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PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.**

NEWS RELEASE

For release on Tuesday, July 30, 2002.
May be broadcast Tuesday a.m. and
may appear in Tuesday newspapers.
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Center Says Enrollment Up in Non-Public Schools But Public Support for Public Schools Strong

Public support for North Carolina's public schools remains stable despite skyrocketing enrollment in private schools, charter schools, and home schools, says the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research in a report released today. The Center examined a decade of enrollment trends in both public and non-public schools and found faster growth in the alternatives to the traditional classroom. However, the Center also found rising support for public schools over the last nine years in polls where respondents graded the state's public schools, as well as consistent approval of bond referenda for public school construction.

The Center's research was prompted by concern that increasing enrollment in alternatives to traditional public schools – such as religious and secular private schools, home schools, and charter schools – might be undermining public support for public education. The three indicators the Center used to address this question are: (1) enrollment trends in both public and non-public alternatives over the last decade; (2) statewide and national poll results gauging support for public schools; and (3) results of local bond referenda over the last decade.

“Steady increases in enrollment, growing support for the public schools in public opinion polls, and favorable votes on three-fourths of local school construction bond referenda indicate that the public schools enjoy a deep reservoir of public support,” says Mike McLaughlin, editor of *North Carolina Insight*, the Center's magazine. “Education has become a virtual food court of choices, but the traditional public schools still draw most of the customers.”

Enrollment Trends in Private Schools, Home Schools, and Charter Schools vs. Traditional Public Schools

A look at a decade of data (1990-1991 through 2000-2001) indicates that enrollment in alternatives to public schools clearly is on the rise. The number of students in private religious and secular schools has increased by 68.2 percent over the decade, from 53,372 to 89,789 students in 2000-2001. Recently released figures for 2001-2002 showed private schools added 2,028 students for a total of 91,817, a further increase of 2.3 percent, but this is the smallest increase in the number of private students in a decade.

Home school enrollment mushroomed by 720 percent – from 4,127 students in 1990-1991 to 33,860 in 2000-2001. However, home schools were not formally recognized until a 1985 N.C. Supreme Court decision forced the legislature to allow home schooling in 1988.

Charter schools, which are non-traditional but still taxpayer-funded and open to the public, served 4,624 students in their initial year in 1997 and increased to 15,833 students by 2000-2001. During the 2001-2002

school year, a total of 93 schools enrolled nearly 18,000 students, and the state will reach its cap of 100 schools in 2002-2003.

While there has been an erosion in the percentage of total children served, the traditional public schools continued to see steady annual enrollment increases due to increases in the state's population. The public schools still serve the vast majority of North Carolina's school-age children and expanded their enrollment by 19.1 percent between 1990-1991 and 2000-2001, with an average annual growth rate of 1.76 percent during the decade. The state's school-age population (ages 5-17) increased from 1,146,543 in 1990 to 1,424,538 in 2000 – or 24.2 percent. The state's overall population grew by 23 percent over the same time period to 8,049,313 residents, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In 1990-91, 95.1 percent of school-age children were enrolled in the public schools, compared to 91.5 percent of school-age children in 2000-2001.

“People choose private schools, home schools, and other alternatives for a range of reasons – including religion, concerns about morality or safety in the public schools, or issues related to their child's classroom performance or behavior, says McLaughlin. “However, it's important to note that the public schools have had all the enrollment growth they could handle over the last decade.”

Support for Public Education as Indicated by State and National Polls

a. State Polls

The Center examined state and national polls as a second way of gauging support for public schools in North Carolina. Over the last decade, support has been on the upswing as measured by a statewide poll conducted by the Gallup Organization and subsequent telephone surveys by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carolina Poll. In the 1993 Gallup poll, 8 percent of respondents gave the schools in their communities an “A,” while 34 percent gave them a “B,” and 36 percent a “C.” The remaining 22 percent awarded a “D,” an “F,” or did not answer the question.

In an identical poll conducted in the fall of 1997, 14.9 percent of North Carolinians gave public schools in their communities an “A” grade, 34.4 percent a “B” grade, and 25 percent a “C.” Of those who gave the schools below-average marks, 7 percent gave them a “D,” and 4.6 percent an F. An additional 14 percent answered “don't know” or declined to answer the question. By 2000, the number of North Carolinians giving public schools A's or B's rose to 52.3 percent versus 38.9 percent giving C's, D's, or F's. By 2001, the number giving A's and B's rose to 57.8 percent. Thus, the nine-year trend shows that the percentage of North Carolinians recording A's and B's in their report card for the state's public schools increased from 42 percent in 1993 to 49.3 percent in 1997 to 52.3 in 2000 and further improved to 57.8 percent in 2001.

