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# The Education Iron Triangle

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## Abstract

Do teachers and the public disagree on education reform? We use data from a nationally representative survey conducted in 2011 to identify the extent of the differences between the opinion of teachers and the general public on a wide range of education policies. The overall cleavage between teachers and the general public is wider than the cleavages between other relevant groups, including that between Democrats and Republicans. At least with respect to patterns of opinion on education reform, school politics is largely a conflict between producers within the system and consumers outside it – a classic iron triangle theme.

**KEYWORDS:** public opinion, education policy, teachers unions

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Iron triangles lie at the heart of the textbook theory of American politics. Producer interest groups—farmers, gas and oil barons, banks, auto companies, real estate firms, nuclear energy plants and the like—all build relations with elected officials who oversee the regulatory and operating agencies relevant to the industry’s well-being. Implicit in iron triangle theory is the notion that the interests and policy preferences of those inside the triangle differ from those of the general public. Producer groups succeed in insulating policy decisions from external pressures, because they have the focus and resources to pursue their goals effectively, while the attention of the general public is too episodic and scattered to have an impact, except in times of crisis. In the midst of a financial meltdown, banks may find their privileges crimped by a suddenly aroused Congress. If gas prices and profit margins soar in tandem, tax loopholes benefiting the oil industry may be closed. But times of crisis are the exceptions, textbook theory tells us. Ordinarily, the iron triangle operates quietly—at the public’s expense.

Curiously, iron triangle theory is seldom applied to school politics.<sup>1</sup> The politics of education is typically presented either as an extension of the culture wars (Should schools teach evolution? Should they supply teen-agers with condoms?); or as an extension of class and ethnic politics (Do the affluent stand in the way of efforts to equalize school spending?); or in generational terms (Will the elderly pay for the schools of the next generation?); or as just another issue that divides Democrats from Republicans along familiar lines (Are schools a state and local responsibility or is there a role for the federal government?). If hints of iron triangle theory sometimes can be found in arguments that teachers unions prioritize their interests as producers of public education rather than the interests of children, the focus is more often on the supposedly misguided actions of union leaders than on the views of their members.

As for teachers themselves, they are thought to be just like us—or, more exactly, just like our better selves. Teachers did not originally enjoy such a lofty perch in the American mythology. In the best-selling book of the colonial era, John Locke warned families against schooling their children for fear of contaminating their morals. Washington Irving arranged for the ungainly teacher, Ichabod Crane, to be hounded out of a Hudson Valley town. And in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Americans cried with their British cousins over the beatings administered by Mr. Creakle to David Copperfield. But even as Dickens was writing, a rapidly expanding public education system, staffed by young, unmarried women with a talent far beyond their level of compensation, altered the American schoolteacher’s public image.

So, in recent decades, the teacher has become an admired figure in American popular culture. It was not only Mr. Chips (Robert Donat), the ill-

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<sup>1</sup> For an exception, see Terry Moe, *Special Interest* (Brookings, 2011).

starred educator in the 1939 British film classic, who captured American hearts. The selfless public servant, Richard Dadier (Glen Ford), subdued the “Blackboard Jungle” in 1955; twelve years later, Mr. Thackery (Sidney Poitier) overcame racial prejudice in Britain by proving that he can box as well as teach; 1988 saw Jaime Escalante (Edward James Olmos) “Stand and Deliver” instruction that inspired his East Los Angeles students to success in Advanced Placement Calculus; and, in 1989, John Keating (Robin Williams) created a “Dead Poets Society” to reach even the most cynical students at an elite private school.

It is not only in the movies that educators are beloved. Unlike lawyers, bankers, used-car dealers, and state legislators, teachers maintain a superb reputation. We all remember at least one who had a decisively positive impact on our lives. We see them as selfless members of a helping profession. Most Americans say that teachers have “very great prestige”, an accolade otherwise given by a majority of the public only to firefighters, scientists, doctors, nurses, and military officers. Other occupations pale by comparison. Just 11 percent, for example, give accountants the same rating.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps for that reason, the public has held fast to governing arrangements that isolate education from the mainstream of political life. American school districts operate as single-purpose governments, typically with their own taxing authority. They are governed by school boards chosen through nonpartisan elections often held on days other than the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Because schools are for children, progressive era reformers argued, they should be quietly removed from the dirtier aspects of partisan conflict. And special deference should be given to the professional educators whose expertise is needed to make schools function effectively.

