

# **MONTANA PUBLIC VIEWS on K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION**

**Featuring the 2010 MTSBA and MREA/Zogby Poll of Montana Voters**



**4<sup>th</sup> Grade classroom at Broadwater Elementary in Helena Montana**





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**Jan Cahill**

President, MTSBA



**Kris Kuehn**

President, MREA

### **Working together for K-12 Public Education**

If you want to know the opinions of Montana voters on K-12 public education issues, all you have to do is ask!!! That is exactly what the Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) and the Montana Rural Education Association (MREA) have done. In order to ensure that legislators, trustees, educators, parents and community members have access to information regarding the views of Montana voters on critical issues impacting K-12 public education, MTSBA and MREA took the initiative to gather critical information in preparation for, what will undoubtedly be, one of the most challenging legislative sessions for K-12 public education.

In November of 2010, MTSBA and MREA commissioned Zogby International, a renowned U.S. market research, opinion polling firm to conduct a telephone survey of 700 likely Montana voters. The Poll solicited information on how Montanan's graded their local schools, whether training (professional development) was important for trustees, the imposition of forced consolidation, budgeting priorities at the state level, Montanan's views on increased income taxes or the implementation of a sales tax, whether money intended for schools (i.e., \$81 million in state land revenue from coal leases on Otter Creek and \$30.7 million from the Federal Education Jobs Fund Act Jobs) should go directly to schools or help balance the state's budget, whether those polled were concerned about the decrease in K-12 funding from 51% to 34% since 1991, and Montanan's support for elected officials who support increased funding for K-12 education. This publication is devoted to revealing the results of that Poll.

The Poll revealed overwhelming support for K-12 public schools and prioritization of funding for K-12 public education. Montanans are clear that state funding for schools should be a priority. At a time when Montana is faced with a budget shortfall of approximately \$370 million more than projected revenues over the coming two years, the Poll shows that the general public is standing behind K-12 public education and that decreasing public education funding is not the solution. Instead, likely voters believe that the state needs to invest additional resources in our state's public schools and that K-12 public education needs to remain a priority.

MTSBA and MREA advocate for the interests of public schools and the children served by Montana's public schools every day. MTSBA and MREA know that by collaborating and working together to represent the interests of every public school child in the state of Montana and continually promoting enhanced student achievement, we can develop solutions to ensure Montana's constitutional requirement (Article X, Section 1 of the Montana Constitution) that "the legislature provide a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools" is fulfilled. However, MTSBA and MREA cannot do it alone. Legislators need to be informed about the wants, needs and preferences of Montana voters. Trustees, educators, parents and community members need to be strong advocates for K-12 public education and make their voices heard. Now is not the time for apathy. Get involved and become educated about what matters to those in your communities and rally the troops. We need to be and remain united on education issues that benefit all children.

## **OVERVIEW**

### **The Montana School Boards Association**

The Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) is a statewide association of public school boards whose mission is to encourage and advance public elementary and secondary education through the unique American tradition of local citizen responsibility. Since 1926, MTSBA has been firmly committed to the concept of public education policy being determined by locally elected school board members and has served as the service association for those individuals. MTSBA's membership encompasses virtually all the state's locally elected boards of trustees and provides access to a wide range of services, including seminars, legislative representation, legal assistance, personnel services, superintendent search services, policy development, in-district consulting services, and insurance programs. The association also serves as a liaison between local school boards and various state agencies and organizations.

#### **MTSBA'S CORE IDEOLOGY**

Core ideology describes an association's consistent identity that transcends all changes related to its relevant environment. It consists of two elements - core purpose - the association's reason for being - and core values - essential and enduring principles that guide an association. Envisioned future conveys a concrete yet unrealized vision for the association. It consists of a big audacious goal - a clear and compelling catalyst which serves as a focal point for effort - and a vivid description - vibrant and engaging descriptions of what it will be like to achieve the big audacious goal.

#### **MTSBA'S CORE PURPOSE**

"To maximize the potential of every child through school board leadership."

#### **MTSBA'S CORE VALUES**

- **Advocacy Focused on Children:** MTSBA will lead advocacy efforts on behalf of our membership to ensure that Montana's system of public education is focused on high student achievement, full development of the potential of all children, and development of the whole child through a system of education that includes music and the arts, healthy habits and early childhood education.
- **Rational, Adequate Funding:** MTSBA commits to funding, at all levels, which is rationally related to standards, mandates, values and all other necessary operational costs.
- **Visionary Leadership:** MTSBA will provide services that strengthen the effectiveness of local school boards as governors of public education. MTSBA will be visionary, dynamic and solution-oriented in all programs and services.
- **Cultural Integrity:** MTSBA commits to the preservation of and education regarding the cultural integrity of our American Indian populations.
- **Commitment to Preserving Local Control:** MTSBA commits to preservation of supervision and control of public schools by elected school boards.

## **The Montana Rural Education Association**

The Montana Rural Education Association is an organization which is concerned about all aspects of the K-12 public education system in rural Montana. The organization is particularly concerned with the following basic educational premises:

- That equality of educational opportunity regardless of their geographic location is a constitutional right of all Montana students;
- That the state must provide a funding system which provides adequate funds for all students in Montana;
- That the "local control" provided to school boards in the Montana Constitution be realized in all aspects of school district proceedings;
- MREA supports the accreditation standards adopted by the Board of Public Education, provided sufficient state funding is available for implementation of the standards;
- MREA is opposed to the "forced consolidation" of school districts. Forced consolidation is legislative, administrative or executive action taken at the state or regional levels that mandates the consolidation of school districts.

### **MREA'S COMMITMENTS**

- MREA is committed to providing all students of Montana equality of educational opportunity. Each person in this state must be offered equal educational opportunity of they are to achieve individual success. MREA is not only committed to educational equality, but just as important, to quality educational experience.
- MREA is committed to work toward an educational funding system that is weighted to reflect the increased cost of educating students in rural areas of Montana, including all aspects of state ANB funding, transportation and capital outlay.
- MREA shall work to ensure that the control and supervision of local school districts remain at the local level.
- MREA realizes that the consolidation of school districts in Montana has been a voluntary and ongoing process, and strongly believes that local communities and school boards are in the best position to evaluate and initiate voluntary consolidation efforts and will only support consolidation on that premise.
- MREA is committed to work with all other educational groups for the betterment of Montana students.
- MREA will insure that effective lobbying efforts are undertaken with the Montana Legislature, the State Board of Public Education, the Office of Public Instruction and all other public or private entities that have an effect on rural education in Montana.
- MREA pledges that its members will receive timely information regarding issues that affect rural education in Montana and will also encourage the participation of member districts in lobbying efforts when appropriate.