b. National Polls

Similar polls asking the public to grade their schools have been conducted nationally. North Carolina trailed the nation in 1993, with 47 percent of poll respondents giving their local public schools A's and B's nationally, compared to 42 percent in North Carolina. But by 1997, as the state became increasingly focused on public school reform, North Carolina's numbers surpassed those of the nation as a whole, with 49 percent of N.C. respondents giving A's and B's compared to 46 percent nationally. Public confidence grew further in 2000, with 52 percent of North Carolina respondents awarding A's and B's, compared to 47 percent nationally. Thus, the poll numbers support the notion that North Carolinians now have more confidence in their public schools than does the nation as a whole.

Support for Public Education as Indicated by Public Votes for Local School Construction Bonds

As a third measure of support for public schools, the Center examined results of school construction bond referenda each year from 1990-1991 through 2000-2001. Here again, the results were favorable. Of the 91 bond referenda held over a decade, the public voted in favor of school construction bonds 67 times (74 percent) and against them 24 times. Over the decade, 61 percent of votes were cast in favor of school bond referenda, while 39 percent were against them.

The largest number of referenda in any year during that time period was 11 in both 1994 and 1997. Six of the 11 (55 percent) in 1994 were defeated while only two were defeated in 1997 (18 percent). The 1994 results reflected a groundswell of anti-tax, anti-government sentiment that swept unprecedented numbers of Republicans into state and local offices in North Carolina. However, public sentiment soon turned in favor of spending for school construction. The most favorable years for school bond referenda were 1996 and 2000, when all 15 local referenda passed.

“Steady increases in enrollment, support for the public schools as indicated by public opinion polls, and favorable votes on most school construction bond referendums indicates the public schools enjoy a reservoir of public support,” says the Center’s McLaughlin. And, advocates of alternative means of educating children do not see their enrollment growth as driven solely by dissatisfaction with public schools. “Parents do not choose to teach their children at home as a show of criticism of public education,” says Jeff Townsend, president of North Carolinians for Home Education. “People primarily choose to teach their children at home because it works. Sadie Jordan, president of the North Carolina Association of Charter Schools, says parents who choose charter schools are making a choice for “a different environment that empowers change in the process used in educating their child.”

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study key public issues facing North Carolina and to evaluate state government programs. The Center receives general operating support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, 11 other foundations, 190 corporate contributors, and almost 900 individual and organizational members across the state. The Center thanks the Hillsdale Fund of Greensboro, N.C. and Progress Energy in Raleigh, N.C. for their grants in support of this project. In addition to publishing *North Carolina Insight*, the Center also publishes book-length research reports, a citizens’ guide to the legislature, and textbooks for teachers who teach courses on state and local government. The Center currently is studying governance of public universities.

Copies of the issue of *North Carolina Insight* containing the Center’s research on increasing enrollment in non-public schools but continuing support for public schools are available for \$20, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Ralcih, N.C. 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or order through the Center’s web site at www.nccppr.org.

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For more information on the Center’s study of public support for public education in North Carolina, call Mike McLaughlin, editor of *North Carolina Insight*, at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

**Table 1. Public School Enrollment in N.C.,
1990-91 to 2000-01**

School Year	Total Students	% Increase
1990-91	1,121,098	—
1991-92	1,131,600	0.9%
1992-93	1,146,657	1.3%
1993-94	1,165,248	1.6%
1994-95	1,191,835	2.3%
1995-96	1,219,890	2.4%
1996-97	1,247,144	2.2%
1997-98	1,274,949	2.2%
Public	1,270,325	—
Charter	4,624	—
1998-99	1,295,780	1.6%
Public	1,287,252	1.3%
Charter	8,528	84.4%
1999-00	1,316,073	1.6%
Public	1,303,751	1.3%
Charter	12,322	44.5%
2000-01	1,335,733	1.5%
Public	1,319,850	1.2%
Charter	15,883	28.9%

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction

Table 3. Home School Enrollment in N.C., 1990-91 To 2000-01*

School Year	Total Students	Percent Increase	Total Schools	Percent Increase	Average Students Per School
1990-1991	4,127		2,479		1.7
1991-1992	5,556	34.6%	3,315	33.7%	1.7
1992-1993	6,947	25.0%	4,138	24.8%	1.7
1993-1994	8,927	28.5%	5,145	24.3%	1.7
1994-1995	11,222	25.7%	6,683	29.9%	1.7
1995-1996	13,801	23.0%	8,171	22.3%	1.7
1996-1997	15,785	14.4%	9,381	14.8%	1.7
1997-1998	18,415	16.7%	10,925	16.5%	1.7
1998-1999	21,500	16.8%	12,733	16.5%	1.7
1999-2000	27,978	30.1%	16,623	30.6%	1.7
2000-2001	33,860	21.0%	20,113	33.7%	1.7

* The total number of students is an approximation based on an estimate of 1.7 students per registered home school. Total number of schools is the actual number of home schools registered with the state.