If that was for decades part and parcel of the textbook theory of school politics, it hardly seems applicable in the early years of the Twenty-first Century. Governors, mayors, and even school boards have increasingly come into conflict with the organized representatives of the teaching profession. Wisconsin’s curtailment of the collective bargaining rights of teachers and other public employees provoked major protests in early 2011. Teachers called in sick in droves, union members crowded the state capitol, and Democratic senators blocked for a time the passage of the legislation by refusing to attend legislative sessions. Debates over union rights and prerogatives have since percolated in states as politically diverse as Indiana, Florida, Ohio, Illinois, Massachusetts, and California. Meanwhile, in school districts from Washington DC to Los Angeles, teacher unions and superintendents have clashed over new evaluation systems based on student test scores and the use of those evaluations as a basis for compensation.

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<sup>2</sup> The Harris Poll® #86, August 4, 2009, “Prestige of 23 Professions and Occupations,” by Regina A. Corso, Director, *The Harris Poll*, Harris Interactive.

Are such developments reflections of broader currents in society? Does the public in fact favor changes in public education that members of the teaching profession reject? Is the dominant political cleavage with respect to education policy between an organized producer group and the general public?

To shed light on these questions, in 2011 we surveyed a representative sample of the adult population, including oversamples of public school teachers and several other groups. This essay draws upon the responses to this survey to identify the extent of the differences between the opinion of teachers and the general public on a wide range of education policies. We show that the overall cleavage between teachers and the general public is wider than the cleavages between other relevant social groups, including that between Democrats and Republicans. In other words, at least with respect to patterns of opinion on education reform, school politics is largely a conflict between producers within the system and the public consumers outside it – a classic iron triangle theme.

### **The *Education Next*-PEPG Survey**

Our data come from a 2011 survey of public opinion conducted by the journal, *Education Next*, and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University. These data are uniquely suited for exploring divisions in public attitudes toward school reform because they include oversamples of multiple subgroup populations and measure opinion on a variety of education policy proposals. The survey was administered by the polling firm Knowledge Networks (KN) between April 15 and May 4, 2011.<sup>3</sup> The findings reported in this essay are based on a nationally representative stratified sample of approximately 1,100 adults (age 18 years and older) and representative oversamples of roughly 700 members of the following groups: public school teachers, parents of school-aged children, African Americans, Hispanics, and the affluent, defined as those with a bachelor's degree or better and an income in the top ten percent of the distribution within their state.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Knowledge Networks administered the survey using its web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a nationally representative, probability-based panel of individuals. Individuals in the KnowledgePanel® respond to surveys online. Knowledge Networks initially samples respondents using a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. These individuals are invited by phone or mail to participate in the KnowledgePanel®. Knowledge Networks provides Internet access and equipment at no cost to those who do not already have access. Panelists are then invited to complete surveys three or four times a month. Detailed information about the maintenance of the KnowledgePanel®, the protocols used to administer surveys, and the comparability of online and telephone surveys is available online at [www.knowledgenetworks.com/quality/](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/quality/).

<sup>4</sup> Respondents could elect to complete the survey in English or Spanish.

We asked about a range of issues including teacher policies, school choice, test-based accountability, school spending and taxes, and the social composition of schools and classrooms. This collection of policy areas allow us to compare subgroup differences across school reform proposals; for example, do teachers differ from the rest of the public only in those policies related to their employment and compensation, or do these differences extend to other areas as well?

