**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM**: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3)

**DATE:** April 9, 2012

**RE:**  Summary of Key Research Findings from California Statewide Survey on
School Discipline Issues

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) recently completed a survey of California voters to assess public attitudes toward a range of issues related to discipline policies in local public schools.[[1]](#footnote-1) **The survey results demonstrate that a substantial majority (80%) of voters believes that public school discipline policies are in need of reform, and that broad support exists for positive, preventative approaches that hold students accountable for misbehavior but also provide them with the support they need to get back on track and succeed in school.**

The results also show high levels of support for a variety of specific policy approaches to achieve these objectives, including the use of school suspensions only as a last resort after other approaches have been tried; the implementation of in-school versus out-of school suspensions in cases where students have defied authority; and state-level requirements for schools with high suspension rates to change their discipline policies.

This memorandum details these and other key findings from the survey research.

* **Four in five voters believe that California school discipline policies need changes.**  Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they believe public school discipline policies were in need of major changes, minor changes or no changes at all. Fully 80 percent believe that changes are needed, including 41 percent who say that “major changes” are in order.

These opinions may stem from the fact that a similar proportion (80%) view discipline problems in their local public schools as a serious issue, including 50 percent who identify it as an “extremely” or “very serious” concern. A sizeable majority (58%) also holds the view that above-average rates of school suspensions signal flaws in a school’s discipline policy. The survey also showed many respondents had personal knowledge of the issue, with 37 percent saying they know someone who had suspended or expelled, or both.

* **California voters express high levels of support for preventive approaches to school discipline.** Voters were presented with the following description of a preventative, supportive approach to school discipline, and were then asked whether they supported or opposed the approach.

*This**approach prevents problems by teaching kids positive behaviors in the classroom when they are young. When kids do get into trouble at school, it holds them accountable by requiring them to make it right with the people they hurt, and to give back to the community. It still suspends or expels kids from school for the worst offenses.*

As shown in **Figure 1** below, 92 percent of voters say they favor this preventative approach—including more than two-thirds that feel strongly. This firm expression of support transcends partisan and demographic divides, with more than two-thirds of Democrats, Republicans, independents, women, men and every major age and ethnic/racial demographic subgroup of the electorate expressing strong support.



**Figure 1: Voter Attitudes toward Positive, Preventative School Discipline**

* **California voters believe teachers and schools should have more resources when it comes to school discipline.** Eighty-five percent of voters believe that teachers should have more tools to manage discipline in their classroom, and large majorities support expanding student access to counseling services, mental health and substance abuse services. These findings are consistent with the fact that 85 percent of voters share the belief that putting interventions in place that get to the root cause of student behavior is an effective strategy for improving school discipline.
* **California voters reject the view that suspending large numbers of students makes schools safer, more productive learning environments.** School safety is a concern for a majority of voters—56 percent agrees that there are serious safety concerns that threaten students and teachers in their local school. However, a solid majority (61%) *disagree* with the sentiment that is okay to suspend large numbers of students, even for minor misbehavior, because that makes the school safer and more successful for the remaining students. In fact, there is broad consensus that taking a preventative approach to school discipline is a more effective way to improve school climate and safety. Fully 91 percent identify the benefits to school safety and climate as a compelling reason to support preventative and supportive approaches.
* **Voters understand the serious consequences that can occur when children are suspended or expelled from school.** A solid majority of voters (61%) believes that expelling or suspending a student makes them *more* likely to end up dropping out, committing crimes or going to jail. Only 26 percent feel that harsh discipline makes it *less* likely that students will drop out and commit crimes. In fact, 85 percent of voters agree that suspension for minor offenses can start a downward spiral of lower academic achievement and less attachment to school that makes them less likely to get a good job and succeed in life.

Voters understand that making mistakes is part of growing up. Fully 90 percent identify providing students with a second chance and preventing adolescent mistakes from having a permanent effect on the life of a child as compelling reasons to adopt positive, supportive approaches to school discipline.

* **A clear preference exists among voters for using school suspensions only as a last resort, except in the most serious cases.** When asked to choose between contrasting approaches to school suspension policies, nearly three-quarters of voters (73%) expressed a preference for using school suspension only as a last resort, compared with just under one-quarter (22%) who believe students should be suspended right away in order to communicate that there are immediate consequences for negative behavior, as shown in **Figure 2** on the following page.

**Figure 2: Voter Attitudes Toward School Suspension Policies**

*I am going to read you a several pairs of statements about different potential approaches to discipline in your local school district. After I read each pair, please tell me which statement comes closer to your opinion.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Policy** | **Percentage**  |
| Suspensions should be used as a last resort after other approaches to correct misbehavior have been tried, except in cases that are very serious, such as bringing a gun to school. | 73% |
| It is better to suspend students right away, even for a first offense that does not involve bringing a weapon to school, in order to communicate that there are immediate consequences for misbehavior.  | 22% |
| Both/Neither/Don’t Know | 5% |

* **In cases where students defy the authority of a teacher, principal or school official, voters demonstrate a preference for in-school as opposed to out-of school suspensions.** Voters were read two statements describing different approaches to school suspension for defiance of authority. As shown in **Figure 3**, a solid majority (86%) believes that when a student defies the authority of a teacher, principal or school official, they should be kept in school. This compares with only nine percent who express the view that these students should be kept out of school—even if it means they have no adult supervision.

**Figure 3: Voter Attitudes Toward In-School vs. Out of School Suspensions**

*I am going to read you a several pairs of statements about different potential approaches to discipline in your local school district. After I read each pair, please tell me which statement comes closer to your opinion.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Policy** | **Percentage** |
| When a student is suspended for defying the authority of a teacher, principal or school official, they should be kept in school, in a supervised environment like study hall, so they can be held accountable without falling behind in their school work. | 86% |
| When a student is suspended for defying the authority of a teacher, principal or school official, they should be kept out of school – even if it means they have no adult supervision during the day | 9% |
| Both/Neither/Don’t Know | 6% |

* **Nearly three-quarters of voters favor a state-level requirement that schools with high suspension rates change their school discipline policies in order to lower suspension rates.** As a part of the survey, voters were informed that – on average – schools in the U.S. suspend seven percent of students every year. They were then asked about a proposal that would require schools in California with suspension rates above 25 percent to change their approach to school discipline in order to reduce the rate of suspensions. The results show high levels of support for the policy, with 73 percent indicating that they are in favor, including a majority (51%) that offers “strong support.”

**Figure 4: Support for Requiring Changes in
Discipline Policies for Schools with High Suspension Rates**



* **High levels of voter support for preventative approaches to school discipline stem from the broadly shared belief that schools have a dual responsibility to hold students accountable *and* help them get back on track and succeed in school.** When asked about their perceptions of the role of public schools in connection with discipline policies, 90 percent of voters agree that school districts have a responsibility to make sure students who break the rules get the help they need to be successful students. Consistent with this view, 86 percent of voters reject the idea that the most important part of discipline is to show students that the consequence for breaking rules is to be removed from school. In fact there is a broad consensus (91% of voters agree) that an effective school system should *prevent* discipline problems, not just punish students after problems occur.

Overall, the survey results demonstrate that voters are concerned about school discipline issues and believe discipline policies in California public school need reform. In this regard, overwhelming voter support exists for preventative and supportive approaches that require students to take responsibility for their actions while providing kids with opportunities to learn from their mistakes and get the support they need to succeed in school.

1. **Methodology:** From March 27-29, 2012 FM3 completed 803 telephone interviews with California voters. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 3.5%; margins of error for subgroups within the sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals sum to 100%. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)