



# CHARTER FISCAL IMPACT

## Statewide Poll

### Perceptions of Local Control & Negative Effects of Charter Schools

Tennessee voters overwhelmingly support local control in public education and oppose state-mandated charter schools, according to a statewide poll by an education-reform advocacy group founded by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist.

Additionally, the poll found that Volunteer State voters view traditional public schools more favorably than privately run charter schools. Moreover, voters express significant concerns about the negative fiscal impacts and destabilizing effects that taxpayer-funded charters have on public schools.

#### Background

According to Nashville's WTVF-TV NewsChannel 5, Frist's State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) commissioned the poll to examine "the strength of arguments against charter schools, while testing potentially winning messages to convince the public to support them."<sup>1</sup> Public Opinion Strategies, an Alexandria, Va.-based Republican polling firm, conducted the poll on SCORE's behalf. Among the SCORE poll's key findings:

- By a nearly two-to-one margin, Tennessee voters believe that elected local school boards— versus the appointed state charter school commission — should decide whether or not to approve new charter schools. Specifically, 62 percent of voters believe charter applications should be reviewed and approved at the local level, while only 33 percent believe decisions should be made at the state level.

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- Public schools enjoy considerably higher positive ratings than privately run charter schools. Sixty-eight percent of Tennessee voters view public schools favorably, compared with a 41 percent favorable rating for charters. Support for charters falls to 31 percent when voters are asked for their impression of so-called "classical" charter schools, such as those promoted by Governor Bill Lee and Michigan-based Hillsdale College.

Overall, public opinion of charter schools in Tennessee is decidedly mixed. The SCORE poll found that 41 percent of voters view charters favorably versus 24 percent who view them unfavorably. However, some voters — especially parents — react positively to the choices and flexible options that charter schools provide.

#### Support Slipping

Public support for charter schools may be eroding. Outrage over charters erupted after WTVF-TV aired video of Governor Lee and Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn at a pro-charter event in which Arnn denigrated teachers as "trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country."<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of the Hillsdale controversy, voters express serious concerns about the negative fiscal impacts and destabilizing effects that charter schools have on public schools. For example, among SCORE poll respondents, two-thirds or more acknowledge feeling less favorable toward charters after hearing the following statements about well-documented problems:

- “Charter schools destabilize and dismantle public education for private profit. While traditional public schools struggle, charter school administrators often make incredibly high salaries and successfully lobby government officials for special perks, all on the taxpayer’s dime and to the detriment of the local school district.”
- “Charter schools tend to cherry pick the best students from the state who are the least challenging to educate, leaving teachers in traditional public schools serving more costly students with reduced resources.”
- “Because they are managed independently from local school districts, charter schools lack adequate government oversight and transparency, and divert millions of local tax dollars to unaccountable, out-of-state private operators.”
- “Charter schools receive taxpayer dollars but are privately run. The owners and operators of charter schools make money through lucrative real estate deals, tax credits, and management companies. These private operators care more about turning a profit than improving outcomes for local students.”
- “By supporting an increase in charter schools, out-of-state billionaires are simply trying to protect their profits. That’s why people from the Wal-Mart family to Michael Bloomberg, and Bill Gates to Betsy DeVos fund charter schools — to drain resources from public schools and break-up teachers’ unions.”

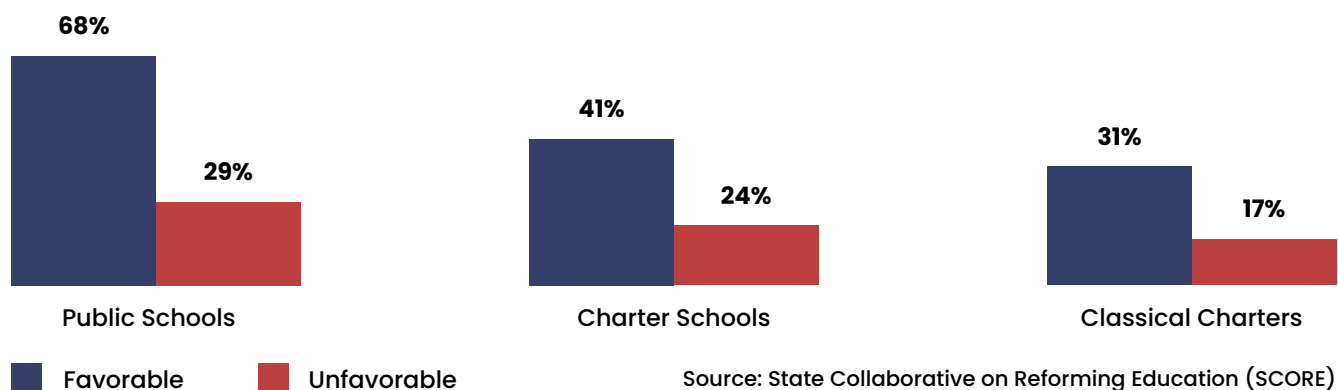
## Past Problems

In addition to probing voters’ general perceptions of well-documented problems with charters, the poll may have been testing SCORE’s ties to ethical failings and special-interest influence in the charter sector. For example:

- New Vision Academy, a Nashville charter school touted by SCORE, closed following reports of exorbitant executive salaries as well as state and federal investigations into financial irregularities and failures to comply with laws regarding students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> In statements prior to New Vision’s collapse, SCORE celebrated New Vision as one of three schools deemed “leaders in learning.”<sup>4</sup>
- KIPP Nashville, another charter school endorsed by SCORE, falsely claimed to be financially distressed in order to access federal COVID-relief funds through the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). According to a USA Today investigation, “KIPP Nashville had more than \$17 million in net assets and had a \$3.5 million PPP loan forgiven.”<sup>5</sup> In publicity reports prior to KIPP Nashville bilking taxpayers during the pandemic, SCORE pointed to the charter’s “financial literacy seminars for parents” as evidence of success.<sup>6</sup>
- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Seattle-based charity of Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates, reportedly has donated tens of millions of dollars to pro-charter groups in the Volunteer State — including