## **POLL HIGHLIGHTS**

### **EDUCATION FUNDING**

- Montana voters believe K-12 education funding should be increased.
- A majority of Montana voters support elected officials who support increased funding for K-12 public education.
- Montana voters overwhelmingly chose K-12 education when asked to identify what they believe should be the top priority in the state budget.
- Montana voters disagree with the state's recent decision to use emergency federal education aid to balance the state's budget.
- A great majority of Montana voters believe that revenues from state land leases should go directly to public education and not the state general fund.
- Those polled are concerned that K-12 education spending, as a percent of the state budget, has decreased in the past decade.
- The majority of Montana voters expressed support for possible initiated measures that would deliver increased funding to schools.

### **EDUCATION QUALITY**

- When asked to grade schools based on the quality of education students receive, most Montana voters give schools in their community an A or B.
- An overwhelming majority of Montana voters believe that school districts should invest in training for their volunteer school board members.

### **DECISION MAKING**

- Montana voters overwhelmingly believe local school boards are best positioned to make decisions about when it may be time to consolidate or merge with another school district.

### **ABOUT THE POLL OF MONTANA VOTERS OVERVIEW**

Zogby International was commissioned by MTSBA and MREA to conduct a telephone survey of 700 likely Montana voters. The survey was conducted November 8-9, 2010.

### **MARGIN OF ERROR**

The margin is +/- 3.8 percentage points. Margins of error are higher for sub-groups. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percent. Please note that totals may not sum up to 100% due to rounding.

### **QUESTIONS**

The survey featured 27 questions, including demographic questions, which were developed jointly by MTSBA/MREA and Zogby International. For questions with several possible answers, response options were rotated.

### **SAMPLE**

Participants were randomly drawn from telephone CDs of a national listed sample.

### **SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS**

#### **AFFILIATION**

- 34% Republican
- 30% Democratic
- 36% Independent

#### **AGE GROUP**

- 18-24: 10.2%
- 25-34: 16.3%
- 35-54: 35.1%
- 55-69: 25.5%
- 70+: 1.6%

#### **COMMUNITY SIZE**

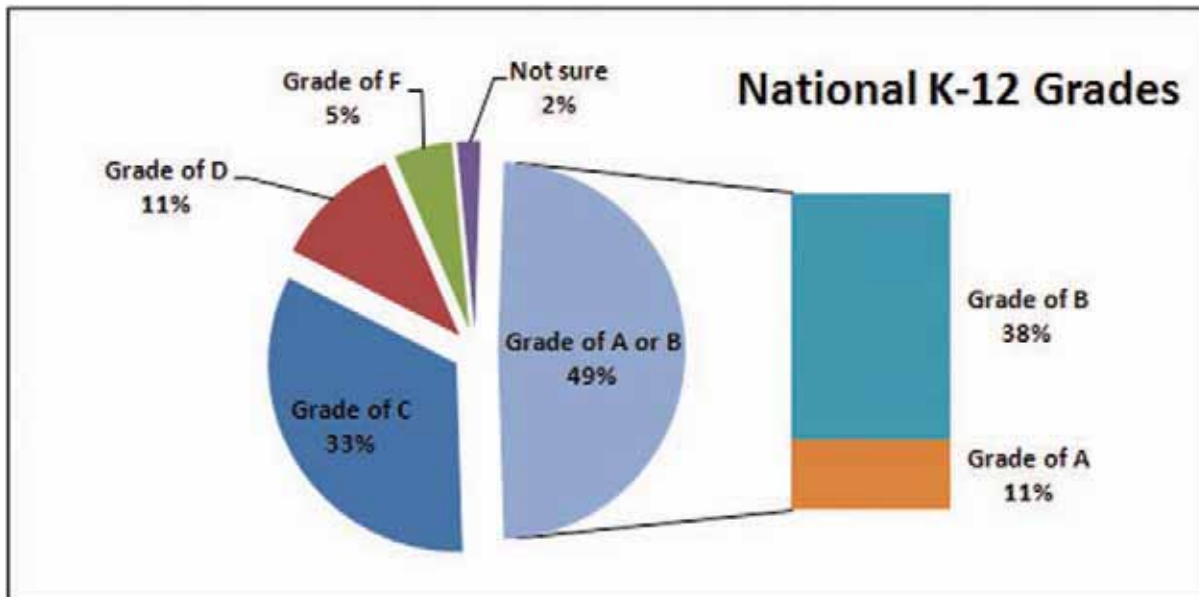
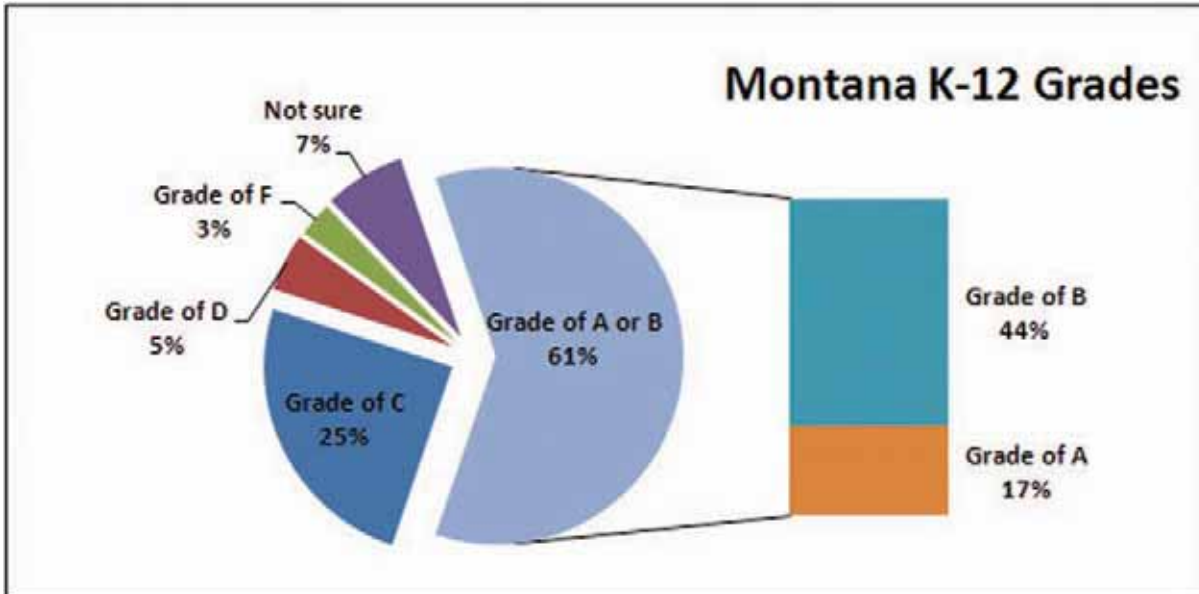
- 24.1% 50,000 or more
- 15.0% 25,001 to 50,000
- 6.1% 12,001 to 25,000
- 10.2% 6,500 to 12,000
- 38.4% 6,499 or less

