A progress report on raising standards shows few students unsettled by testing and continued support for such efforts among teachers, parents, and students.

Since 1998, Public Agenda has annually surveyed public school students, teachers, and parents, along with employers and college professors, to help gauge the nation’s progress in raising academic standards. The surveys ask students, teachers, and parents about expectations, testing, promotion, and graduation in their own schools, and they ask employers and professors for their perceptions about the skills of young people entering the workforce and higher education. This year, despite some headlines trumpeting a “backlash to testing,” Reality Check shows strong agreement on the useful role standardized tests can play, and a broad consensus on how they should be used.

A Changing Educational Landscape

The drive to raise academic standards in public schools has enjoyed broad political backing at the national, state, and local levels. But there are still many who feel that schools need to do more to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. Some educators have called for a greater focus on teaching critical thinking skills, while others have argued for a more balanced approach that includes both traditional and innovative teaching methods.

Glimmers of Progress?

Indications are that professors in particular are beginning to give local schools more credit for their efforts to raise standards. The number of professors who say that local schools expect students to learn “too little” has steadily fallen from 66 percent in 1998 to 47 percent today, a significant drop of 19 points. For employers also, the data suggest a downward trend, from 56 percent in 1998 to 48 percent today. Both groups are more likely to give their local public schools higher ratings overall than they were four years ago. In 1998, only 21 percent in each group said their schools were doing an excellent or good job. In 2002, that proportion has increased to 43 percent of employers and 39 percent of professors.

Despite these glimmers of hope, the high levels of dissatisfaction among employers and professors—who are in many ways the ultimate consumers of K-12 education—are disheartening. Since standards reforms take time to take effect, it is possible that these groups are not yet encountering the better-prepared students coming through the pipeline.

But Can They Spell?

It is also possible that disagreements over the importance of such skills as grammar, spelling, punctuation, and basic math are a stumbling block. Seventy percent of employers and 81 percent of college professors rate the computer skills of the high school graduates they come in contact with as excellent or good.

For more information on this or other Public Agenda research, visit Public Agenda Online at www.publicagenda.org. In-depth information, including survey findings, news digests, and trend data, is available on education and nearly two dozen other public-policy issues.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Reality Check: a joint project of Public Agenda and Education Week, is the annual report on the progress of the academic standards movement and the impact of reform efforts on schools and the work world as seen from the perspectives of education’s key stakeholders. The Pew Charitable Trusts and the GE Foundation provide support for the project. The four previous editions of Reality Check appeared in Education Week on Feb. 21, 2001, Feb. 16, 2000, Jan. 11, 1999 (Quality Counts 1999, and Jan. 8, 1998 (Quality Counts 1998).

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in New York City, designed the surveys on which this report is based and provides this summary of the findings. The report was written by Jean Johnson and Kris Daubert.

More findings from the Reality Check surveys are available online at www.schools.org and www.publicagenda.org.
Basic Skills Still Troublesome

But this year’s surveys also contain some less welcome news for standards proponents. Based on reports from teachers, parents, and students, the impact of higher academic standards on promotion and graduation policies has been mixed. Employers and professors also continue to voice considerable dissatisfaction with high school graduates’ basic skills.

FINDING 1:

Even as students nationwide face more testing and higher hurdles for promotion and graduation, very few seem apprehensive about school or unnerved by what is currently being asked of them.

Based on Public Agenda’s survey of 600 public middle and high school students, only very few of the nation’s students experience school as a grueling academic pressure cooker. Eight in 10 (82 percent) say academic expectations in their own schools are “about right,” just 11 percent say students are expected to learn “too much.” Seven in 10 students say the amount of homework they get (71 percent) and the number of tests they take (71 percent) are also about right.

Taking Tests in Stride

Although some educators have raised concerns about whether increased standardized testing is placing undue pressure on students, Reality Check picks up little evidence of strain. Virtually all students say that they take standardized tests seriously: 56 percent say they take them “very seriously.” At the same time, however, most also seem to be taking the tests in stride. Twenty-three percent say they don’t get nervous at all; 73 percent say they get nervous but can handle it. Only a handful of students (5 percent) say they “get so nervous” that they can’t take the tests.

