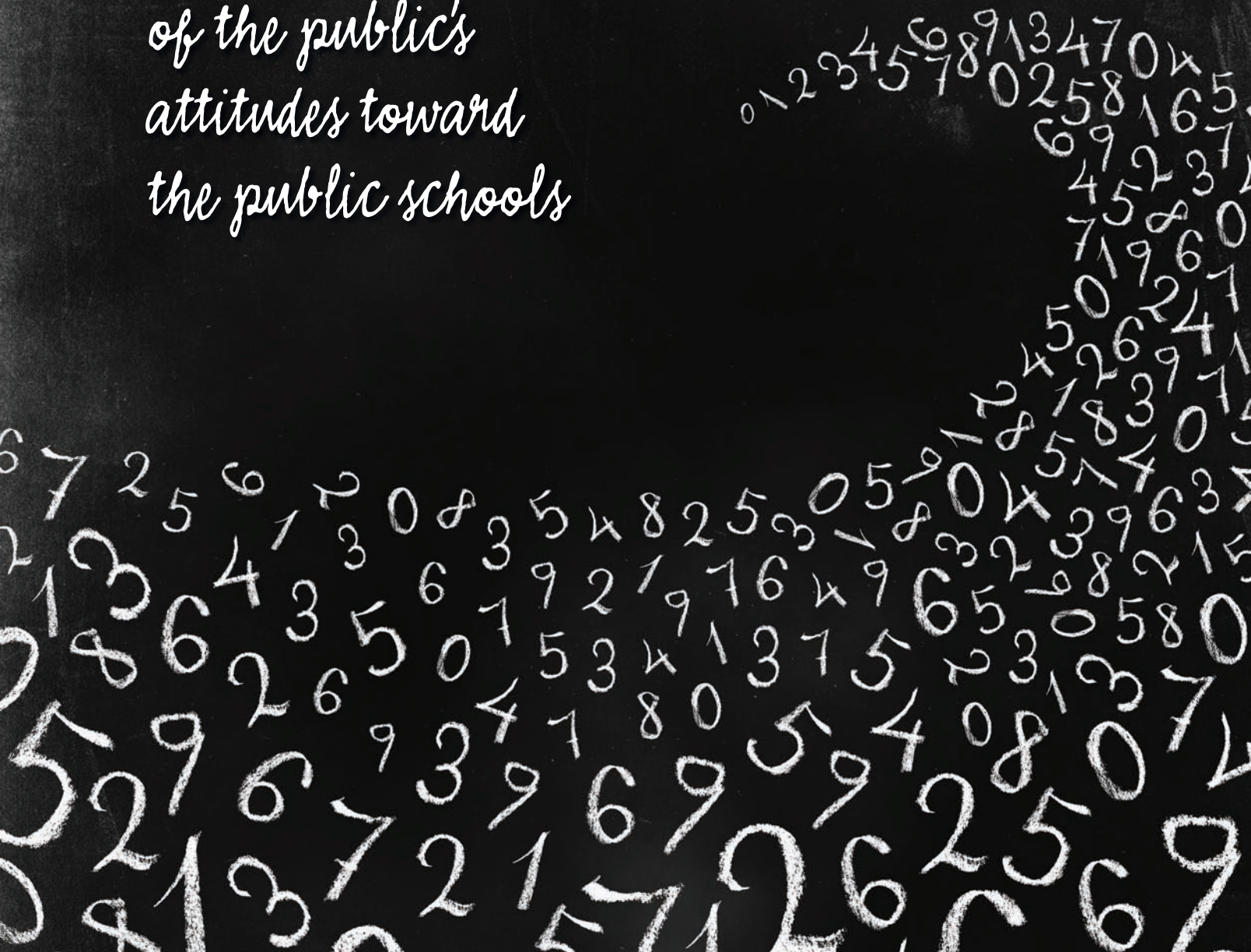
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*The 43rd annual  
PDK/Gallup poll  
of the public's  
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the public schools*



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# Drip, drip, drip

Psst, the Republicans are winning the education debate.

That's my take-away from this year's PDK/Gallup poll results. When I look at the numbers, I see an American public that largely has been won over by reform ideas first generated by Republicans a few decades ago — ideas they have steadily nurtured ever since.

This year, we learned that Americans favor charter schools (70%), favor allowing parents to choose a child's school (74%), believe unionization is bad for public school education (47%), and that natural talent is more important than college training (70%). Any way you slice it, those ideas have been part of the Republican reform agenda.

Republicans have had a long view about changing the education system. They were willing to wait, moving slowly to achieve the massive changes they wanted. They have never been after small, incremental fixes: They've wanted it all.

They have worn us down by the drip, drip, drip of their message. A little here, a little there, and pretty soon, without even realizing it, we've been converted. How did this happen?

What started in the 1990s as a Republican reform agenda has morphed into what's widely recognized now as simply the reform agenda for education, with supporters all along the political spectrum.

Remember when Republicans were adamant in their opposition to standards and the tests that went with them because they threatened local control? Democrats were equally vocal in opposing

charters and choice. Now, the folks who once opposed "outcomes-based" education tend to support standards, testing, and "results." And many, many Democrats have become not only charter advocates but developers of charter schools. Democrats who once marched to the tune of the unions, now often are at odds with them because of union resistance to reforms. Even merit pay, once a Republican-only idea, now garners wide support.

Consider the evolution of charter schools. Al Shanker may have introduced charters to policy discussions in the late 1980s, but Republicans picked up the choice torch and ran with it. They promoted the triple-threat package of charters, choice, and vouchers. Shanker saw charters as a way for educators to pilot and refine new ideas before importing them into traditional public schools; Republicans supported charters, choice, and vouchers as tools that would break up the education "monopoly." They were shrill and, honestly, a little bit scary at some of the early public meetings where they pressed their case because they were so clear about what they were after: They wanted to nuke the system!

Reform-minded Democrats hopped on charters and choice for other reasons: They believed such options would insert equity into the system — and because they became frustrated in their efforts to reform the existing system.

When all of this started, charter schools were a radical, even a wacky, idea. Who would support the idea of

giving public money to a private entity to set up a public school? Those early charter schools were a bit on the sketchy side. I visited charter schools in converted garages, strip shopping centers, and trailers. I would never have sent one of my own children to schools with such obviously poor facilities and less-than-stellar staff. But time passed and the idea became more acceptable, credible, and well-funded. Now, I visit charter schools that wow me with their facilities, their staffs, and their very clear vision about the work they do. Charter schools have moved into the mainstream.

In this cozy atmosphere, overlooking the motivation that undergirds these reforms is easy. But we ignore that at our peril. I believe the American public fails to understand that every time we authorize a charter school or promote choice, we are failing to hold the existing system accountable for providing an excellent education to all children. The most engaged parents seize those opportunities to escape from a system of schools that doesn't work — and that means fewer parents are left to pressure the public system for improvements.

Every parent should be able to send a child to a neighborhood public school, and be confident that he or she will experience high-quality learning every hour of every day. Endorsing reforms that tear apart the system and force children to leave their neighborhoods in search of a better education is simply un-American. No matter what the American public says. — JR