

2009 WESD Voter Survey

Prepared for:

Washington Elementary School District



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Executive Summary

The Washington Elementary School District (WESD) commissioned WestGroup Research, Inc. of Phoenix, AZ to conduct a study with high efficacy voters living within the WESD boundaries. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into potential support or opposition for an M&O override and a K-3 override.

WestGroup Research conducted all telephone interviews between February 24 and March 12, 2009. Results are based on 402 17-minute telephone interviews conducted with 194 male and 208 female voters within the District. WestGroup Research purchased a list of all high efficacy voters within the District zip codes. "High efficacy" voters were defined as voters who had voted in three of the last five "off year" elections. Respondents were then screened during the telephone interview to verify their residency within the District as well as their propensity to vote in "all elections" and not just the elections for "major offices." The total sample (n=402) has a margin of error of $\pm 5.0\%$.

Initial Reactions

- Slightly more than one in three voters (35%) gave high ratings (i.e., "4" or "5-excellent") for the quality of the education in the local public schools; however, 25% of the voters were unable to offer an opinion.
- The vast majority of voters indicated they generally tend to vote in favor of measures to fund the local public schools (79%).
- After hearing brief descriptions of two overrides proposed by WESD for the November 2009 ballot, voters were more likely to vote for the extension of the K-3 override (63%) than to vote in favor of the M&O override (51%).
- A belief that society must focus on education (i.e., education is important - 26%; always support schools - 16%; children need a good education - 13%) and a belief that schools are underfunded (i.e., schools need more money - 21%; schools are falling apart - 16%; state cuts are hurting schools - 9%) are the primary driving factors why voters indicate they would likely vote for the extension of the M&O override.
- Voters who indicated they were likely to vote against the extension of the M&O override primarily believe that the District needs to work within its budget and "tighten its belt" (mentioned by 45%).
- Voters overwhelmingly indicated that retaining teachers should be the highest priority for the District as it uses M&O override funds (60% ranked first + 21% ranked second). Reducing class sizes ranked second (22% ranked first + 31% ranked second).
- Voters likely to vote for the K-3 override extension also believe it is important to support education in general (i.e., anything for children's education - 30%; schools really need the money - 18%; children are the future - 8%) and that laying a solid foundation in kindergarten through third grade is particularly important (i.e., importance of early childhood education - 23%; make sure covering the "basics" at this level of school - 6%).

- The primary reason voters are likely to vote against the K-3 override is the challenging financial environment – a belief the District needs to work its budget better (mentioned by 40%), a perception that property taxes are high enough (13%), and a general concern about the economy (11%).
- Voters were most likely to believe that providing tutoring for students struggling with learning should be the highest priority for the District as it uses K-3 override funds (40% rank first + 37% rank second). Reducing class sizes ranked second overall (32% rank first), followed by full-day kindergarten (27% rank first).

Impact of Informational Statements on Override Support

- The two statements with the greatest likelihood to increase support for the override informed voters that both overrides are extensions of existing overrides, therefore, do not mean an increase in the taxes (60% indicate they are more likely to support the overrides), and that the override funds currently being used for all-day kindergarten have helped students to read more effectively at an early age (55%).
- Voters were most likely to believe that providing tutoring for students struggling with learning should be the highest priority for the District as it uses K-3 override funds (40% rank first + 37% rank second). Reducing class sizes ranked second overall (32% rank first), followed by full-day kindergarten (27% rank first).
- The three consequence statements that led at least half of the voters to indicate they would be more likely to support the overrides were: tutoring programs for math and reading will be in jeopardy if the K-3 override does not pass (60% indicating “more likely to support”), there would be a reduction in the number of art, music and PE teachers if the M&O override does not pass (57%), and class sizes at all grade levels could go from 25 to at least 30 if the M&O override does not pass (52%).

Perceptions of Public Education and the Economy

- There was a very high level of agreement among voters that “Even though we are in difficult economic times, we must fund our public schools because investing in our children is investing in our future” (81% giving a “4” or “5” rating where “5” = “strongly agree”).
- A strong majority of voters also agreed that “investing in the K-3 override is important because the first years of education determine whether or not a child will be successful for the rest of his or her life” (71% give a “4” or “5” rating) and “Because Arizona State funding for public schools is not adequate, school districts must seek voter approved funding in order to provide basic services for students” (62%).