Source: N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at <http://www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh201.htm> and <http://www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh202.htm>

**Table 2. Private School Enrollment in N.C.,
1990-91 to 2000-01**

School Year	Total Students *	% Increase	Total Schools**	% Increase
1990-1991	53,372	—	463	—
<i>Independent</i>	17,157	—	132	
<i>Religious</i>	36,215	—	331	
1991-1992	54,186	1.5%	471	1.7%
<i>Independent</i>	17,547	2.3%	142	
<i>Religious</i>	36,639	1.2%	329	
1992-1993	58,024	7.1%	484	2.8%
<i>Independent</i>	18,528	5.6%	147	
<i>Religious</i>	39,496	7.8%	337	
1993-1994	62,300	7.4%	504	4.1%
<i>Independent</i>	19,550	5.5%	153	
<i>Religious</i>	42,750	8.2%	351	
1994-1995	68,097	9.3%	518	2.8%
<i>Independent</i>	20,888	6.8%	150	
<i>Religious</i>	47,209	10.4%	368	
1995-1996	71,599	5.1%	545	5.2%
<i>Independent</i>	22,110	5.9%	169	
<i>Religious</i>	49,489	4.8%	376	
1996-1997	77,647	8.4%	568	4.2%
<i>Independent</i>	23,402	5.8%	164	
<i>Religious</i>	54,245	9.6%	404	
1997-1998	82,001	5.6%	592	4.2%
<i>Independent</i>	24,642	5.3%	176	
<i>Religious</i>	57,359	5.7%	416	
1998-1999	84,384	2.9%	626	5.7%
<i>Independent</i>	25,162	2.1%	193	
<i>Religious</i>	59,222	3.2%	433	
1999-2000	87,406	3.6%	644	2.9%
<i>Independent</i>	26,238	4.3%	187	
<i>Religious</i>	61,168	3.3%	457	
2000-2001	89,789	2.7%	656	1.9%
<i>Independent</i>	26,749	1.9%	184	
<i>Religious</i>	63,040	3.1%	472	

* These figures do not include special school or home school data.

** These figures include special school but not home school data.

Source: N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh500.htm
and www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh501.htm

Support for the Public Schools in Polls: North Carolina Versus the Nation

For the much of the past decade, polling organizations in the state and nation have probed the public mind in an effort to gauge support for the public schools. The typical format is to have respondents grade the schools, much as respondents were graded by their teachers in grade school and beyond. A standard question is this: "Students are often are given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools, themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the schools here?"

How do North Carolina residents grade their schools compared to the rest of the nation? The results of polls taken in the same year statewide and nationally make possible a direct comparison.

As the numbers below indicate, North Carolina trailed the nation in 1993, with 47 percent of poll respondents giving their local public schools A's and B's nationally, compared to 44 percent at the state level. But by 1997, as the state became increasingly focused on public school reform, North Carolina's numbers had surpassed those of the nation as a whole, with 49 percent of N.C. respondents giving A's and B's compared to 46 percent nationally. The gap widened in 2000, with 52 percent of North Carolina respondents awarding A's and B's, compared to 47 percent nationally. Thus, the poll numbers support the notion that North Carolinians think more of their public schools than does the nation as a whole.

—Mike McLaughlin

	1993		1997		2000	
	A's&B's	C,D,F	A's&B's	C,D,F	A's&B's	C,D,F
National answer (%)	47	46	46	49	47	46
N.C. answer (%)	42	52	49	37	52	38

Bold type indicates higher percentage when respondents awarding an A or B are combined.

Source: 1993 national data from the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa as reported in "Report Card for the Nation's Schools," *The Polling Report*, Washington, D.C., Oct. 11, 1993, p. 2. National data for 1997 and 2000 also are reprinted from *The Polling Report* (Sept. 1997, p. 1, Oct. 21, 200, p. 1. North Carolina data were taken from data archives at the University of North Carolina's Institute for Research in Social Science. See "What Do Polls Show North Carolinians Think about North Carolina Public Schools?" p. 86. for a more detailed description of these in-state polls.

