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To: Alliance for Excellent Education

From: Lake Research Partners & Bellwether Research

Re: National Voter Survey on Public High Schools and ESEA Reauthorization

Date: July 12, 2010

This memo summarizes findings from a subset of questions in our recent survey for the Alliance for Excellent Education.¹

Strategic Summary

- ❖ **Voters believe the nation's public high schools are in urgent need of improvement.**
- ❖ **Improving the quality of public high schools through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is a voting issue for over eight in ten voters. Over half say failure to act this year will impact their vote decision for current elected officials in the upcoming 2010 Congressional elections.**
- ❖ **Solid majorities of voters across party lines say it is personally important to them for Congress to change ESEA to improve public high schools this year.**

Key Findings

Voters believe the nation's public high schools are in urgent need of improvement, more so than middle schools or elementary schools.

- Nearly three-quarters of voters believe that improving public high schools is extremely or very urgent (73 percent urgent; 42 percent extremely urgent). Voters place more urgency on improving high schools than they do on improving middle schools (67 percent urgent; 33 percent extremely urgent) or elementary schools (63 percent urgent; 32 percent extremely urgent).
- Just one in four give the nation's high schools a good (B) or excellent (A) rating, while 42 percent give them a "C" and one in five a poor (D) or failing (F) grade.
- Closer to home, voters give their own public high schools a better grade: 45 percent rate them as good (B) or excellent (A), 27 percent give them a "C." Yet, one in five rate them as poor (D) or failing (F).

¹ Lake Research Partners and Bellwether Research designed and administered this telephone survey of 1,000 likely voters nationwide. Interviews were conducted by professional interviewers from June 15-23, 2010. The data was weighted slightly by age, education, race, political affiliation and marital status to reflect the attributes of the actual population.

Nearly seven in ten voters say that a high school diploma is not enough to get a good-paying job in today's world. Additionally, nearly as many voters believe it does not prepare students to succeed in college as believe it does.

- Nearly seven in ten voters (69 percent) say that a diploma from America's public high schools does not prepare graduates to get a good-paying job. When it comes to college preparation, voters are more divided, with 45 percent saying a high school diploma prepares graduates to succeed in college and 45 percent saying it does not.
- Voters voice strong concerns that almost one half of current high school graduates have earned a diploma but are not ready for college or a career (78 percent say this is extremely or very concerning).

Two-thirds of voters say the high school drop out rate has a significant impact on the nation's economy and on America's ability to compete in the global economy.

- Two-thirds believe that a high drop out rate has a lot of impact on the nation's economy (69 percent), and similarly on America's ability to compete in the global economy (65 percent).
- The fact that 30 percent of high school students fail to graduate with their peers is highly concerning for a wide segment of eight in ten voters (82 percent extremely or very concerned), and similar proportions are highly concerned that as many as half of African-American and Latino students fail to graduate with their peers on top of the 30 percent drop out rate (79 percent extremely or very concerned).
- Additionally, the dollars and cents impact of the high drop out rate is a strong concern for voters. Nearly eight in ten voters say they are extremely or very concerned that each year high school dropouts cost the nation over 319 billion dollars and cost individual communities millions of dollars in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over those students' working lifetimes (79 percent).

A majority of voters say Congress is not paying enough attention to the state of public high schools, and around half of voters say governors and President Obama are not paying enough attention.

- Majorities of voters say that Republicans in Congress (62 percent) and Democrats in Congress (58 percent) are not paying enough attention to the state of public high schools. This belief crosses party lines, with majorities of Democrats, independents, and Republicans expressing that Republicans and Democrats in Congress are not paying enough attention to public high schools.
- Half of voters believe their governors (53 percent) are not paying enough attention to public high schools. Around half of Democratic (50 percent) and Republican voters (53 percent) hold this belief, and closer to six in ten independents share this view (56 percent).
- Additionally, nearly half of voters think President Obama is not paying enough attention to public high schools (49 percent not enough; 31 percent right amount of attention; 8 percent too much). A majority of Republicans (59 percent) and independents (52 percent) believe President Obama is not paying enough attention, while 38 percent of Democrats hold this belief.

- Voters believe President Obama is most likely to “get something done” to improve public education and public high schools (54 percent likely), followed by Democrats in Congress (46 percent), governors in their state (45 percent), and Republicans in Congress (36 percent).
 - Democratic voters place the most confidence in President Obama getting something done (80 percent likely), followed by Congressional Democrats (73 percent), their state's governor (53 percent), and place the least confidence in Congressional Republicans (27 percent).
 - Republican voters place the most confidence in Republicans in Congress getting something done (55 percent), followed by their governor (38 percent), President Obama (30 percent), and, the least in Democrats in Congress (22 percent).
 - Independent voters are most likely to look to President Obama (51 percent likely to get something done) and governors in their state (41 percent), followed by Democrats in Congress (38 percent), and, lastly, to Congressional Republicans (28 percent). Interestingly, independents, who are usually more locally-oriented in their perspectives, are more likely to look to President Obama than to their own state governor.

