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Bill Cirone op ed column

To: All newspapers
Jan. 24, 2017 —Col. 16/17-16

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PDK poll shows strong support for skills-based education, parent communication

By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

The annual Phi Delta Kappan poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools is always filled with interesting and important information, made more compelling by the fact that PDK has been doing this now for 48 years. This year's poll shows strong support for skills-based education and parent communication.

Over the nearly five decades of PDK polling, one fact has remained constant: While people give low grades to the nation's public schools, they give mostly As and Bs to the local schools that their own children attend, where they see first-hand what is happening. Interestingly, the grades for the nation's public schools are higher than they have been for many years, while the grades for local schools remain where they always have been, meaning that the gap has narrowed significantly.

Another interesting finding was the disparity in beliefs about the main goal of a public school education. While 45 percent of respondents said the purpose is to prepare students academically, 26 percent chose "Prepares students to be good citizens," and 25 percent chose "Prepares student for work."

School improvement priorities were also important. Some 68 percent of respondents preferred that their school offer more career-technical or skills-based classes while 21 percent said they preferred more honors classes.

With this strong support for skills-based education, it's good to know that schools both nationally and locally are focusing on these types of programs. For example, a new Career Technical school will be built in Santa Maria in the next few years, and Santa Ynez Valley, Carpinteria, and Santa Barbara high schools all offer robust Career and Technical Education courses and academies. The public acknowledges a large role for public education in all these areas — academics, citizenship, and career education — and it's important that public schools continue to rise to those expectations.

Parental involvement and engagement with schools has always been critical to student success and is gaining momentum with California's statewide accountability system, which requires meaningful engagement with parents and school communities. The PDK poll shows that communication is essential to parent support. The largest gap in how parents graded their local schools correlated almost precisely with the extent to which parents were satisfied with the school's efforts to keep them informed about their child's progress.

Nearly as critical was the extent to which a school offered ample chances for parents to provide input in return. Parents who felt they were given opportunities for input were 29 percent more likely to give their school an A or B than those without as much opportunity for feedback. Similarly, higher marks were received from parents who were frequently invited to visit their school and from those who felt their child's school was very interested in what they have to say. These are important findings for educators, and meshes with efforts throughout our state and county to focus on parental involvement.

The largest gap in the survey came in response to a question about when a public school has been failing perennially whether the best response is to keep the school open and try to improve it, or close it altogether. Respondents preferred keeping it open by a two-to-one margin. Asked their priorities for using increased funding, 34 percent chose to use it for teachers, 17 percent chose supplies, another 17 percent chose classes and extracurriculars, eight percent chose infrastructure and new schools, and six percent chose learning specialists and counselors.

We are a large and diverse country. Phi Delta Kappan provides an important service to families and policymakers by continuing to poll the public on its opinions regarding public schools, the glue that binds our democracy and the foundation for all that follows. We turn to PDK, once again, for taking the pulse of our country, and providing critical insights into the perceptions of the public we all serve.

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