Poll: Education and water should be Arizona’s top priorities

Education and water rank as Arizonans’ top two priorities among state residents, according to a new poll by ASU’s Morrison Institute for Public Policy and the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

The inaugural Morrison-Cronkite Quarterly Poll surveyed 754 Arizona adults to assess resident attitudes and opinions about a variety of issues, from health care to law enforcement to arts and culture.

When asked to prioritize the K-12 system in the context of state spending – very high, high, low, or very low priority – nearly nine in 10 Arizonans (89 percent) responded very high (46 percent) or high (43 percent) in terms of funding consideration for education.

“This comes as no surprise,” said David Daugherty, associate director of Morrison Institute and director of the statewide poll. “Researchers have consistently noted that Arizonans recognize their public school system’s shortcomings and their desire to improve it.”

Law enforcement and public safety ranked third (82 percent) in the poll, yet Arizona’s prison system ranked lowest among the 11 listed priorities (42 percent).

In regard to state funding, nearly eight in 10 Arizona adults believe Arizona spends too little on K-12 education, with nearly two-thirds willing to put additional money into K-12 education, according to the poll.
While the vast majority of Arizonans is concerned about the state’s kindergarten through 12th-grade education system, and believes further investment and improvements are critical, Arizona consistently hovers near the bottom of all 50 states in academic quality, achievement and per-pupil spending.

Meanwhile, among the 11 issues offered to respondents, “maintaining adequate water and water quality” ranks at that same level of importance (87 percent) as education.

“It’s apparent that the importance of ensuring an adequate and quality water supply for Arizona’s varied interests figures prominently on Arizonans’ radar. This is a complex and dynamic issue, but clearly one that Arizonans understand as a priority that needs to be thoroughly examined and addressed,” Daugherty said.

The second installment of findings from the Morrison-Cronkite Quarterly Poll will be released March 3 and include such topics as marijuana laws, water supply and care giving for people with disabilities.

**Methodology**

The survey of 754 randomly selected Arizona adults was conducted between Jan. 20-28, 2015. Interviews averaged 12 minutes in length with about 40 percent of interviews conducted via mobile phones. Respondents were given the choice of doing the interview in English or Spanish. To ensure results represent the general state population, data was weighted by using a post-stratification technique to scale the respondents to census population estimates, including geographic distribution. The margin of error for most items, prior to subsample breakdowns, is about 4 percentage points.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy is Arizona’s premier think tank, examining critical Arizona and regional issues and a catalyst for public dialogue. A unit of the Arizona State University College of Public Service and Community Solutions, Morrison Institute uses nonpartisan research and communication outreach to help improve the state and region’s quality of life. MorrisonInstitute.asu.edu

The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication is widely recognized as one of the nation’s premier professional journalism programs. Rooted in the time-honored values that characterize its namesake — accuracy, responsibility, objectivity, integrity — the school fosters journalistic excellence and ethics among students as they master the professional skills they need to succeed in the digital media world of today and tomorrow. Cronkite.asu.edu

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**Key Findings**

**Common Core**
The Common Core curriculum is a lightning rod in the politics of education. Justified or not, its very name has become synonymous with federal overreach, as well as concerns by many that it makes math too complicated. This makes testing public approval or disapproval of Common Core somewhat difficult. So, in order to gauge Arizonans’ stance on Common Core, the sample was split by separate inquiries.

Half of the respondents were asked the following question: “Do you favor or oppose the Common Core curriculum for Arizona public schools?”

The other half was asked: “Do you favor or oppose establishing a standard set of education concepts to be taught in public schools across the country, including Arizona, and then testing students on these concepts to assure that students receive a rigorous education and providing a system to allow outcomes to be compared from state to state and school to school?”

The findings are indicative of the political tinge related to Common Core. Fifty-five percent of those asked whether they favor or oppose Common Core said they oppose it as a curriculum for Arizona public schools. However, when the basic elements of Common Core are described to respondents without using the term “Common Core” nearly seven in 10 (69 percent) favor it.

“It appears to underline that the term ‘Common Core’ has become politicized,” Daugherty said. “Yet when the basic elements – but not all – of Common Core are described, it receives positive reviews. Responses to the descriptive question clearly indicate that the majority of Arizona citizens favor some form of curriculum standards, common testing and the ability to compare across schools, districts and states.”