On teacher policy, we inquired whether teachers' pay should be based in part on the academic progress of students in their class, whether teacher tenure should also be based on student performance, whether tenure should be eliminated altogether, whether principals should be allowed to hire college graduates as teachers even if they do not hold state certification, and whether teacher unions have a positive or negative effect on the performance of local schools. With respect to school choice, we asked about support for both means-tested and universal school voucher programs, tax credits to fund scholarships to private schools, the formation of charter schools, and online coursework. In the domain of test-based accountability, we asked whether the federal government should continue to mandate that all students be tested annually in grades 3-8, whether states should adopt common standards and tests, whether state tests should be used to decide whether a student is promoted to the next grade, and whether students should have to demonstrate proficiency on state tests in order to graduate from high school. On spending and taxes, we asked whether respondents favored more spending on education, higher local taxes to pay for education spending, and higher teacher salaries. Finally, on the social composition of schools and classrooms we inquired about single-sex education, efforts to promote socioeconomic diversity within schools, and allowing students with emotional and behavioral disabilities to join their peers in regular classroom settings (a practice commonly known as mainstreaming).<sup>5</sup>

Except for the union, spending, and tax items, each question asked respondents to choose from the same five options: "Definitely favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, or definitely oppose." To provide a measure of the size of the divide between any two groups in the public, we first calculate the share in each group expressing support for the policy among all those who expressed an opinion (setting aside those who indicated "neither favor nor oppose") and then take the difference between those shares.<sup>6</sup> On the

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<sup>5</sup> Complete survey results and question wording are available at [http://educationnext.org/files/EN-PEPG\\_Complete\\_Polling\\_Results\\_2011.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/EN-PEPG_Complete_Polling_Results_2011.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> In doing so, we ignore those respondents who neither favor nor oppose these policies. A considerable number of respondents do not choose a side on these proposals, a share ranging from 19% on the question of whether the federal government should require testing to 42% on the question of single sex schools for the general population. Additionally, the propensity to take the

spending and tax items, respondents could select: “greatly increase, somewhat increase, stay about the same, somewhat decrease, or greatly decrease.” For these three items, we simply calculate the share of all respondents within each group supporting an increase and report the difference in those shares.<sup>7</sup>

### The Teacher-Non-teacher Divide

We begin our examination of the degree to which teachers disagree with the rest of the public in their views on key education debates with a series of items on teacher policy. Public discussions of the best way to recruit, evaluate, and compensate teachers have proliferated in recent years, possibly due to research demonstrating the importance of teacher quality for student achievement. Admittedly, any differences between teachers and the broader public are likely to be largest on these items, which have direct implications for teachers’ work lives. At the same time, the intense interest among policymakers at all levels in measures to improve teacher effectiveness has placed these issues at the very top of the governmental agenda.

**Table 1. Opinions on Merit Pay: General Public and Teachers**

	General Public	Teacher
<b>Use Merit Pay</b>		
Completely favor	14%	6%
Somewhat favor	33	12
Neither favor nor oppose	26	10
Somewhat oppose	18	24
Completely oppose	9	48

We first illustrate our process for discerning the extent of disagreement between teachers and non-teachers by presenting detailed results for one survey item, which asked whether teacher salaries should be based, “in part, on their students’ progress on state tests.” As Table 1 indicates, the public appears broadly

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neutral position varies across subgroups. The average proportion of neutral responses across questions is 27% for the general population but only 15% among teachers. The results in this paper, therefore, speak only to the share of the population who choose a side on these issues. In other projects we explore the sources of non-opinion on these issues and the sensitivity of non-opinion to information.

<sup>7</sup> The union item asked about the effect teachers unions have on their local schools, with the following response options: “Very positive, somewhat positive, neither positive nor negative, somewhat negative, and very negative.” As for the policy items, we exclude those offering the middle position and calculate the share of the remaining respondents offering a positive response.

supportive of this form of merit pay, with 14 percent favoring the idea completely and another 33 percent favoring it somewhat. Just 27 percent were either somewhat or completely opposed, while roughly one-quarter of the public remained neutral on the issue. Conversely, 72 percent of teachers report that they oppose merit pay either somewhat or completely and only 18 percent registered support, with 10 percent opting not to take a position on the issue.

