# What Makes a Poll Believable?

# *Source: Buck Institute for Education*

A “public opinion poll” is a way to collect information about public opinion by asking people questions. The most accurate, or “valid,” polls are based on the following scientific polling methods:

1. The sample of people polled is representative of the total population of voters in the city, district, state, or other group that is of interest.
   * For example, imagine a high school principal wanted to know how many parents in a school of over 1000 students supported a schedule change. The principal would have to report the results from a percentage of parents of students from each grade level, each ethnic group, each academic achievement level, and so on, *in proportion to* the percentage of these students in the whole school.
   * The principal should also be sure to only ask parents and *not* other members of the community.
2. The sample of people polled is **random**—they have not been selected because they are a certain type or have certain opinions.
   * For example, the high school principal should not ask *only* those parents who come to football games.
3. The number of people polled must be **large enough**.
   * For example, the high school principal would need to ask *more* than 10 parents out of 1000.
4. The questions must be **worded carefully** so people aren’t influenced one way or another.
   * For example, the high school principal should not word the question, “If you knew it would totally disrupt sports and extracurricular activities, and possibly lower test scores, would you support the small group of people who want to change the school schedule?”
5. The **way** in which the question is asked must be **controlled** or “neutral”.
   * For example, if the high school principal asked people their opinion when meeting them at Back-to-School Night, she would need to be sure her tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language did *not* influence people.