Predictably, there are significant differences in opinions about Common Core by political party. Among those who identify themselves as Republicans, only 27 percent favor “Common Core” when identified as such and 73 percent oppose it. Among Democrats, 64 percent favor “Common Core” and 36 percent oppose it. Among Independents, 34 percent favor “Common Core” and 66 percent oppose. However, when Common Core is described, but not referred to as “Common Core,” it is favored by 81 percent of Democrats, 56 percent of Republicans and 67 percent of Independents.

The K-12 System

Arizonans are not enamored of their K-12 public education system. Half believe Arizona’s high school graduates are not as well prepared as graduates from most other states. In fact, only 11 percent believe Arizona grads are better prepared and 39 percent believe they are “about as well prepared.”

The better educated the respondents, the more likely it is they believe Arizona high school graduates do not compare favorably with high school graduates from most other states.

While Republicans are slightly more positive about Arizona’s high school graduates than are Independents or Democrats, they still give the system mediocre reviews (45 percent of Republicans believe Arizona high school graduates are not as well prepared as high school graduates from other
states, 49 percent believe they are about as well prepared and only 5 percent believe they are better prepared).

Arizonans are less disappointed in their public universities. While the state’s three universities don’t receive a ringing endorsement, 21 percent overall believe graduates from Arizona’s public universities are better prepared than public university graduates from most other states. Sixty-four percent believe they are about as well prepared and 15 percent believe they are not as well prepared.

Most Arizonans believe the state does not invest as many tax dollars in K-12 education as most other states, according to the poll. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) believe Arizona invests fewer tax dollar than most other states while only 7 percent believe it invests more.

Furthermore, nearly eight in 10 Arizona adults believe Arizona spends too little on K-12 education, including 89 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of Republicans and 82 percent of Independents.

And, nearly two-thirds of Arizona adults say they are willing to put additional money into K-12 education. Sixty-two percent would be willing to pay an additional $200 per year in state taxes to help support the K-12 education system, including 75 percent of Democrats, 53 percent of Republicans and 65 percent of Independents.

Finally, while data indicate there are significant differences in academic achievement by ethnicity, including an educational attainment gap for Arizona’s booming Latino population, only 62 percent of Arizona adults agree that is true.

**Prioritizing the Issues**

According to Arizona citizens, how should the Legislature prioritize issues?

Respondents were asked how they prioritize 11 issues facing the state – as a very high priority, a high priority, a low priority, or a very low priority. The following shows how Arizonans prioritize some of the state’s most pressing issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Priorities</th>
<th>Very High</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very High + High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-12 education</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining adequate water and water quality for the state</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement and public safety</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mid-level Priorities</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programs designed to help children from families living under the poverty level</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Health and education services for children under the age of 4  34  39  73
Health care coverage for those living below the poverty level  30  42  72
The Arizona public universities  25  47  72

Lower Priorities

Raising state revenues to alleviate the budget deficit  20  42  61
State parks and recreation  12  46  58
Arts and culture  10  37  48
Arizona’s prison system  11  32  42

While there are few surprises in the prioritization of the 11 Arizona issues, it is notable how high the top three issues are prioritized. Because they are given such high overall priority – 89 percent, 87 percent and 82 percent – it means nearly everyone from every subgroup (by political preference, age, educational attainment, etc.) rate education, water/water quality and law enforcement/public safety as high priorities.

Essentially, the top three are a “big deal” to almost everyone. However, among some of the other issues measured, differences emerge.

Democrats rate programs designed to help children from families living under the poverty level as a higher priority than do either Republicans or Independents. Nearly half of the state’s Democrats (46 percent) rate it a very-high priority compared with 18 percent of Republicans and 27 percent of Independents. However, when combining the very-high-priority group and the high-priority group, the numbers come much closer together: 84 percent for Democrats, 74 percent for Republicans and 82 percent for Independents.

Like other socially driven issues tested, Democrats rate health and education services for children under the age of 4 as a higher priority (77 percent a very high or high priority) than Republicans (68 percent), but the same as Independents (75 percent). However, 41 percent of Democrats rate it a very high priority compared with 22 percent of Republicans and 32 percent of Independents.

