

## Gauging Attitudes on Tennessee Schools:

### *Tennesseans are Cautiously Optimistic about K-12 Public Education*

In cooperation with the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), Widmeyer Communications conducted a telephone survey of 600 likely voters in Tennessee to explore attitudes towards kindergarten through 12th grade public education in the state. The poll sought to assess people's general understanding of the depth and promise of education reforms today in the state and their opinions on where the state is headed. The survey was conducted from July 7-13, 2010. The overall margin of error is +/- 4.0%.

SCORE is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization chaired by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, whose mission is to work with state and local governments to encourage sound policy decisions in public education, and to advance innovative reform on a statewide basis. SCORE's core strengths are providing information on state-level education reform and technical support for state and local governments. SCORE engages in advocacy, including building coalitions among public- and private-sector partners. In addition, SCORE is playing a key role in helping implement and monitor the state's Race to the Top program.

#### **Key Findings:**

- Tennessee (TN) voters are cautiously optimistic about education reform in the state, which they see as a primary concern for the state government. They recognize victories such as winning federal Race the Top funds and raising TN state education standards, but they are not sure where the state is going from there. They understand this may be a time of change, but they are not fully aware of what is included in TN's plan to get them there.
- TN voters understand the connections between the economy and education. They know that a strong education is one of the pathways for TN to improve its economy and increase opportunities for its citizens.
- TN voters support increased rigor for TN students, despite the cost or a temporary dip in achievement levels while schools and students adjust to higher standards. But they are mixed in their views about — or may not be aware of — other key education reforms, such as charter schools, new teacher evaluations and takeovers of low-performing schools. Awareness building efforts about these more nuanced reforms, as well as the coalitions that exist to carry them out, are necessary to engage voters more fully in education reform issues.

**More in depth findings of the poll include:**

**TN voters believe K-12 public education should be a top priority of state government.** About one-third of voters (32%) believe improving the quality of public schools should be one of the state's most important goals. The only goal that rated higher: Strengthening the economy and creating jobs (34%).

**TN voters believe K-12 public education is closely tied to the economy and jobs.** More than two-thirds of voters (69%) agree that graduating high school students who are college- and career-ready is critical to building a strong economy and creating jobs. Meanwhile, about four out of five voters (82%) believe that having a strong K-12 public education system is “very important” to the economy.

**TN voters are mixed in their views on the quality of K-12 public education.** Fewer than half of voters (48%) have a favorable view of K-12 public education in the state. Of those, 41% rate it as “good” and just 7% rate it as “excellent.” Meanwhile, 45% of voters believe TN's K-12 public education system is moving in the right direction while about one-third of voters (34%) believe it is headed in the wrong direction.

**TN voters are upbeat about the state's early win in the federal Race to the Top competition.** More than one-third of voters (36%) are aware of the competition to improve K-12 public education. When informed about TN's winning bid in the competition, more than three-quarters of voters (76%) say they are more optimistic about the prospects for education reform.

**TN voters strongly support higher academic standards in the classroom.** More than two-thirds of voters (69%) “strongly support” the State Board of Education's decision to raise standards in key subjects including reading and mathematics. Strong support increases slightly (71%) after voters hear statements for and against higher standards — including arguments that student test scores could fall and costs to local school systems could rise.

**TN voters have mixed views on some recent reforms, with many undecided.** For example, 31% of voters support charter schools while a similar number (29%) oppose them, with 40% undecided. Meanwhile, 40% of voters support TN's new law requiring that half of a teacher's evaluation be based on student test scores and student performance data while about one-third of voters (34%) oppose the law, with 26% undecided. A majority of voters (52%) supports TN's new law allowing the state to take over persistently failing schools, with 40% opposing it.