#### **CHILDREN UNDER AGE 17**

- 64% do not have children under age 18 living at home
- 36% have children under age 18 living at home

## EDUCATION QUALITY

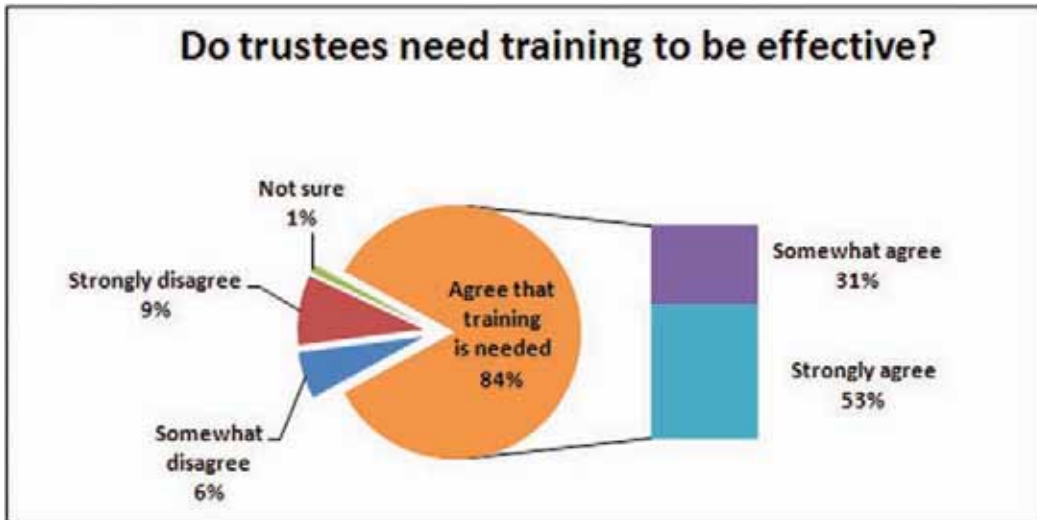
**POLL QUESTION 1: If you had to give a letter grade to the K-12 public schools in your community based on the quality of education children enrolled are receiving, would you give them an A, B, C, D, or F?**



The two charts above compare how Montana voters graded the schools in their local communities versus the national PDK Poll. Montana schools are graded higher by their local communities than the national average (1). A plurality of Montana voters (61%) say they would give K-12 public schools in their community a letter grade of better than average based on the quality of education children enrolled are receiving. A large portion (17%) gave their school a grade of A, while only 3% of Montana's would give their local school a failing grade.



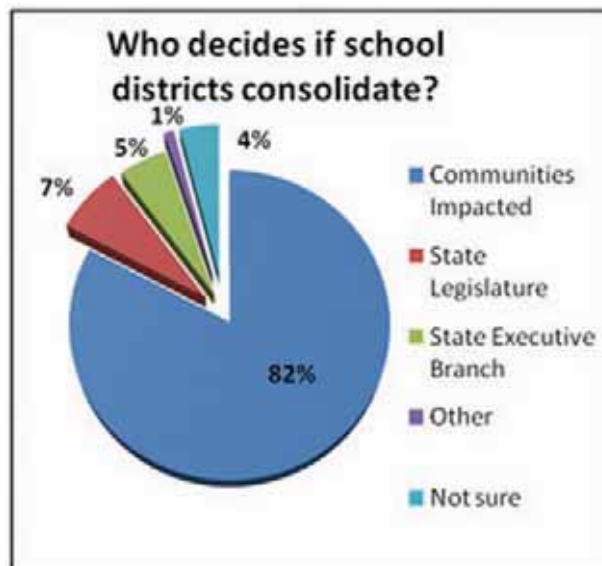
**POLL QUESTION 2: Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following statement: "School districts should invest in training school board members to become more effective in their positions."**



A strong majority (84%) of people polled said they agree with the statement: "School districts should invest in training school board members to become more effective in their positions". A majority of those (53%) say they strongly agree with the statement. A small percentage (15%) disagree that public schools should invest in training for their volunteer school board members.

