

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Benenson Strategy Group  
**RE:** National Education Polling Results  
**DATE:** October 2019

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

New nationwide polling shows that voters – especially Democratic primary voters and voters of color – want new investments, new ideas, and real changes in our schools. Support among Democratic primary voters remains high for investments in line with the Obama education legacy, and voters across party lines believe strongly that it will take more than just money to improve education from pre-school to college. Voters support a range of education policies to increase school funding and make it more equitable, improve teacher quality and preparation, maintain choice and accountability in the public-school system, and ensure higher education is not just cheaper, but also fairer and better for all. Democratic candidates have an opportunity to connect with both primary- and general-election voters by owning the need for real change that goes beyond addressing underfunding public education.

### **DETAILED FINDINGS**

**Democratic primary voters believe in President Obama’s approach to public education, and they are ready to embrace candidates who will be authentic successors to his policy agenda of resources for innovation and accountability in public education.**

- When asked to reflect on Obama’s education legacy, voters side with President Obama on education rather than his Democratic critics.
- In a forced choice, 61% of Democratic primary voters say they agree more with “President Obama, who said that his education policies would promote innovation and choice in public schools and raise standards for every student.”
- Just 20% of primary voters agree more with “Democratic opponents of President Obama’s education policies, who said that his agenda would weaken public schools, promote standardized testing, and get in the way of teaching.”

**Across partisan and demographic lines, voters strongly believe that we need more funding to improve public schools, but they know that funding alone is not enough to give our children the education they deserve.**

- In a three-part forced choice question about their views on how to improve America’s public schools, voters of all kinds say we need more funding **and** new ideas and real changes:
  - ✓ 57% of all voters say that “we need to not only provide more funding for public schools, but also bring in new ideas and make real changes to how schools operate.”
  - ✓ Just 25% say that “there’s already enough money going toward public schools, we just need to spend it more effectively.”
  - ✓ Only 17% say that “we just need to fully fund public schools, not make major changes to how they work.”
- Even larger majorities of key Democratic constituencies agree that we not only need more funding, but also new ideas and real changes in schools:
  - ✓ 66% of Democratic primary voters
  - ✓ 61% of Black Democratic primary voters
  - ✓ 63% of Latinx Democratic primary voters



**When it comes to policy, voters strongly support a range of proposals that include more resources and innovative ideas, and Democratic candidates have effective messages at their disposal to advocate for those policies.**

**Resource Equity:** Funding is a major pain point for voters, and Democratic candidates can appeal powerfully by fighting for *fairer* public-school funding as well as more funding overall.

- After voters hear a message from a hypothetical candidate calling to fix the way we fund schools, they are much more likely to vote for that candidate.
  - ✓ Message tested: “It’s time to not only start making real investments in our public schools, but **fix the way we fund them so every student gets their fair share of resources, not just those in wealthy neighborhoods.** Every child deserves a chance for a great education, no matter where they live, and to make that possible, we need to start funding schools fairly.”
  - ✓ 74% of voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who made this statement (43% *much* more likely).
  - ✓ Calls for fairness in funding public schools resonate even more strongly with the Democratic base. Among Democratic primary voters, 80% say they would be more likely to vote for this candidate (52% *much* more likely).
- Voters also strongly support policy proposals on funding equity. 80% of voters support a proposal to “Increase federal funding for schools and make it fairer by directing additional resources to underfunded areas, including Southern states, rural communities, and low-income districts.”
  - ✓ This includes 88% of Democratic primary voters, 93% of Black Democratic primary voters, and 93% of Latinx Democratic primary voters.

**Teacher Quality and Preparation:** Voters know that a great education starts with effective teachers, and they support not only increasing salaries for all teachers but also focusing on the areas of greatest need.