**Table 2. Support for School Reform: General Public, Teachers, and Nonteachers**

	<b>General Public</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Non- teacher</b>	<b>Teacher Difference (Teacher - Nonteacher)</b>
<b>TEACHER POLICY:</b>				
Use Merit Pay	64%	16%	66%	<b>-50*</b>
Use Merit Tenure	74	29	76	<b>-46*</b>
Allow Flexible Hiring	57	30	58	<b>-28*</b>
Eliminate Tenure	70	35	72	<b>-37*</b>
Teachers Unions Harmful	56	32	57	<b>-25*</b>
<b>SCHOOL CHOICE:</b>				
Expand Choice with Universal Vouchers	64	38	65	<b>-27*</b>
Use Govt Funds for Means-Tested Vouchers	50	27	51	<b>-24*</b>
Allow Charter Schools	70	54	71	-17*
Allow Tax-Credit Funded Scholarships	70	51	71	-20*
Allow Online Courses	65	56	65	-9
<b>ACCOUNTABILITY:</b>				
Require Annual Testing	88	65	89	-24*
Use Common Standards/Test	72	60	72	-12*
Use Test for Grade Promotion	86	72	86	-15*
Require Graduation Test	86	77	86	-10*
<b>TAXES AND SPENDING:</b>				
Increase Spending	65	71	64	6
Raise Taxes	35	49	35	14*
Raise Teacher Pay	55	80	54	26*
<b>SCHOOL AND CLASS COMPOSITION:</b>				
Allow Single Sex Schools	59	71	59	12*
Use Family Income to Assign Students	37	37	37	0
Separate Classes for Disturbed Students	65	67	65	2

Note: Cells in far right column contain raw differences in percent support between comparison groups. \* indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level. Bold indicates that plurality opinion among the comparison groups are on opposite sides of the issue.



As explained above, we convert the results from this and other survey items into a summary measure of the extent of disagreement between teachers and non-teachers. Setting aside the 10 percent of teachers who remained neutral, just 16 percent of teachers expressed support for merit pay. This contrasts with 64 percent of the public as a whole and 66 percent of non-teachers, suggesting a difference between teachers and non-teachers in their support for merit pay (as defined in the question) of 50 percentage points.

Table 2 uses this metric to summarize the cleavage between teachers and non-teachers on 20 education policies. Entries in bold indicate that the difference puts majorities of those expressing an opinion within each comparison groups on opposing sides of the issue. As it turns out, merit pay proved to be the single most divisive issue between teachers and non-teachers. Not far behind, however, were the elimination of teacher tenure and using student test score performance to make tenure decisions. Teachers were also far more skeptical of allowing principals to hire uncertified candidates and more likely to see their unions as having a positive effect on local schools. Indeed, on all five teacher policy items, the greater shares of teachers and non-teachers hold opposite views on these issues.

Beyond teacher policy, statistically significant differences in support appear on 11 of the 15 remaining issues. Only in the case of school vouchers, however, do these differences produce pluralities on opposite sides of the issue. On the remaining school choice, accountability, fiscal, and school composition items, teachers and the rest of the public were on the same side of the issue. Even so, the magnitude of support for (or opposition to) these proposals was strikingly different across the two groups. For example, a bare majority of the non-teaching public favored an increase in teacher pay, but teachers, not surprisingly, were overwhelmingly supportive. Although they agree with the plurality of the non-teaching public on school accountability and forms of school choice other than vouchers, teachers are substantially less supportive of these measures. In short, the political cleavage between teachers and non-teachers extends well beyond issues directly related to employment and compensation.

Table 2 reports the raw differences between teachers and the public on the various issues under consideration. But do teachers hold to their positions because they are teachers or because of some other background characteristic that distinguishes them from the general public? After all, teachers are better educated, more likely to be female, more likely to be white, have higher incomes, think more highly of their local schools, and are different in other respects as well.

In additional analyses not reported here, we examined whether these demographic differences can account for the cleavage between teachers and the rest of the public on school reform proposals. More specifically, we standardized the five point response scale for each issue (with higher values indicating more support) and regressed it on a binary indicator for employment as a teacher along