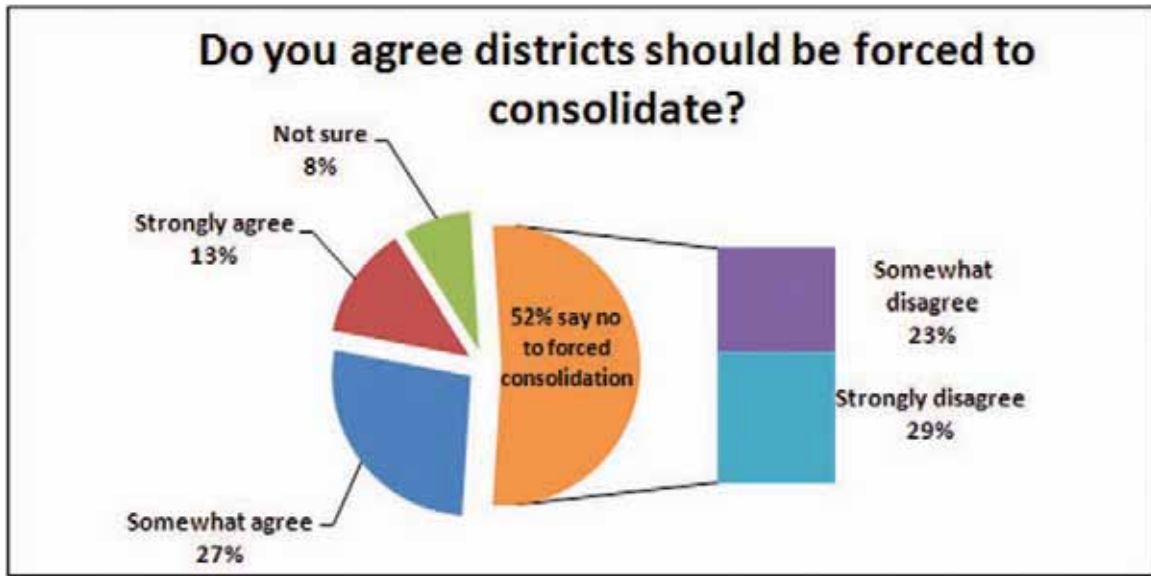
### **CONSOLIDATION**

**POLL QUESTION 3: Which of the following do you think should be most responsible for deciding whether school districts should merge or consolidate?**



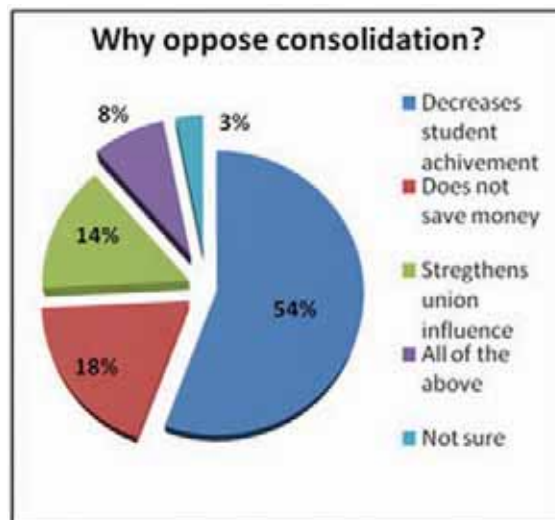
An overwhelming majority of likely voters in Montana (82%) believe that the communities impacted by consolidation should be the most responsible for deciding whether school districts should merge or consolidate, while just 12% say that either the state legislature or executive branch should be responsible for such decisions.

**POLL QUESTION 4: Do you agree or disagree that some Montana public school districts should be forced to consolidate?**



Over half of Montana voters (52%) say that Montana public school districts should not be forced to consolidate. Of those that do not believe that Montana public school districts should be forced to consolidate a large majority (29%) of the respondents say they strongly disagree with the concept of forced consolidation.

**POLL QUESTION 5: Which of the following would make you most likely to oppose forced consolidation?**



Montana voters (72%) oppose forced consolidation upon learning that it either decreases student achievement or that it does not save money. 14% said they would oppose forced consolidation if it strengthened union influence in public schools.

### **Montana School Consolidation - Fictions and Facts:**

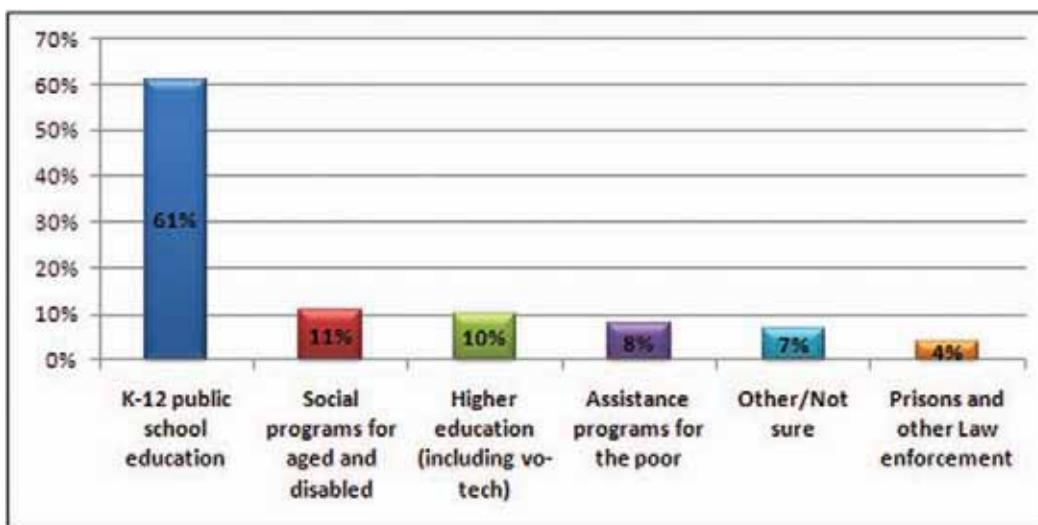
- Fiction: There are 417 school districts, each operating separately in Montana.
  - Fact: Many of those 417 districts operate jointly with another. For example, Columbia Falls has a high school and elementary district, but operate with one superintendent and board, which create a school system. There are 298 school systems in Montana.
- Fiction: There are too many administrators in Montana.
  - Fact: In 2009, there were 109 full time superintendents in Montana. Public education in Montana had 16.5 FTE (Teacher, Library staff, counselor and no educator licensed staff) employees for every 1 administrator (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principal and Assistant Principal). The employee-to-executive/manager ratio for Public Administration (e.g. state and local government) is 3.5-to-1. (2)
- Fiction: Children will get a better education through consolidation.
  - Fact: The research actually proves that smaller school settings help narrow the achievement gap and lead to higher academic achievement. Not only is consolidation likely to lead to increased costs and lower academic achievement, forced consolidation is fundamentally at odds with the Montana Constitution, which vests supervision and control of education in each district in the elected board of trustees.

