

Survey finds Maryland voters support nonpublic schools, tax credits

Maryland voters are more than twice as likely to prefer sending their children to nonpublic schools over any other type of school, according to a new public opinion survey to be released Aug. 28.

The “School Choice Survey in the State of Maryland,” completed by the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, also found that more than half of Maryland voters favor a tax-credit scholarship system, and nearly two-thirds of voters believe private schools are “somewhat” or “very” important to Maryland’s public education system.

Mary Ellen Russell, deputy director for education and family life for the Maryland Catholic Conference, was encouraged by the strong support shown for business tax credits. The Catholic Conference was one of the sponsors of the poll.

During the last several legislative sessions in Annapolis, Catholic educators have pushed to establish the BOAST Maryland tax credit, which would provide businesses with a 75 percent state income tax credit on donations made to scholarship organizations or certain educational programs. The proposal passed the Maryland Senate by a 30-17 vote in the 2008 legislative session, but did not get out of committee in the House of Delegates.

“I think the majority support indicates how clearly that kind of program will benefit everyone,” said Ms. Russell, noting that the survey results give tax credit proponents some leverage in Annapolis. The BOAST program would help students and teachers in public and nonpublic schools.

“It’s really important to remember that in supporting the ability of families to afford nonpublic schools, we are saving the state money in the long run,” she said.

Ms. Russell pointed out that only 21 percent of survey respondents said private

schools were “not that important” to public education in Maryland and only 13 percent said they were “not at all important.”

Maryland’s private schools currently enroll about 136,000 students and save taxpayers approximately \$1.56 billion in yearly public school expenditures, according to the survey.

Mary Ellen Hrutka, executive director of the Annapolis-based Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium, said efforts to sustain enrollments in Catholic and other private schools relieve overcrowding in public schools. She believes Maryland voters recognize that fact.

“It was gratifying to see that across every demographic category, there was support for the business tax credit,” said Ms. Hrutka, whose group encompasses the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington and four neighboring dioceses.

The Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium was also among the sponsors of the survey.

The survey found that 52 percent of Republicans, 53 percent of Democrats and 42 percent of Independents favored business tax credits. Overall, voters favored tax credits by 52 percent to 48 percent, with support growing to 63 percent for programs that limit the scholarships to students with financial need.

“I think it’s very affirming that parents see the value of having choice,” said Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools in the Baltimore Archdiocese. “When we give parents that choice, we should help them by way of the resources.”

The survey found that large majorities of Maryland voters were unfamiliar with school choice reform proposals. Sixty nine percent were not familiar with charter schools – public schools that have more control over their own budget, staff and curriculum. Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed were unfamiliar with virtual schools – public or private schools that offer lessons over the Internet rather than in traditional classrooms.

More voters were familiar with voucher programs, with 57 percent saying they were

“somewhat” or “very” familiar with school vouchers.

More than a third of the respondents said overcrowded classrooms or overcrowded schools were major challenges facing public schools. Seventeen percent rated Maryland’s public school system as “good” or “excellent.”

Eighty two percent of those surveyed said they would like to choose a school for their child among options that include private schools, charter schools, virtual schools and home schooling.

When asked “what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child,” 45 percent of respondents selected private schools.

A total of 1,200 phone interviews were conducted for the study by Strategic Vision June 27-29. The Friedman Foundation has conducted similar studies in Oklahoma, Idaho, Tennessee, Nevada, Illinois, Georgia, Florida and Arizona.