“The pattern of response for the socially driven issues shows more Democrats than Republicans rating them a high priority primarily because of the much larger percentage rating the issue as a very high priority,” Daugherty explained. “Essentially, Democrats are more likely to rate socially driven issues higher than Republicans or Independents and a large percentage of them appear to feel passionately about the issue.”
Democrats feel more strongly about providing health care coverage for those living below the poverty level than do Republicans – 42 percent rate it a very high priority compared with 18 percent of Republicans (although 42 percent of Republicans rate it a high priority).

Meanwhile, four in 10 Republicans (40 percent) rate providing health care coverage for those living below the poverty level as a low (31 percent) or very low (8 percent) priority, compared with 22 percent of Democrats (17 percent low and 5 percent very low). Independents, now Arizona’s largest contingent of registered voters, fall between the Democrats and the Republicans in their rating of providing health care coverage for those living below the poverty level: 76 percent rate it as a very high (24 percent) or high (52 percent) priority.

Political differences also emerge in prioritizing Arizona’s public universities. Eighty percent of Democrats rate it a very high or high priority, compared with 66 percent of Republicans and 65 percent of Independents.

While more Democrats (65 percent) than either Republicans (58 percent) or Independents (58 percent) rate raising state revenues to alleviate the budget deficit as either a very high or high priority, the difference is inconsequential.

While nearly six in 10 rate state parks and recreation a very high (12 percent) or high (46 percent) priority they are clearly viewed as far less important to Arizona citizens than most of the tested issues. No single or multiple subgroups appear to champion it as a state priority.

Arts and culture failed to get widespread traction as a statewide priority. Only 10 percent of Arizonans rate arts and culture as a very high priority and more than half, 52 percent, rate it a low or very low priority (including 64 percent of Republicans) in terms of funding. Much like state parks and recreation, there does not appear to be a large, cohesive group willing to champion arts and culture as a state priority.

Few Arizona adults list prisons as a priority, perhaps because they essentially operate in the background, garnering little attention until an inmate escapes. However, it is important to note that prisons account for a disproportionately large percentage of the state’s $9.3 billion general fund – 10.7 percent, or nearly $1 billion, which is $229 million more than the state puts into its university system.

More than half of Democrats (62 percent), Republicans (55 percent), Independents (54 percent), all levels of education and all ethnic groups rate prisons a low or very low priority.

Notably, respondents were asked the following question: “One method suggested for reducing state spending is releasing some prisoners who were sentenced for non-violent crime from state prisons and turning them over for community-based treatment. Do you favor or oppose this strategy?”

Seventy-six percent of respondents favor that strategy including 80 percent of college graduates, 79 percent of Democrats, and 82 percent of Independents.
Other Legislative-related Issues

Most Arizonans believe the state needs to find more ways to bring in additional revenue.

They were asked: “Do you think Arizona brings in enough money each year to adequately meet the state’s needs, brings in more money than it needs, or do you think the state needs to find ways to bring in additional funds?”

Sixty-five percent believe more revenue is needed while 22 percent believe the state has enough revenue and 12 percent believe the state takes in more revenue than it needs.

Predictably, Democrats (71 percent) are more likely than Republicans (57 percent) to believe the state needs to produce more revenue, although the percentage is relatively high for Republicans. Independents fall between the two political parties on this issue (67 percent).

Finally, respondents were asked to determine how well the Legislature’s projected decision making would match their own position on issues: “Arizona’s new Legislature is now in session. Based upon what you know about the Arizona Legislature, how likely is it they will consistently make decisions that you will support – very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?”

A bare majority of Arizona citizens, 52 percent, believe it is very (10 percent) or somewhat (41 percent) likely the Legislature will make decisions they support.

There are, predictably, big differences by political party. While 65 percent of Republicans say it is very (13 percent) or somewhat (52 percent) likely the Republican-controlled Legislature will consistently make decisions they will support, only 34 percent of Democrats feel that way. As has been true throughout this research, Independents’ position falls between the two political parties, at 46 percent.

“It will be interesting to see if these opinions prevail as this legislative session advances toward eventual adjournment with its new laws and own set of budget priorities,” Daugherty said. “That’s among the key benefits of a quarterly poll, to measure public opinion at various points in time to determine whether and where viewpoints have shifted.”

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