Some educators also voice fear that test preparation and “teaching to the test” may drive out other important elements of education, and a large majority of students (80 percent) do report that teachers spend class time preparing for upcoming standardized tests. Still, almost eight in 10 (78 percent) say that their teachers do not take so much time that they neglect other important topics.

As for the tests themselves, over half of teenagers (53 percent) say that most of the tests they take consist only of multiple-choice questions; 44 percent say their tests include writing and explaining their answers. Almost eight in 10 of the students (79 percent) say they think standardized-test questions are generally fair.

Too Much Emphasis on Scores?

Even so, some evidence suggests that all the talk about testing is affecting at least some students. A sizeable number (45 percent) do believe that their schools place too much emphasis on standardized-test scores. And they do have distinct views on how these tests should be used: Most (82 percent) say it would be wrong to use the results of just one test as a basis for promotion or graduation. As we will see in subsequent findings, strong majorities of the adults surveyed agree. Reality Check does show, however, that it’s very unusual for schools to base promotion or graduation solely on standardized-test scores.

FINDING 2:

Even as standards are being raised nationwide, many students say they could work harder in school, and many say classmates often get diplomas without having learned what was expected.

Getting By

Reality Check 2002 suggests that many American middle and high school students could devote a substantial amount of discretionary effort to study-
**Finding 3:**

Broad agreement exists that local schools are moving in the right direction on standards, and that testing has genuine benefits. No evidence points to a broad backlash against higher academic standards among any of the groups surveyed.

Public school students may voice relatively little dismay over increased testing, but this does not mean that the topic has not been hotly debated in some communities. Yet, despite several widely publicized anti-testing protests in recent years, *Reality Check* younger students as a whole do not express concern that standardized testing is taking away from real learning. They simply say they want to take the tests to prove their abilities and qualifications. Even among teachers, there is no significant backlash against standards, although they do voice concerns about the frequency and complexity of testing.

**Few Would Turn Back the Clock**

Just as it did last year, *Reality Check* picks up virtually no support for returning to the days before the "standards movement" began. Among those who know that their districts are raising standards, only 2 percent of parents, 1 percent of teachers, 2 percent of employers, and 1 percent of professors say local schools should discontinue their current efforts and go back to the way things were. In fact, great majorities of all the adult groups say that their own districts have been "careful and reasonable" in their efforts to raise standards.

Not only are most parents, teachers, employers, and professors comfortable with the overall drive to raise standards, few take serious issue with the concept of standardized testing. As we reported in Finding 1, a large majority of students accept standardized testing as fair and reasonable. Equally large numbers of adults also give testing a general thumbs-up.

**Basic Skills at Least**

Very large majorities of parents (85 percent), teachers (75 percent), employers (79 percent), and professors (79 percent) say that standardized tests work harder if they know that they will have to pass a test for promotion or graduation. Most parents (54 percent) and teachers (58 percent) say such a test should focus on basic skills, but almost a third of parents (32 percent) and 21 percent of teachers say it should cover even higher skills. Just 12 percent of parents and 20 percent of teachers say it's "a bad idea" to emphasize higher skills on tests today, and sizable percentages of parents (60 percent), employers (52 percent), and professors (57 percent) agree.

Large majorities of parents (66 percent), teachers (79 percent), employers (64 percent), and professors (79 percent) also say "teachers will end up teaching to the test instead of making sure real learning takes place." Still, these concerns do not seem to affect an overall comfort level with testing. Even teachers, by far the group voicing the most concern, are largely untroubled by testing's impact in their own classrooms. Just 26 percent of teachers say that they themselves focus so much on test preparation that real learning is neglected; 73 percent say this is not currently the case in their own classroom.