**Table 3. Cleavages in Opinion Toward School Reform**

	Teacher Difference (Teacher - Nonteacher)	Parent Difference (Parent - Nonparent)	Homeowner Difference (Homeowner - Nonowner)	Affluent Difference (Affluent-Nonaffluent)	Black Difference (Black - White)	Hispanic Difference (Hispanic - White)	Party Difference (Democrat - Republican)
<b>TEACHER POLICY:</b>							
Use Merit Pay	<b>-50*</b>	4	0	-5	1	13*	-1
Use Merit Tenure	<b>-46*</b>	2	-2	-5	6	11*	-5
Allow Flexible Hiring	<b>-28*</b>	-4	-7	15*	5	3	<b>-11*</b>
Eliminate Tenure	<b>-37*</b>	5	19*	8	<b>-32*</b>	-20*	-18*
Teachers Unions Harmful	<b>-25*</b>	8	<b>25*</b>	12*	<b>-43*</b>	<b>-28*</b>	<b>-41*</b>
<b>SCHOOL CHOICE:</b>							
Expand Choice with Universal Vouchers	<b>-27*</b>	17*	-16*	-10	9	22*	-5
Use Govt Funds for Means-Tested Vouchers	<b>-24*</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>-22*</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>25*</b>	<b>26*</b>	<b>5</b>
Allow Charter Schools	-17*	6	-4	6	7	1	-5
Allow Tax-Credit Funded Scholarships	-20*	12*	-15*	-4	15*	15*	0
Allow Online Courses	-9	9*	-11*	-14*	11*	15*	0
<b>ACCOUNTABILITY:</b>							
Require Annual Testing	-24*	-2	-2	-2	4	5	-1
Use Common Standards/Test	-12*	0	8*	2	-5	-6	-7*
Use Test for Grade Promotion	-15*	-5	4	1	-3	8*	-8*
Require Graduation Test	-10*	-4	5	4	-7	3	-6
<b>TAXES AND SPENDING:</b>							
Increase Spending	6	13*	-13*	-6	18*	18*	<b>36*</b>
Raise Taxes	14*	6	-9*	6	10*	12*	23*
Raise Teacher Pay	26*	0	-14*	2	<b>29*</b>	<b>16*</b>	<b>22*</b>
<b>SCHOOL AND CLASS COMPOSITION:</b>							
Allow Single Sex Schools	12*	-7	0	8	11	3	-6
Use Family Income to Assign Students	0	-12*	<b>-19*</b>	-4	<b>29*</b>	<b>30*</b>	23*
Separate Classes for Disturbed Students	2	0	7	-1	-6	<b>-20*</b>	-9

Note: Cells contain raw differences in percent support between comparison groups. \* indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level. Bold indicates that plurality opinion among the comparison groups are on opposite sides of the issue.

with variables for respondent income, education, party identification, evaluation of local public schools, and separate binary indicators for gender, African American race, Hispanic ethnicity, region (South/non-South), homeownership, religious identity (Evangelical Protestant or other), and parental status (of a child under the age of 18). On all but one issue—income integration of schools—significant differences between teacher and non-teacher opinion remained even after adjusting for all of the above mentioned variables. For ten of the items, the size of the teacher coefficient was larger than 0.3 standard deviations of the response variable, and for six it was larger than 0.5 standard deviations.

In short, the divergence of opinion between teachers and non-teachers is both statistically significant and large on many of the school policy topics on the public agenda. But is this cleavage larger than those resulting from other social and political divides in contemporary society? To that topic, we now turn.

### **Parents, Homeowners, and the Affluent**

Parents with children under the age of eighteen have a vested interest in the schools that nonparents do not. Except for the roughly 12 percent of families who send their children to private school or educate them at home, parents have a clear interest in a safe, effective, and attractive school for their children to attend. For them, as distinct from other members of the public, schools can be expected to be a priority, and parents may well have views not shared by those without children or who no longer need to worry about their children's K-12 education. Perhaps the opinions of parents differ from those of the public at large just as much as teacher opinions do.

Homeowners, too, have a vested interest in their local schools. Better than 40 percent of the cost of K-12 education is borne by local taxes, which typically means the local property tax. The annual property tax is one of the most visible taxes a homeowner pays, and much—typically a third or more—of that property tax goes to fund local schools. On the other hand, the quality of local schools affects the value of community property, so the homeowner may be willing to pay higher taxes if school quality is expected to improve as a result. In other words, the homeowner has a unique stake in efficient schools—those that return value for the dollars spent—rather than inexpensive schools per se. Moreover, having invested resources in a residence in a specific school district, they may take a skeptical view of proposals to break the tie between residential location and school quality through the expansion of parental choice.