### **Additional facts about consolidation:**

- The argument that consolidation saves money is based upon the premise of economies of scale.
  - Analysis shows that cost savings from massive school and district consolidation have not been realized. There is no evidence that consolidation of schools will result in reduced expenses. (3) Bigger is not always better for reducing costs.
- Students in larger schools tend to be more disconnected.
  - In large schools, the sense of belonging and cohesiveness is diminished which often requires special programs to address dropouts and discipline. (3) Bigger is not always better in engaging children in the school day.
- Small schools in high-poverty communities produced higher student achievement.
  - Compared to larger consolidated buildings, small schools produce better results. Poverty exerts a larger detrimental effect in large schools in large districts. (3) Bigger is not always better in increasing student achievement.
- Loss of local control is important when considering consolidation.
  - As districts and schools become larger, those who make decisions affecting the local communities become more removed from those most affected. (3) Bigger is not always better in community engagement and development.

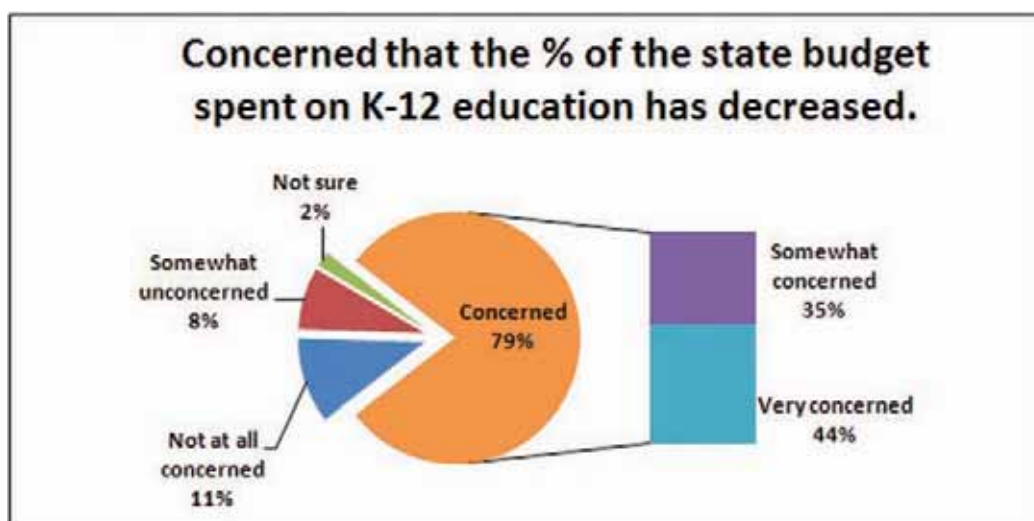
## EDUCATION FUNDING

**POLL QUESTION 6: When it comes to how state government spends your tax dollars, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority?**



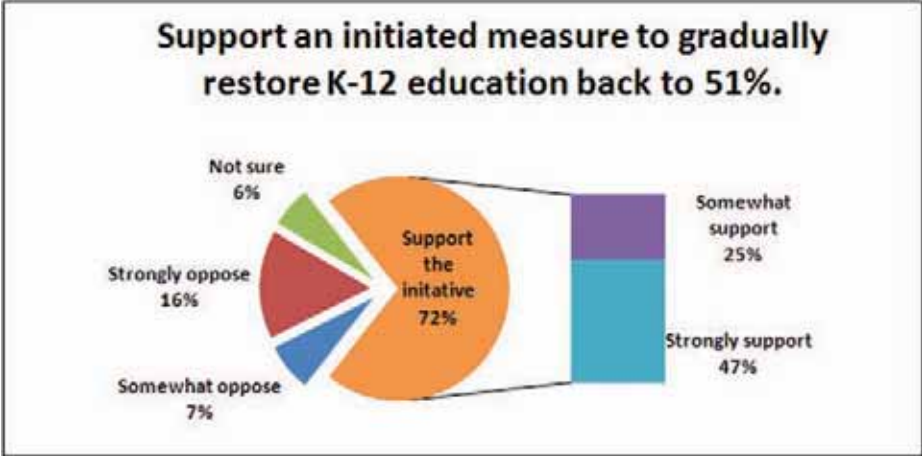
A majority of likely voters in Montana (61%) say that when it comes to how state government spends their tax dollars, K-12 public school education should be the highest priority. Just one in nine (11%) say the highest priority should be social programs for the aged and disabled and one in ten (10%) say the priority should be higher education, including vo-tech.

**POLL QUESTION 7: From 1991 through 2010, the percentage of Montana's total state budget devoted to K-12 public education funding has decreased from 51 percent to 34 percent. Knowing this, are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, or not at all concerned that the percentage of the state budget spent on K12 public education has decreased?**



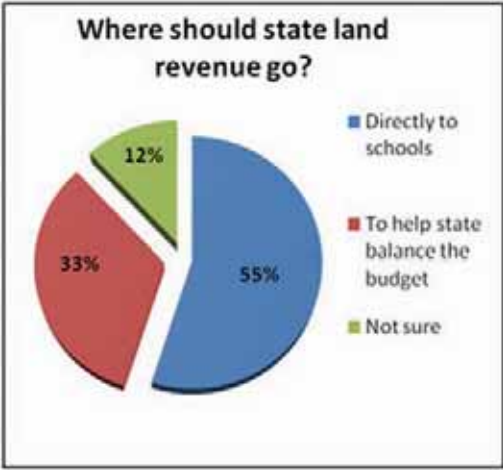
A strong majority of likely voters (79%) say they are concerned about the decrease in K-12 funding from 51% to 34% since 1991, with 44% saying they are very concerned with such a decrease and 35% stating they were somewhat concerned. Only 19% of Montana voters say they are unconcerned with this decrease.

**POLL QUESTION 8: If you had the opportunity to vote on a statewide measure that would require the state to gradually restore the percentage of the state budget devoted to K-12 education back to 51 percent, would you most likely support or oppose the initiated measure?**



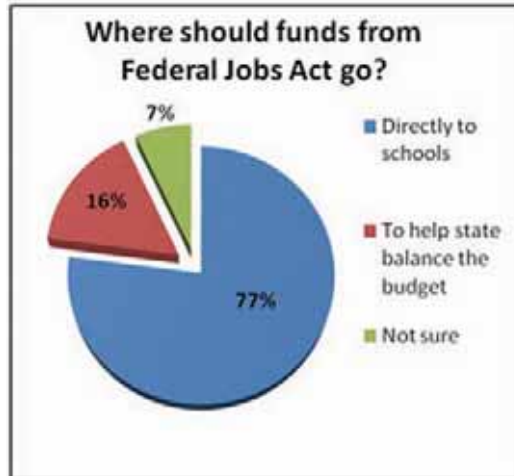
Most voters polled (72%) say they would support a statewide measure that would require the state to gradually restore the percentage of the state budget devoted to K-12 education back to 51%. Those who say they strongly support the measure (47%) are almost triple those who strongly oppose it (16%).

