



**AMERICAN VIEWPOINT®**

**To:** Expect More Arizona and Interested Parties  
**From:** Lake Research Partners and American Viewpoint, Inc.  
**Re:** Recent Statewide Survey on Voter Attitudes Toward Arizona's Education System<sup>1</sup>  
**Date:** June 2010

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A recent statewide survey conducted on behalf of Expect More Arizona finds that voters in the state are concerned with the education system, disappointed in elected leaders, and worried that the quality of the education system costs Arizona economic and job growth opportunities and needed talent and expertise. However, while voters view a wide array of people and groups as responsible for their disappointment, they ultimately believe that they, too, (along with everyone else) have a role to play when it comes to improving education in Arizona.

#### **Concern and Frustration with Arizona's Education System**

Voters in Arizona are concerned about the state's education system. Given a choice of words that included optimistic and pessimistic descriptions of the state's education system, a plurality of voters chose "concerned" (43%); in fact, a plurality of voters in every demographic group chose "concerned" over any other word. Many also said they were "frustrated" (15%) or "unhappy" (12%), and only 13% chose positive words such as satisfied (6%), optimistic (5%), or happy (2%).

Driving this sense of concern with the education system is a belief that education in Arizona has declined in the last five years, rather than improved or stayed the same. Currently, 44% of voters – again a plurality – say that education in Arizona has declined in the last five years, 38% say it has stayed the same, and only 11% say it has improved. In similar research we have conducted nationally and in other states, it is unusual to find more voters who feel education has declined; instead, most voters who want to express frustration say that education has "stayed the same." That more voters in Arizona choose declined rather than stayed the same is an important and symbolic sign of their concern.

Voters are critical of the current performance of Arizona's education system, with 70% rating the system as just fair (39%) or poor (30%) and only a quarter rating the system as good (23%) or excellent (2%). They are only somewhat more positive toward the education system in their local community (43% excellent/good and 50% just fair/poor). Voters believe student performance is also sub-par, with 50% believing students in Arizona perform worse than students nationally (5% say better) and 62% believing Arizona students perform worse than students internationally (5% better).

Voters place responsibility for their frustration on a broad group of leaders, individuals and institutions. Their disappointment with elected leaders is not just with those officials in the state capitol, but also their own locally elected leaders. Eighty-five percent of voters say elected officials in the state have done a just fair or poor job improving the education system, and 79% have the same assessment for elected officials in their area. When it

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<sup>1</sup> **Methodology:** Lake Research Partners and American Viewpoint designed and administered this survey, which was conducted by phone using professional interviewers. The survey reached a total of 750 voters across the state, including a base sample of 400 voters and oversamples including 100 Latinos, 125 voters in Pima County, and 125 voters in the northern and southern rural regions of the state. The survey was conducted April 14-20, 2010. The margin of error for the full sample is +/-4.9 percentage points.

come to responsibility for taking a role in improving the education system, however, voters hold a wide array of officials accountable: 79% of voters say teachers have a great deal of responsibility, followed by parents (72%), the Arizona Department of Education (73%), the State Superintendent (70%), the state legislature (62%), the governor (56%), and their own state representative (55%). Ultimately, however, 92% of voters agree that everyone has a role to play when it comes to improving education in Arizona, and 43% say they personally have a great deal of responsibility.

### **Worry that the Quality of the Education System Means Lost Economic Opportunities**

Voters' concern with the education system in Arizona runs so deeply and exists so broadly because voters feel that education and the state's economic future are closely tied together. They feel, in short, that the future of their state is at stake. Forty-three percent of voters say the economy and unemployment are the most important issues facing the state of Arizona. Sixty-nine percent of voters strongly agree (90% agree overall) that economic development and job growth depend on improving the education system, which means improving K-12 schools, and 55% also strongly agree (90% overall) that economic development and job growth depend on improving our college and universities. They want to see education improve because they agree that investing in the education system can help attract new businesses and job opportunities (61% strongly agree, 87% overall), and they are fearful that Arizona loses business and job growth opportunities (41% strongly, 75% overall) and talented and expert people (37% strongly, 64% overall) due to the quality of the state's education system. They are dubious that Arizona is a good place for recent college graduates to start a career (only 48% agree, 17% strongly). Of course, this is a big concern to Arizonans who want to see their state develop a pipeline of talent that can attract relocating companies to Arizona.