Finally, affluent Americans (those with at least a bachelor's degree and an income in the top decile of their state) may differ in their views of education policy in part because they are more likely to have located themselves in an area in which public school performance is less of a concern. Our data confirm that the

affluent have fewer complaints about the performance of their local public schools. Asked to evaluate the schools in their local community, 54 percent of affluent Americans assign an “A” or “B” grade, as compared with 46 percent of the general public. And only 12 percent of the affluent assigned their school a “D” or an “F” grade, while 18 percent of the public did so. Across the public as a whole, those assigning schools lower grades are substantially more likely to support various reform proposals, suggesting that affluent Americans may be less supportive.

As can be seen in Table 3, however, the relevant cleavages in opinion for parents, homeowners, and the affluent are quite modest – especially when contrasted with the sharp cleavage between teachers and non-teachers. For parents and homeowners, the differences in opinion which do emerge are largely as expected. Parents are more supportive than nonparents of proposals to expand school choice, more supportive of increased school spending, and less supportive of the use of family income to assign students to schools. Homeowners are in turn less supportive than renters of private school choice, online coursework and the use of family income in school assignments, more supportive of the elimination of teacher tenure, and considerably more likely to view teachers unions as having a harmful effect on their local schools. The views of the affluent, meanwhile, differ from those with fewer advantages on only three items: They are more supportive of allowing principals to hire uncertified teachers, more critical of teachers unions, and less enthusiastic about online courses.

As important, virtually all of these differences are on the margins. On no issue do majorities of those expressing an opinion among parents and nonparents or among the affluent and non-affluent disagree with one another by a statistically significant amount. Pluralities of homeowners and renters disagree on just three items, as compared to the seven items which distinguished teachers and non-teachers.

### **Racial and Ethnic Differences**

Additional columns in Table 3 present the differences in opinion among blacks and Hispanics, both as compared to whites. Patterns of residential segregation in America, especially in metropolitan areas, often sort students into schools with similar demographic backgrounds. Minority groups are disproportionately concentrated in the nation’s poorest performing schools. Decades of education research testifies to an achievement gap between black and white students in America. Differences in access to quality education services might manifest itself in disparate desire for reform.

The data confirm that these groups are not in perfect agreement on school reform issues, but the pattern of disagreement is complex—and much more

modest in magnitude—than the cleavage between teachers and non-teachers. The ways in which black opinion differs from white opinion are a surprising mix. Blacks are decidedly more in favor of school choice in a variety of forms: vouchers, on-line learning for credit, and tax credits for those who donate to charities giving scholarships to those from low-income families who attend private schools. But they are also more likely to support unions and to favor higher spending and more pay for teachers. More than whites, they favor keeping current teacher tenure practices. They tend to favor federal testing requirements more than whites but are less likely to support graduation exams. Although they are more likely than whites to favor single sex education, they support both mainstreaming and assigning students to schools on the basis of income. On some of the issues, differences between blacks and whites—support for vouchers, higher salaries for teachers, teacher unions and teacher tenure, for example—are fairly substantial.

Hispanics also are more likely to favor school choice policies than whites are. They also favor a broad range of school accountability policies, teacher tenure, social integration, and mainstreaming. They are more likely than whites to think that more money should be spent on schools and that teachers should be paid more. They think unions have done more good than harm.

But cleavages among ethnic groups are, in most instances, smaller than either the one that divides teachers from the general public or, as we shall see, the one that separates Democrats from Republicans.

### **Partisan Differences**

Many of the policy debates in America are channeled through partisan differences. For example, in 2010 Democrat and Republican voters divided over a universal health insurance program, tax cuts, a guest worker program for immigrants, troop presence in Afghanistan, and abortion.<sup>8</sup> Are education policies also subject to a similar partisan divide? If so, are the disagreements between Republicans and Democrats so large that the cleavage is more significant than the one between teachers and the rest of the public? The final column of Table 3 shows the differences between respondents who identified with the Republican Party and those who identified with the Democratic Party.<sup>9</sup> On three issues—

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<sup>8</sup> The 2007-2010 Associated Press-Yahoo News Election Panel Study.