## Wide Public Preference

Tennessee voters assign their highest favorability ratings to public schools — not privately run charter schools.



more than \$20 million to SCORE. According to a Daily Memphian investigation: “Almost two-thirds of the money Gates gives to nonprofit education advocacy organizations in Tennessee goes directly to SCORE, which then distributes much of that funding as subgrants to smaller organizations” — most or all of which presumably support charter schools.<sup>7</sup>

Summing Up

According to information obtained by WTVF-TV, SCORE has been regularly polling on charter-related public opinion since at least 2016. As state-mandated charter schools spread from urban areas into suburban and rural areas, Tennesseans’ views of charters likely will shift.

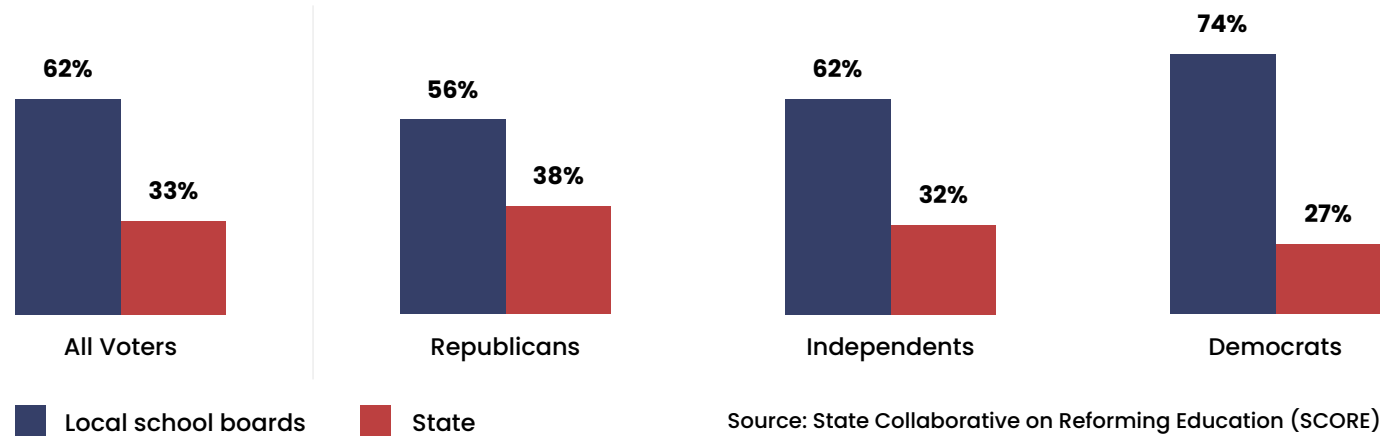
In an effort to affect public opinion and public policy, SCORE and other charter advocacy groups are expected to use polling data to drive lobbying, marketing, and political campaigns in support of state-mandated charters.

Tennesseans who value local control in public education should remain skeptical of poll-tested messages that downplay or ignore the negative fiscal impacts and destabilizing effects that charters have on public schools.

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** WTVF-TV obtained a **56-page summary of SCORE’s polling data**. The pollster, Public Opinion Strategies, surveyed 500 registered voters in Tennessee on April 30 to May 4, 2022. The poll had a reported margin of error of ± 4.4 percent.

Local Control Matters

Regardless of party affiliation, Tennessee voters believe decisions on charter schools should be made by local school boards — not state government.



<sup>1</sup> “Pro-charter group’s poll shows Tennesseans like their public schools more than their leaders,” WTVF-TV, August 23, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> “Revealed: Teachers come from ‘dumbest parts of dumbest colleges,’” WTVF-TV, June 30, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “New Vision Academy to close, forcing more than 150 students to find new schools,” Tennessean, March 6, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> “2015 SCORE Prize Winners: Trousdale, Delano, New Vision, Soulsville,” SCORE Blog, October 26, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> “Taxpayers covered \$28M in PPP loans for KIPP Foundation’s charter schools despite its \$75M in assets,” USA Today, March 22, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “KIPP Academy Emphasizes that Middle Schoolers Will Go to and Through College,” SCORE Blog, April 7, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> “Billionaire charter school advocates gave to at least 22 organizations that endorsed TISA,” Daily Memphian, August 29, 2022.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Pinkston is a public-affairs professional who has fielded dozens of statewide public-opinion polls in Tennessee on issues including education, health care, and the economy. Previously, Pinkston served as managing director of the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE). In that role, he led a nationally recognized campaign to support rigorous K-12 academic standards. Between 2003 and 2010, Pinkston served as a top aide to former Gov. Phil Bredesen, helping develop bipartisan education policies that resulted in Tennessee becoming the fastest-improving state in the history of the Nation's Report Card. From 2012-19, Pinkston served as an elected member of the Metro Nashville Board of Public Education — where he observed, first-hand, the negative fiscal and operational effects that charter schools have on public schools. Earlier in his career, Pinkston worked as a reporter for the Tennessean and Wall Street Journal. A Nashville native, Pinkston earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee.

Charter Fiscal Impact is a project of Public School Partners,  
a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that encourages sound public policies  
on behalf of Tennessee students, parents, teachers, and taxpayers.

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