Eight in ten voters want to see No Child Left Behind (NCLB) altered in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), while just 11 percent say NCLB should be left as is. Reauthorizing ESEA this year in a way that improves public high schools is personally important to three-quarters of voters. Overall, voters give mixed reviews to NCLB.

- A majority of voters believe that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has done just a fair (25 percent) or poor job (27 percent) for public schools in their community, compared to 27 percent who say it has done either a good (22 percent) or excellent job (5 percent). A majority of Democrats (53 percent) and Republicans (55 percent) judge NCLB as having a less-than-positive impact on the public schools in their communities, and half of independents hold this view (50 percent).
- Opinions are not as well-formed on NCLB's specific impact on public high schools. Just as many voters say NCLB has done more to help improve the quality of public high schools (32 percent) as say NCLB has done more to hurt high schools (33 percent), and 28 percent do not think it has made a difference either way. However, negative views on this measure are more intense than positive ones (11 percent strongly believe NCLB has done more to help public high schools; 20 percent strongly hurt).
- Voters are solidly in favor of seeing changes made to NCLB when Congress renews the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), but more are interested in seeing Congress keep the main elements of NCLB and only making modest changes to the law to fix schools (46 percent) than in entirely replacing NCLB and taking a different and new approach to fix schools (33 percent). Only 11 percent say Congress should leave the law as is and make no changes.
 - Voters do not differ greatly by political affiliation on this measure and are divided much like the overall electorate. Around half of Democrats (49 percent) and four in ten independents (45 percent) and Republicans (45 percent) say they want to

see Congress keep the main elements of NCLB and only make modest changes to the law when renewing ESEA. One third of Democrats (34 percent), independents (33 percent) and Republicans (33 percent) want Congress to entirely replace NCLB and take a different and new approach to fixing schools. Only one in ten Democrats (10 percent), independents (11 percent) and Republicans (12 percent) want to see Congress leave the law as is with no changes.

- Over three-quarters of voters (78 percent) say it is personally important to them that Congress change ESEA to improve the quality of public high schools (52 percent very important); and three-quarters (74 percent) say it is important for Congress to do it this year (48 percent very important). **Solid majorities of voters across party lines say it is personally important to them for Congress to change ESEA to improve public high schools this year (86 percent of Democrats, 69 percent of independents, and 70 percent of Republicans).**

Improving the quality of public high schools through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is a voting issue for over eight in ten voters. Over half say failure to act this year will impact their vote decision for current elected officials.²

- Eight in ten voters say they would be more likely to support a candidate who would support renewing ESEA in a way that gives significant attention to improving the quality of public high schools (81 percent more likely; 39 percent much more), including Democratic voters (87 percent more likely; 42 percent much more likely), independents (78 percent; 41 percent), and Republicans (78 percent; 33 percent).
- This support continues even when tax increases are introduced, although not surprisingly intensity is weaker in a scenario involving increased taxes: Two-thirds of voters (68 percent) say they would be more likely to support a candidate who favors renewing ESEA in a way that gives significant attention to improving public high schools even if it means increasing taxes (23 percent much more likely). With the introduction of tax increases, some partisan divisions emerge but, even so, strong majorities of voters from all political affiliations say they would be more likely to support such a candidate, even if it meant increased taxes (Democrats: 76 percent more likely, 30 percent much more likely, independents: 67 percent, 19 percent; and Republicans: 62 percent, 20 percent).
- Additionally, half of voters say that if Congress takes no action this year to reform the Elementary and Secondary Education Act it will be an important factor in their decision to vote for a current elected official in the 2010 Congressional elections (52 percent one of the most or very important), with an additional 26 percent saying it will be a somewhat important factor.

Voters send a clear message to Congress: Bipartisanship is important but should not hold up ESEA reauthorization; do not let elementary or middle school policy debates tie up passage of policies to improve high schools.

² These findings are strong across parents with children 18 years or younger, as well as and non-parents. Nearly seven in ten (69%) voters in this study do not have children under the age of 18.

- Three-quarters of voters would be more likely to support a candidate who says Democrats and Republicans should do everything they can to work together to renew the ESEA (77 percent more likely; 46 percent much more likely). Further, two-thirds of voters would be more likely to support a candidate who calls for Democrats and Republicans to work together, but that passage of ESEA should not be delayed if both sides cannot reach agreement (66 percent more likely; 31 percent much more likely).
 - The urgency for action carries across party lines as well. Strong majorities of Democrats (76 percent), independents (60 percent), and Republicans (62 percent) are more likely to support a candidate who calls for bipartisanship but also asserts that passage should not be delayed if Congressional Democrats and Republicans cannot reach agreement.
- Six in ten voters, including Democrats, independents and Republicans, would support moving ahead with ESEA to improve public high schools even if Congress cannot agree on policy changes for elementary or middle schools (63 percent more likely; 22 percent much more).