Source of Information about Ballot Measures and Communications from WESD

- Voters indicated they are most likely to turn to the newspaper (60%), items sent to them in the mail (58%), and/or the television news (42%) for information about ballot measures.
- Two in three voters indicated they currently receive information from WESD (68%). Not surprisingly, current and former WESD parents were more likely to report receiving

information from the District than those who had never been a parent (74% vs. 60%). The most commonly recalled information from the District are newsletters (mentioned by 38%) and various mailings such as pamphlets and flyers (38%).

Final Reactions to Proposed Ballot Measures

- Voters remained more likely to vote for the K-3 override than the M&O override (67% vs. 59%) when asked their opinion again at the end of the survey; however, the percentage indicating they would vote for each measure increased (M&O up eight points from 51% and K-3 up four points from 63%).
- Those most likely to indicate they would vote for the M&O override after hearing the information from the survey questions include: females (67% vs. 50% males), Democrats (72%) and Independents (67%) vs. Republicans (49%), and voters who have lived in the District less than 16 years (66% vs. 56%).
- Those most likely to vote for the K-3 override at the conclusion of the survey include: females (74% vs. 60%), Democrats (84% vs. 57% Republicans and 65% Independents), and voters who have lived in the District less than 16 years (74% vs. 64%).

Conclusions

1. As suspected after the focus groups with voters, the telephone survey results confirm that there is stronger support for a K-3 Override than for an M&O override among high efficacy voters in WESD. This higher level of support appears to be related to the ability of voters to get a clearer picture of what would be funded in a K-3 override as well as a belief that it is important to invest in the education of children because “children are the future” and that it is particularly important to start children out strong in the early grades.
2. Voters supportive of the M&O override also have a strong belief that education is important as well as an understanding that schools are “underfunded” and that “state cuts are hurting” local schools. However, the concerns about the economy appear to have a stronger impact on the M&O override support than the K-3 support – with a strong percentage of those opposed indicating that the District needs to “work within its budget” and “tighten its belt.”
3. There was a fairly high percentage of “don’t know” responses to the voting scenarios and there also was a significant amount of movement within that group once they had responded to all of the information in the survey. It was clear in the focus groups that if voters do not initially know or understand what an override is or will be used for, they will vote based on what information they hear. If they do not receive a clear explanation, they are likely to vote against an initiative. The telephone survey confirmed that voters initially in the “against” and “don’t know” response categories were more likely to move to a “for” position once they were exposed to information (both in favor and opposing) the overrides. This shows that education about the initiatives can have a notable positive

impact on the voter, but also that a lack of education will only hurt the initiatives.

4. Based on the final voting responses, it appears that it is possible for the District to win both overrides, but there are critical pieces of information that needs get to voters in order for this to be a possibility. The most important piece is that both overrides are extensions of existing overrides and do not represent any increase in tax burden on District residents. This was the information that had the most significant positive impact on all opposing subgroups, particularly for the M&O override. Voters are concerned about the economy, but they also indicated they firmly believe in the importance of education and that the state cuts are hurting local districts. It is critical that WESD inform voters that they have the ability to help their local district within out hurting their own pocketbooks.
5. For the K-3 override, it was interesting to see that talking about the possible negative impact on all-day kindergarten only was effective increasing the positive response among younger voters; it actually had a negative impact on older voters and Republican voters. The older voters were more likely to vote favorably for the override when learning that math and reading tutoring for younger children would be at risk if the override did not pass. Therefore, it is important to tailor these messages to the appropriate audiences.
6. The telephone survey did contradict the focus group participants in one key area. Focus group participants indicated that more specificity about the personal impact of the overrides the more likely they would vote for the initiative. The telephone survey, however, showed that voters opposed to the measures or undecided, were more likely to be negatively influenced by information about the financial impact of the overrides on each household. Once again, the stronger message is that the overrides are extensions while informing voters about the actual cost may do more harm than good.