**POLL QUESTION 9: State land revenues from leases and other income are devoted to support public elementary and high school education under the Montana Constitution. More recently, state policymakers have used \$81 million generated from coal leases on the otter creek state lands to balance the state budget for all government spending. In your opinion, should the state use this money to help balance the state’s budget, or should this money go directly to local school districts?**



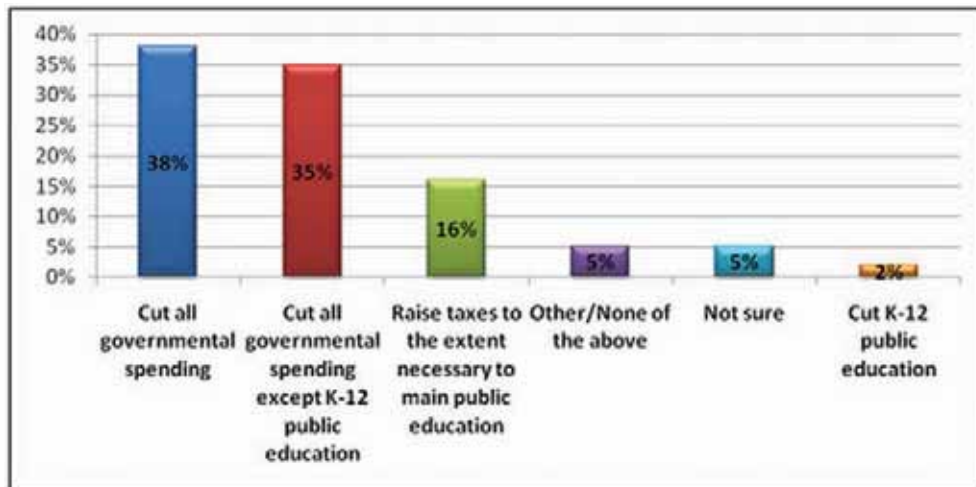
A majority (55%) say that schools should receive money from land leases and other income under the Montana Constitution. (33%) say that money should be used to balance the state budget.

**POLL QUESTION 10: Recently, Congress approved and the President signed the Education Jobs Fund Act, delivering emergency aid to save jobs in K-12 public schools. Montana has received approximately \$30 million under this program, but state policymakers have used these funds to balance the state budget for all government spending. In your opinion, should the state use this money to help balance the state’s budget or should this money go directly to local school districts?**



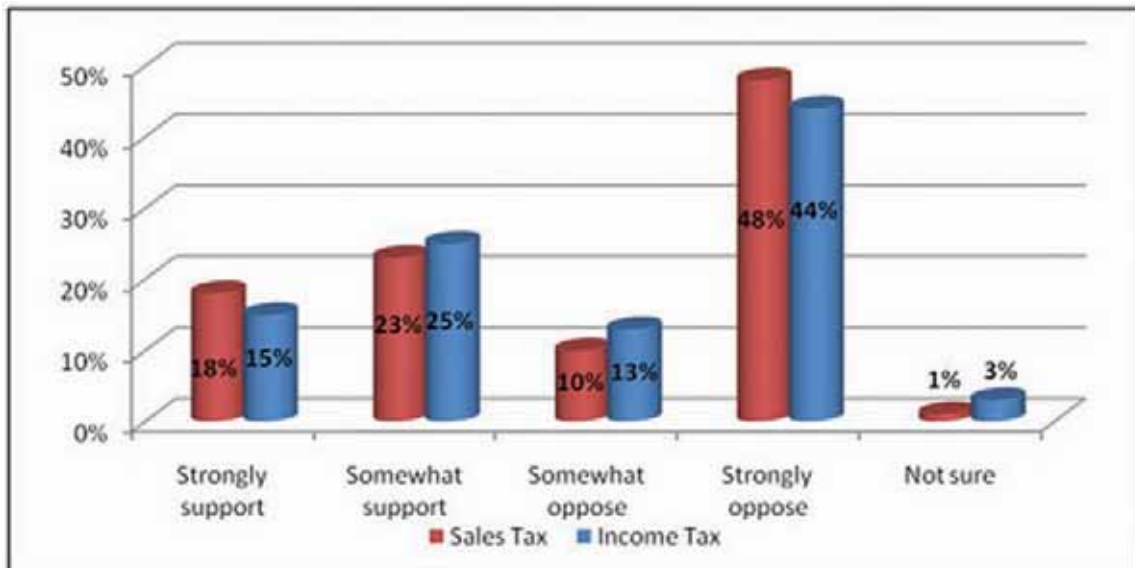
More than three quarters of likely voters (77%) say that schools should receive the money from the Education Jobs Fund Act, while 16% say it should balance the state budget and 7% are not sure what should be done with the money.

**POLL QUESTION 11: The staff for the Legislature estimate that the cost of maintaining current levels of government service in Montana will be approximately \$ 370 million more than projected revenues over the coming two years. Which one of the following options best represents your views regarding how to solve this issue?**