Table 4. Public School Bond Referenda in N.C., 1991-2001

County	Election Date	Amount of Bond		Voting Margin			
		Issue Approved	Issue Defeated	For	%	Against	%
Durham	3/12/1991	\$125,000,000		11,423	64.9%	6,170	35.1%
Pender	3/26/1991		\$19,900,000	1,504	36.0%	2,678	64.0%
Surry	5/28/1991	\$30,000,000		3,187	60.8%	2,056	39.2%
Mecklenburg	11/5/1991	\$86,000,000		52,692	71.2%	21,340	28.8%
Rowan	11/5/1991		\$49,200,000	8,146	47.9%	8,844	52.1%
Alamance	5/5/1992	\$36,000,000		10,033	60.8%	6,467	39.2%
Buncombe	5/5/1992	\$6,900,000		7,665	52.9%	6,814	47.1%
Cumberland	5/5/1992	\$50,000,000		18,216	62.6%	10,869	37.4%
Davidson	5/5/1992	\$26,000,000		10,315	75.5%	3,339	24.5%
Duplin	5/5/1992		\$22,500,000	2,336	37.9%	3,828	62.1%
Watauga (Elem.)	9/22/1992	\$18,700,000		3,775	55.2%	3,064	44.8%
Watauga (H.S.)	9/22/1992	\$5,300,000		3,858	53.5%	3,351	46.5%
Gaston	11/3/1992	\$59,500,000		32,123	58.1%	23,197	41.9%
Mecklenburg	11/3/1992		\$15,000,000	76,929	50.0%	77,010	50.0%
Orange	11/3/1992	\$52,000,000		26,005	58.4%	18,509	41.6%
Catawba	3/16/1993	\$33,117,000		2,883	66.4%	1,462	33.6%
Buncombe	4/27/1993	\$34,500,000		11,461	64.5%	6,295	35.5%
Wake	6/8/1993	\$200,000,000		25,985	56.4%	20,077	43.6%
Stanly	8/31/1993		\$22,000,000	2,301	17.5%	10,813	82.5%
Currituck	11/2/1993	\$16,000,000		1,938	63.4%	1,120	36.6%
Iredell	11/2/1993		\$36,285,000	8,154	44.8%	10,043	55.2%
Madison	11/2/1993		\$10,200,000	1,224	37.4%	2,045	62.6%
Mecklenburg	11/2/1993	\$192,000,000		45,789	51.4%	43,273	48.6%
Rowan	11/2/1993	\$44,000,000		11,981	60.0%	7,996	40.0%
Chatham	12/15/1993	\$15,000,000		1,281	69.9%	551	30.1%
New Hanover	3/8/1994	\$39,900,000		7,872	56.3%	6,100	43.7%
Lincoln	3/29/1994	\$20,100,000		2,025	61.5%	1,269	38.5%
Cabarrus	5/3/1994		\$81,000,000	11,199	43.2%	14,703	56.8%
Guilford	5/3/1994		\$198,000,000	17,208	33.7%	33,869	66.3%
Haywood	5/3/1994		\$23,075,000	4,096	33.7%	8,061	66.3%
Alleghany	8/9/1994		\$4,410,000	1,201	47.5%	1,326	52.5%
Nash	9/13/1994		\$35,000,000	2,543	15.5%	13,813	84.5%
County	Election Date	Amount of Bond		Voting Margin			
		Issue Approved	Issue Defeated	For	%	Against	%
Cherokee	9/19/1994		\$11,000,000	1,079	17.9%	4,959	82.1%
Carteret	11/8/1994	\$29,000,000		9,609	61.4%	6,032	38.6%
Onslow	11/8/1994	\$40,000,000		9,269	63.5%	5,322	36.5%
Union	11/8/1994	\$18,000,000		9,449	54.8%	7,783	45.2%
Pitt	3/14/1995		\$31,800,000	5,305	35.6%	9,594	64.4%
Chatham	5/23/1995	\$5,300,000		1,730	72.1%	671	27.9%
Mecklenburg	5/30/1995		\$304,267,000	30,664	49.0%	31,969	51.0%
Craven	11/7/1995	\$17,050,000		4,964	58.0%	3,594	42.0%
Davie	11/7/1995	\$7,635,000		2,489	52.9%	2,219	47.1%
Forsyth	11/7/1995	\$94,000,000		24,334	69.9%	10,463	30.1%
Johnston	11/7/1995	\$50,000,000		8,034	66.5%	4,056	33.5%
Mecklenburg	11/7/1995	\$217,000,000		70,184	71.5%	27,940	28.5%
Cabarrus	5/7/1996	\$49,000,000		12,915	64.8%	7,019	35.2%
Iredell	5/7/1996	\$22,180,000		9,336	71.8%	3,658	28.2%
Lee	5/7/1996	\$25,000,000		4,212	67.8%	1,999	32.2%
Pender	5/7/1996	\$25,000,000		3,481	64.8%	1,894	35.2%
Wake	6/4/1996	\$250,000,000		33,745	79.2%	8,854	20.8%
Franklin	8/27/1996	\$17,000,000		2,834	78.8%	762	21.2%
Stokes	9/7/1996	\$25,000,000		2,543	65.1%	1,364	34.9%
Scotland	11/5/1996	\$18,600,000		4,578	79.7%	1,163	20.3%
Caldwell	2/4/1997	\$13,910,000		2,547	55.8%	2,016	44.2%
Catawba	3/11/1997	\$50,000,000		3,334	59.5%	2,274	40.5%
Dare	5/20/1997		\$59,500,000	2,176	22.2%	7,637	77.8%
Cumberland	10/7/1997	\$98,000,000		16,295	56.0%	12,820	44.0%
Alamance	11/4/1997	\$25,000,000		9,367	67.3%	4,561	32.7%
Mecklenburg	11/4/1997	\$415,000,000		62,256	73.0%	23,005	27.0%
Moore	11/4/1997	\$25,000,000		8,738	68.7%	3,990	31.3%
New Hanover	11/4/1997	\$125,000,000		13,743	57.1%	10,337	42.9%
Orange	11/4/1997	\$47,000,000		9,589	58.4%	6,823	41.6%
Transylvania	11/4/1997	\$24,300,000		3,606	57.9%	2,618	42.1%
Henderson	11/18/1997		\$46,500,000	5,107	29.7%	12,074	70.3%
Person	2/10/1998		\$18,525,000	1,541	40.6%	2,254	59.4%