<sup>9</sup> We exclude independents that lean toward a party. This exclusion provides a more conservative test against finding small differences between parties. If leaners hold weaker positions on these issues than party identifiers, then inclusion of these independent leaners would water down opinion among the partisan groups and bias results against finding differences between the parties even in the presence of strong differences between non-leaners. Nevertheless, we did a supplementary analysis including leaners and the substantive results reported above remain intact.

teacher unions, spending more on schools and paying teachers higher salaries—a strong plurality of Republicans take positions differing from those chosen by a plurality of Democrats. Sharp differences between the parties are also apparent on the income integration issue.

But on the remaining issues, the parties tend to be in fairly close agreement. On quite a number of issues, including merit pay for teachers, school vouchers, charters, and other forms of school choice, there is hardly any difference of opinion at all. If partisan differences among the public as a whole were shaping education politics, it would be a fairly placid scene.

When partisan differences are adjusted for social background characteristics, the differences between the parties narrow further. On three issues—using government money for school vouchers, online learning, and allowing principals to hire teachers lacking state credentials—no statistically significant differences could be detected. And on many other issues, including merit pay, awarding tenure only to meritorious teachers, mainstreaming, single-sex education, and all the questions concerning school and student accountability, differences, though statistically significant, were small. What Republicans and Democrats disagreed about was limited to standard partisan issues, such as taxes, spending, social integration of the schools, and the role of unions. Even there, the conflict was much more muted than the teacher-public divide.

### Conclusions

We explored other cleavages over school policy in addition to those reported in this essay. We found little evidence that culture wars plague school politics. Although Evangelical Protestants differ from others on single sex education and a few other issues, those differences are not stark. On some issues, women hold views slightly different than those of men, southerners differ somewhat from those living in other parts of the country, and those who give local schools a high evaluation are of a different mind about reform than those who give local schools a low evaluation. But except for assessments of local schools, no factor accounts for much of the variation in public opinion on educational policies. The differences between teachers and the rest of the population are much larger than those between Democrats and Republicans, which are substantially larger than any other divide that we have been able to identify.

Iron triangle theory expects teachers to hold views that contrast with those held by the general public, as they have occupational interests that they wish to protect. On the other hand, standard interpretations of school politics seldom identify the basic conflict of interest between teachers and the public as a whole, emphasizing instead the commonalities of teacher and public interests. It is certainly true that teachers are drawn from a broad segment of the public, live and

work in every community in the country, and have long been held in high regard by the public as a whole. Still, teachers have occupational interests to protect—the desire for a guaranteed job, compensation regardless of performance, autonomy without accountability, among others. For that reason the conflict between teachers and the public is in fact the defining cleavage within the educational sector—at least on the issues explored in these surveys.

On several issues touching on teacher rights and prerogatives, the cleavage between teachers and the public widened somewhat between 2009 and 2011 (not shown). For example, the gap in opinion toward tenure grew from a 30 percentage point difference in 2009 to a 37 percentage point difference in 2012. The trend for the difference in support for government funded vouchers is even more striking as the gap between teachers and the rest of the public doubled in magnitude from 11 points to 24 points over the same period. If teacher opinion is in fact drifting away from a broader consensus in the country, the chances increase that their public image will become tarnished and their treatment by the pillars of the communication industry will alter. A few signs are already evident. Teach for America, a group that identifies outstanding students from highly selective universities, has won widespread praise in the mainstream media for bringing excellent teachers to classrooms without channeling them through the standard credentialing process. Political candidates are still reluctant to criticize teachers directly, but some—both Democrats and Republicans—are increasingly willing to confront teacher unions. Teacher scandals—whether it be cheating or sexual harassment—are receiving greater publicity than in the past. And Hollywood is not showing teachers the same reverence that was at one time standard treatment. It is rumored that only a concerted effort by teacher organizations succeeded in keeping a 2010 documentary hostile toward teacher unions, “Waiting for Superman,” from winning a nomination for an Academy Award. “Won’t Back Down,” a feature-length film scheduled to appear in September 2012, pits working class Pittsburgh parents against the teacher union and administrative bureaucracy and may prove to be one of the first major Hollywood movies to have an anti-teacher patina. Is it a sign that the public will someday no longer regard teachers as Mr. and Ms. Chips?