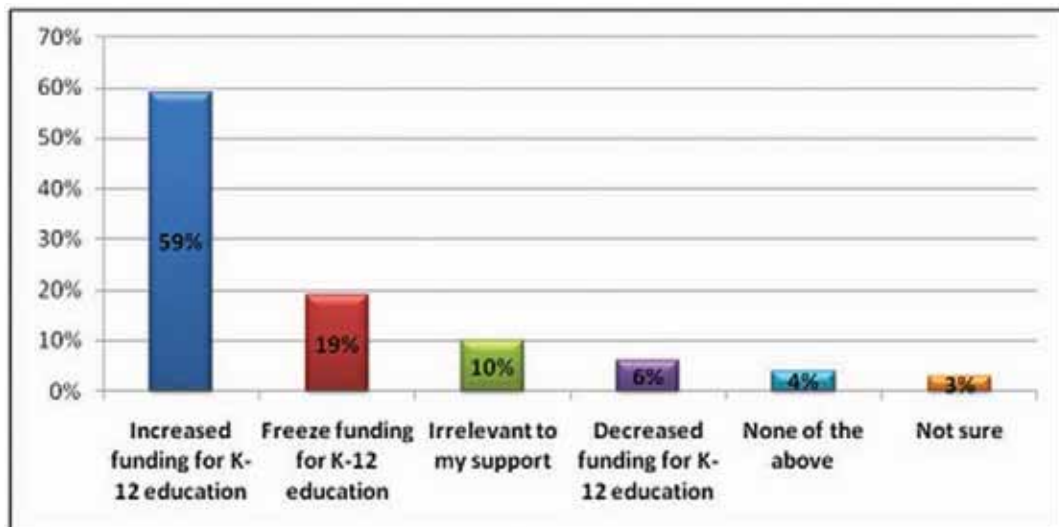
Only 2% of Montana voters believe that K-12 public education should be cut to address the current shortfall in the Montana state general fund. Cutting all government spending (38%) and cutting all spending except public education (35%) receive similar support. Sixteen percent say they would like taxes raised to the extent necessary to pay for the projected costs of maintaining current levels of service in public education.

**POLL QUESTION 12: If you knew the money would be used to increase student achievement by increasing graduation rates, reducing drop-out rates, eliminating achievement gaps and increasing test scores, would you support or oppose implementation of a 2% income or sales tax?**



During these difficult economic times, the majority of Montana voters (58%) said they oppose a 2% sales tax and 57% said they would oppose a 2% increase in income taxes even if they knew the money would be used for K-12 public education.

**POLL QUESTION 13: Please tell us which type of elected official you most support, one who supports increased funding for K-12 public education, one who supports decreasing spending in K-12 public education, or one who supports freezing spending for K-12 public education?**



While Montanans do not support an increase in taxes, most of Montana’s voters (59%) say they support an elected official who supports increased funding for K-12 education. Only 19% support a candidate who would freeze funding for K-12 public education. One in 10 likely voters (10%) say the elected official’s position on K-12 education funding is irrelevant to their support of the candidate.



**Lance Melton**

Executive Director, MTSBA



**Dave Puyear**

Executive Director, MREA

### **What does this all mean?**

In summary, what does all of this mean and how is this information going to help us in advocating for K-12 public schools and the funding necessary to comply with Montana's constitutional requirement that "the legislature provide a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools," in accordance with Article X, Section 1 of the Montana Constitution?

The Zogby Poll results clearly show that Montanans support public education, Montanans support funding for public education, and they support public officials that support K-12 public education. The Zogby Poll focused on three main areas impacting public education: (1) the quality of education in Montana, (2) forced consolidation, and (3) funding for education.

#### The Quality of Education in Montana:

Based upon the results of the Poll, 61% of Montanans graded their local schools as an "A" or "B" when it comes to the quality of education provided to children enrolled in those schools. Compare this to the National PDK Poll where only 47% of those polled gave their local schools an "A" or "B." This is significant in light of the Zogby Poll revealing that 84% of those polled believed that school districts should invest in training for school board members so that trustees can become more effective in their positions. We know from research collected at the national level that effective school boards can make a positive difference in student achievement. Based upon the results of the Poll, Montanans are, in large part, pleased with the quality of education in their respective local communities. However, as we all know, enhanced student achievement is a moving target that needs to be continually refined and reassessed in order to ensure that Montana students continue to excel in a global environment.

#### Forced Consolidation:

As many of you know, there has been much discussion about forced consolidation of schools. Although some have sought to portray forced consolidation as a panacea, the research shows consolidation does not save money and does not benefit kids. The results of the Zogby Poll show that Montanans believe that local school boards and affected communities are in a better position than the state in deciding whether school districts should consolidate. A majority of Montanans further agree that Montana public schools should not be forced to consolidate and 72% of those polled would oppose forced consolidation if it decreases student achievement or does not save money.