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Table 4. Public School Bond Referenda in N.C., 1991–2001, *continued*

County	Election Date	Amount of Bond		Voting Margin			
		Issue Approved	Issue Defeated	For	%	Against	%
Stanly	5/5/1998		\$38,000,000	5,690	45.2%	6,897	54.8%
Bladen	9/15/1998	\$25,000,000		2,793	53.8%	2,399	46.2%
Granville	11/3/1998	\$18,700,000		7,233	85.4%	1,241	14.6%
Wilkes	11/3/1998		\$28,000,000	6,458	35.3%	11,831	64.7%
Union	11/3/1998	\$52,700,000		19,997	72.0%	7,782	28.0%
Caswell	5/4/1999	\$4,500,000		1,200	72.7%	450	27.3%
Wake	6/8/1999		\$650,000,000	31,374	34.6%	59,297	65.4%
Buncombe	10/5/1999	\$45,000,000		14,326	73.3%	5,213	26.7%
Brunswick	11/2/1999	\$83,500,000		6,552	54.3%	5,504	45.7%
Craven	11/2/1999		\$25,000,000	4,381	46.0%	5,140	54.0%
Johnston	11/2/1999	\$80,000,000		8,004	75.4%	2,610	24.6%
Guilford	5/2/2000	\$200,000,000		38,159	59.5%	26,016	40.5%
Lee	5/2/2000	\$25,700,000		23,188	77.8%	6,610	22.2%
Stanly	5/2/2000	\$26,000,000		7,385	66.9%	3,650	33.1%
Lincoln	5/2/2000	\$36,000,000		6,732	72.9%	2,507	27.1%
Wake	11/7/2000	\$500,000,000		200,932	77.9%	56,999	22.1%
Mecklenburg	11/7/2000	\$275,500,000		173,002	70.5%	72,372	29.5%
Union	11/7/2000	\$55,000,000		28,054	66.1%	14,388	33.9%
Catawba	3/20/2001		\$72,000,000	4,285	39.9%	6,458	60.1%
Carteret	3/20/2001		\$33,500,000	3,611	40.3%	5,340	59.7%
Durham	11/6/2001	\$51,800,000		23,604	65.2%	12,612	34.8%
Gaston	11/6/2001	\$89,000,000		11,690	69.3%	5,169	30.7%
Craven	11/6/2001	\$28,000,000		6,963	63.6%	3,993	36.4%
Wilson	11/6/2001	\$21,000,000		4,521	61.3%	2,852	38.7%
Johnston	11/6/2001	\$75,000,000		7,874	77.9%	2,239	22.1%
Forsyth	11/6/2001	\$150,000,000		29,564	67.3%	14,346	32.7%
Orange	11/6/2001	\$47,000,000		11,868	59.2%	8,179	40.8%
Totals		\$4,712,892,000	\$1,834,662,000	1,505,841	61%	964,170	39%

Source: N.C. Department of State Treasurer, State and Local Government Finance Division