### **A Disconnect Between Voting and Holding Officials Accountable**

There is a complex relationship between voting and holding elected officials accountable for their campaign promises on education. Voters say they will make the education system part of their vote criterion when it comes to whom they support for public office, but few say it will be one of the most important issues. Overall, 62% of voters say education will be one of the most or a very important issue in deciding whom to support for governor and state representative, but only 20% give it the highest priority.<sup>2</sup> In addition, while half of voters (53%) are extremely likely to use their vote as a way to hold elected officials accountable for their education promises and another third (36%) are extremely likely to vote for local candidates who will make improving education a top priority, only 17% of voters actually believe that most elected officials are indeed held accountable for their actions on education (78% say they are not held accountable).

In sum, voters say they are concerned with Arizona's education system and are frustrated with the job elected leaders have done improving education in their state. Notably, voters say that while they vote to hold candidates accountable for their education promises, ultimately few, if any, officials are actually held accountable. In that regard, making education one of the most important issues this election cycle can help hold officials accountable and begin the process of improving the education system in Arizona.

### **Regional Similarities and Differences**

Attitudes toward education, of course, are shaped by regional differences. Voters in the south show a bit more frustration than voters in the north, and voters in Pima show perhaps the most frustration while Maricopa, because of its size, tends to hover in the middle and helps to drive the overall numbers. With that said, however, it is clear that, when it comes to education, what Arizonans have in common is much more powerful than their differences. Concern and frustration are broadly and, in the case of concern, deeply held emotions, and voters in all sectors of the state want to see everyone stand up, expect more from Arizona, and take more seriously their role in improving the state's education system.

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 58% of voters will make education a priority for federal offices, but only 14% will make it one of the most important issues.

A few key differences are below:

- **Voters in Pima show more concern and frustration** than voters elsewhere (58% say the local education system is just fair or poor, compared to 50% of voters statewide). Voters there may be expressing frustration at state leadership as they, more than any other region, place responsibility for improving education in the state on the governor (64% great deal of responsibility, compared to 56% of voters statewide) and their state representative (64% great deal in Pima, compared to 55% of voters statewide). A final significant difference is that voters in Pima believe the quality of the state's education system directly impacts their life, more so than voters elsewhere (52% strongly agree in Pima, compared to 43% of voters across the state).
- **The major difference between voters in the northern rural region of the state and elsewhere is their intense focus on the economy and unemployment.** Forty-three percent of voters across the state select the economy and unemployment as a top issue and that share rises to 56% in the rural north –13 points higher than any other region and 18 points higher than in the rural south. Voters in the north are much more likely to say the local education system is just fair or poor compared to voters statewide (62% in the north, 50% across the state). Because of the strong focus on the economy up north, linkages between the economy and the education system are more vivid to voters in the north – 77% of voters in the north strongly agree that economic development and job growth depends on our ability to improve the K-12 education system (compared to 69% of voters across the state).
- **The rural south's stronger focus on education and slightly more positive outlook on the education system overall helps set the region apart.** While voters there remain concerned with education, they also show more optimism toward the current system. Forty-four percent of voters in the rural south think their local education system is excellent or good, compared to just 33% in the north and 35% in Pima (48% in Maricopa). They are also more likely think students there perform about the same as students nationally (52% say "about the same" in the south, while just 37% say so across the state). They are also more likely to believe Arizona high schools are preparing graduates to be competitive in the job market (68% agree, compared to 48% across state) and to be successful in college (50% agree in the south, 43% across the state).

### Race and Attitudes Toward Education in Arizona

Like region, when it comes to education what white voters and Latino voters hold in common is much stronger than where they differ. They both choose "concern" as the driving emotion (44% for whites, 40% for Latinos), and they both make education a top tier concern, though Latinos demonstrate more intensity (47% for Latinos, 34% for whites). They differ, however, because Latinos show more optimism toward the state's education system than whites do. Latinos are still concerned and frustrated and want to see improvements made, but by measureable results across the board they remain slightly more positive about the system. Fifty-four percent of Latinos strongly agree that the education system personally impacts their quality of life, compared to 42% of whites. Latinos are also more likely to think Arizona's education system is preparing high school graduates to be competitive in the job market (58% of Latinos agree, 49% of whites agree), and 56% of Latinos agree that Arizona is a good place for recent college graduates to start a career compared to 49% of whites. Notably, Latinos are more than twice as likely as whites (35%, compared to 15%) to think that elected officials are held accountable for their actions on education.