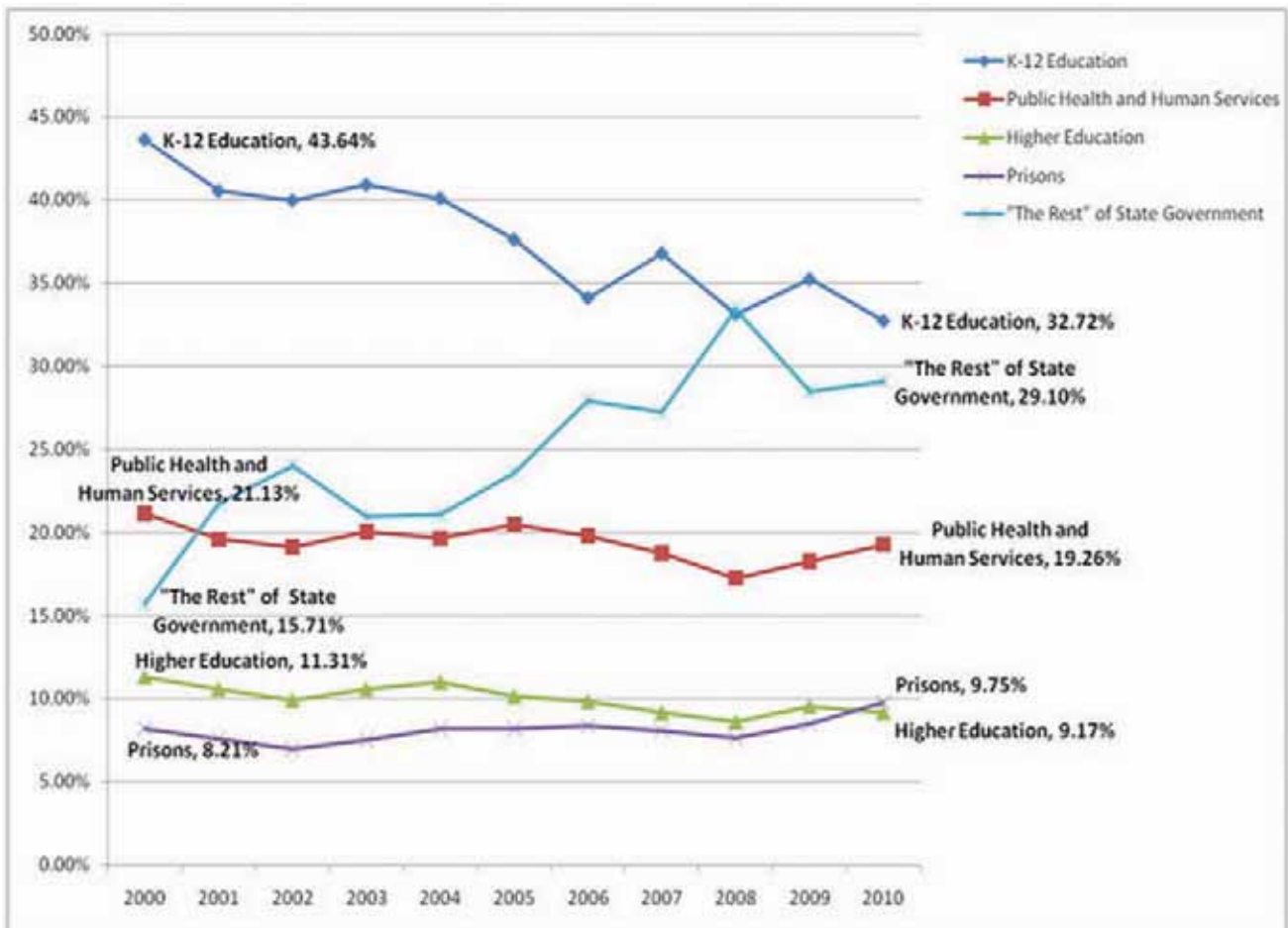


Funding for Education:

The Zogby Poll exposes Montanans opinions on K-12 public education and the verdict is clear – Montanans believe that K-12 public education should be the highest priority when it comes to how state government spends tax dollars. In fact, 79% of those polled stated that they are concerned that from 1991 through 2010, the percentage of Montana’s total state budget devoted to K-12 public education funding has decreased from 51% to 34%. Despite the decreases in the percentage of the state budget to fund K-12 public education, Montanans are generally opposed to raising either income taxes or the imposition of a sales tax to fund schools. Instead, they want to see policymakers reprioritize spending and ensure adequate funding for K-12 public education.

Some have claimed that funding for K-12 public education has increased at the same or even greater pace as funding for other state programs. However, the rhetoric does not match the reality in this case. The chart below, generated from a spreadsheet provided by the Legislative Fiscal Division, shows that K-12 public education continues to fall behind as a state general fund priority, with the rest of government growing at a dramatic pace. We always hear that funding for K-12 public education competes head-to-head with funding for public health and human services and for prisons, i.e., the trifecta of state funding – educating, medicating and incarcerating.

The chart below shows that from 2000 to the present, the percentage of the state general fund devoted to K-12 public education has decreased significantly while the share of funding for government agencies other than Corrections, Health and Human Services and Higher Ed has taken off, growing from 15.71% of the state general fund in 2000 to 29.10% in 2010.



So, K-12 public education is not and should not be portrayed as competing with higher education, social services and prisons. The state funds that were devoted to K-12 public education are now being reallocated to fund other state programs, which is a trend that should be reversed as soon as possible.

Not only has the percentage of total state dollars for K-12 public education continually decreased over time, K-12 public education has taken further significant funding hits by the state's diversion of funds intended specifically for K-12 public education. The Zogby Poll shows that the majority of Montanans believe that the \$81 million generated from coal leases on the Otter Creek state lands should go directly to schools. Instead, these funds have been used to balance the state budget for all government spending. Had it not been for the Governor's veto of House Bill 676 last session (a bill that passed by wide margins in both the House and Senate), Otter Creek funds would have been allocated to schools as they should have been and in the matter supported by likely voters in Montana.

The same is true for the \$30.7 million that Montana received from the Education Jobs Fund Act. This money was intended to directly benefit schools. Again, the Governor's office used these funds to balance the state's budget for all government spending. Montanans overwhelmingly oppose (77%) using this money to help the state balance the budget.

So, where do we go from here!!! In an effort to ensure that all legislators have access to the results of the Zogby Poll prior to making decisions that impact public education, this publication is being mailed to the homes of every legislator in this state. According to the Zogby Poll, 59% of the public supports elected officials who support public education. Our hope is that the results of this poll help Legislators focus their efforts on sustaining and protecting a vibrant system of K-12 public schools throughout Montana. The future of our state is at stake and the public is calling for a prioritization of K-12 public education as a critical part of that future. We believe that Legislators will heed that call if they are provided with objective information regarding the expressed needs, wants and preferences of their constituents. MTSBA and MREA are proud to participate in advancing the interests of K-12 public education and the children our members serve in every community in this state.

#### *References*

- (1) A Time for Change, Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, September 2010*
- (2) Educational Research Service (ERS) Report using U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, 1998*
- (3) Merger/Consolidation of School Districts: Does it save money and improve student achievement, Pennsylvania School Boards Association, April 2009*
- (4) Telephone survey of the American general population, AP-CNBC, November 2010*

## Information concerning the 2011 Legislative Session

The 2011 Montana Legislative Session will convene at 12:00 p.m. on January 3, 2011 and will run for 90 Legislative days. The session is scheduled to end on April 22, 2011. The key dates during the session are –

- Wednesday, February 9, 2011 AA- Day at the Legislature
- Friday, March 4, 2011 Transmittal Deadline
- Monday, March 14, 2011 MTSBA – Day of Advocacy
- Friday, April 22, 2011 Projected 90th (last) Day of 2011 Session

Both the Senate (28-22) and the House of Representatives (68 – 32) will be Republican controlled.

Senate Officers –

- President, Jim Peterson
- Pro Tempore, Bruce Tutvedt
- Majority Leader, Jeff Essmann
- Majority Whips, Taylor Brown and Chas Vincent
- Minority Leader, Carol Williams
- Minority Whip, Kim Gillan

House Officers –

- Speaker, Mike Milburn
- Pro Tempore, Janna Taylor
- Majority Leader, Tom McGillvray
- Majority Whips, Gerald Bennett, Keith Regier, Cary Smith, Wendy Warburton
- Minority Leader, Jon Sesso
- Minority Caucus Leader, Betsy Hands
- Minority Whips, Chuck Hunter, Margaret MacDonald



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