*Unfair, But Rare*

It is also important to recognize that the strong overall support for testing does not mean that these groups give districts carte blanche on how tests are used. Very large majorities of parents (75 percent), teachers (89 percent), employers (81 percent), and professors (95 percent) say it would be "wrong to use the results of just one test to decide whether a student gets
promoted or graduated.” Similarly large numbers—parents (78 percent), teachers (91 percent), employers (71 percent), and professors (76 percent)—say “it’s not fair to put so much pressure on students based on the results of one test.” And at least eight in 10—parents (83 percent), teachers (80 percent), employers (86 percent), and professors (82 percent)—agree that “schools should use standardized-test scores along with teacher evaluations” to decide if students are ready to move ahead.

Interestingly, Reality Check continues to show that the policies these groups so strongly reject are, in fact, rare. Just 5 percent of teachers report that students in their schools are promoted based solely on standardized-test scores. In fact, over half of teachers (56 percent) report that test scores are not even considered in promotion decisions, while the remainder (39 percent) say they are used “only in part.”

**FINDING 4:**

Higher academic standards are taking root, and teachers and parents report notable changes in policies on testing, promotion, and summer school. Even so, some reforms sought by standards advocates remain more discussed than acted on.

For the first time since it began in 1996, last year’s Reality Check reported some significant changes in the way public schools deal with standards and accountability issues. Based on Reality Check’s surveys of parents, teachers, and students, key policies on testing, promotion, and summer school are being more closely scrutinized, and they are changing in precisely the way many standards advocates would hope.

Still, public schools are hardly caught up in the whirlwind of change, and some hotly debated accountability measures are still the exception rather than the rule.

**More Summer School**

For example, the percentage of elementary school parents who say their children must pass a basic-skills test before moving on to middle school has grown from 48 percent to 58 percent in the past two years. The percentage of teachers who report increasing summer school attendance in their schools has risen from 28 percent in 1998 to 40 percent today. More teachers also say that students take summer school seriously, a figure that has grown from 43 percent in 1998 to 56 percent today. The data show that the practice of summer school, a particular bête noir for many standards advocates, is in decline. In 1998, 41 percent of teachers reported that their own schools had such a policy (defined in Reality Check as “automatically promoting students who have reached a maximum age”). Today that number is at 33 percent.

At the same time, other indicators show virtually no change. The number of middle school parents who say their children must pass a basic-skills test to enter high school continues to hover at the six-to-10 mark. It was 57 percent the first time the question was asked in 2000, and 62 percent today. The roughly half of high school students who say that their schools require them to pass an exit exam to graduate also remains virtually unchanged since the question was first asked three years ago (52 percent in 1999 and 49 percent in 2002).

**More Bark Than Bite?**

Most of the standards initiatives enacted so far set guidelines for what students should learn, test youngsters to see if they have done so, and revamp promotion and graduation policies to coincide with these changes. But another important goal among many advocates is establishing more accountability for schools and educators themselves, that is, making sure that schools, principals, and teachers have concrete incentives to help children learn more. For example, the “No Child Left Behind” Act orders staff penalties for schools that fail to raise student achievement, including the reconstitution of some troubled schools and the replacement of their staffs.

Though discussed widely among educators, measures of this kind are still fairly unusual, according to Reality Check. About a quarter of teachers (24 percent) say their districts have a policy that ties educator pay to improvements in student achievement. Just 10 percent of teachers report that their districts contain a persistently failing school that has been overhauled by replacing staff members and closely monitoring subsequent progress.

**EMPLOYERS AND PROFESSORS REMAIN DISSATISFIED WITH BASIC SKILLS**

Percent giving recent high school graduates “poor” or “fair” ratings on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Professors</th>
<th>Employers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing clearly</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar and spelling</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being organized and on time</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being motivated and conscientious</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic math skills</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being curious, interested in learning</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with others effectively</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being respectful and polite</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking English well</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use computers</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2002

**FINDING 5:**

Employers and professors still say that too many of today’s high school graduates lack basic skills, although both groups continue to give young people high marks on computer skills.

Since Reality Check was launched, its surveys have revealed a profound dissatisfaction among local employers and pro-