Support for a California school voucher initiative on the Nov. 7 ballot is slipping because voters don't believe it will help public schools or students with poor test scores, according to a new statewide poll.

Only 37 percent of likely voters plan to vote for Proposition 38, while 53 percent plan to vote against it, according to the survey by the Public Policy Institute of California.

"The supporters of this measure have not been able to convince voters that vouchers are part of the solution to improving the state's schools," said pollster Mark Baldassare.

Meanwhile, support is growing for another school initiative on the same ballot. Prop. 39 would make it easier for local school districts to pass bonds for construction. It would lower the threshold of local voter approval for school bonds from two-thirds to 55 percent.

The poll shows that 49 percent of likely voters support Prop. 39 and 37 percent oppose it. Baldassare cautions that the results on Prop. 39 could swing greatly between now and Election Day as the campaigns promote different aspects of the measure.

The questions about the two school initiatives were included in a statewide poll of 1,099 likely voters conducted Sept. 5-11. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

In each case, the survey results were substantially different from those in a poll taken five weeks earlier by the same organization. And the question asked for each initiative was different than in the earlier survey because pollsters learned in the interim what the ballot wording will be.

Pat Rosenstiel, campaign manager for the voucher initiative, blamed the sharp downturn in support for Prop. 38 on use of the ballot wording for the polling question. It is a case of a "skewed question and tainted results," he said.

Prop. 38 authorizes publicly financed vouchers of at least $4,000 per year for students to attend private or religious schools. In the earlier poll, likely voters were asked a question taken from the title and summary of the initiative that was prepared for the collection of petition signatures. That wording more favorably portrayed the initiative, Rosenstiel said.
Baldassare said the change in wording of the poll question was probably not the reason for the shift. The poll, he noted, also contained a question about whether the initiative would help public schools in California and another about whether it would help students with low test scores.

In both cases, likely voters overwhelmingly said it would not. Taking the three questions together, he said, "We see that voters' opinions are very consistent about the voucher initiative right now."

In contrast, he said, likely voter reaction to Prop. 39 is inconsistent and the question wording might account for some of the shift in public opinion.

The ballot wording for Prop. 39 used in the latest poll does not include mention that the current threshold for passage of local school bonds is two-thirds voter approval. Thus, those surveyed who mistakenly thought the current threshold is a simple majority would construe Prop. 39 as a toughening of the requirement rather than a loosening.

In addition, the ballot wording, unlike the earlier title and summary, makes no mention that property taxes might rise to pay the school bonds. When voters were told those two new pieces of information in a follow-up question, the ballot measure was suddenly losing.

Conversely, when voters surveyed were told that Prop. 39 includes accountability requirements and performance audits, support shot back up.