- Voters respond strongly to candidate messaging focused on the need to pay teachers more where we need them most.
  - ✓ Message tested: “Politicians have failed our public schools and our children for decades by refusing to pay teachers what they deserve. **We need to raise salaries for all teachers and use extra pay and incentives to diversify teaching and recruit great teachers in hard-to-staff subjects and high-need schools.** Because a great education for our kids starts with great teachers in every classroom.”
  - ✓ 72% of voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who made this statement (40% *much* more likely).
  - ✓ Among Democratic primary voters, 74% say they would be more likely to vote for this candidate (44% *much* more likely).
- There is strong support across the board for a range of policies to attract teachers into high-need schools and subjects and prepare them for the classroom.
  - ✓ 83% of voters, including 89% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Provide federal funding to raise salaries for all teachers, with higher pay for teachers in the schools and critical subjects where we face the greatest shortages.”
  - ✓ 85% of voters, including 93% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Pay teachers more to attract and retain a diverse teaching workforce, so that students from all backgrounds have role models to help them succeed in the classroom.”
  - ✓ 85% of voters, including 88% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Pay teachers more to attract and retain them at the schools with the greatest needs.”
  - ✓ 91% of voters, including 92% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Pay teachers more who have expertise in working with students with special needs.”
  - ✓ 81% of voters, including 81% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Pay teachers more who have expertise in critical subjects like science, technology, engineering, and math, also known as STEM.”



**Public-School Choice:** Voters know that a one-size-fits-all approach to education doesn't work, and they support choices in the public-school system to make sure every child—no matter their background—has the chance to get a great public education at a school that puts their unique needs first.

- In large numbers, voters back proposals to maintain and expand public-school choice while strengthening accountability to make sure charter schools are working for students.
  - ✓ 81% of voters, including 81% of Democratic primary voters and 89% of Black Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Expand access to more choices and options within the public-school system, including magnet schools, career academies, and public charter schools.”
  - ✓ 80% of voters, including 78% of Democratic primary voters and 84% of Black Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Expand access to public charter schools, but put tougher accountability rules in place to make sure charter schools are putting their students' needs first.”
- On the other hand, voters are skeptical of a proposal to “Put a nationwide moratorium in place to ban all federal funding for new charter schools.” Just 44% of voters support the proposal and 52% oppose it.

**Accountability:** Voters know that we need consistent standards to understand how schools are doing.

- 77% of voters, including 77% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Require each state to measure student achievement through statewide assessments with a consistent set of benchmarks and standards, so that we can make apples-to-apples comparisons to understand which schools are succeeding and which need help.”
- On the other hand, proposals to loosen the consistency of standards attract limited support. Just 54% of voters, including 55% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Allow each school district in a state to set its own benchmarks, standards, and tests, instead of statewide assessments that measure every student's achievement based on a consistent set of standards.”

**Higher Education Quality and Affordability:** Voters, especially Democratic primary voters, strongly support a range of policies to not just shift who pays for college, but also make our higher education system cheaper, fairer, and better for students and taxpayers alike.

- 88% of voters, including 91% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Give every college-ready student the chance to start taking courses for college credit instead of regular 12th-grade classes, saving their families money by allowing them to graduate college in under 4 years.”
- 85% of voters, including 86% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Create tough accountability rules so that colleges can't receive federal funds or student loans if they rip off their students or act as 'drop-out factories' where few students graduate and find good jobs.”
- 78% of voters, including 86% of Democratic primary voters, support a proposal to “Provide additional federal funding to colleges that are doing a good job of enrolling low-income students and students of color and preparing them with the knowledge and skills they need to graduate and find a job.”

###

**Methodology:** As part of a multi-year polling effort for Education Reform Now Advocacy, Benenson Strategy Group conducted a nationwide poll in August – September 2019, using a multi-modal methodology incorporating both phone and online interviews. The poll interviewed 1,721 likely 2020 voters, including an oversample of 1,227 likely Democratic primary voters. The poll's margin of error among 2020 voters is  $\pm 2.4$ .

