Public Agenda: Reality Check

Parents, employers back accountability measures, but teachers aren’t so sure.

Public Agenda’s annual “Reality Check” offers a status report on standards and achievement from the perspective of key stakeholders. Comparisons with last year’s study reveal a startling—even growing—gap between the views of teachers, parents, and students, on the one hand, and the nation’s employers and college professors, on the other, particularly in their evaluation of the skills of public school graduates.

New questions on accountability added to this year’s survey reveal yet another fissure: between classroom teachers who roundly reject a variety of accountability measures and parents and employers who heartily support them.

These are highlights from Public Agenda’s second Reality Check surveys on the progress of the standards movement and the impact education reform has had on schools, classrooms, and the world of work. Telephone interviews were conducted with 700 K-12 public school teachers, 708 parents, and 702 middle and high school students, as well as 252 employers and 257 college professors.

Dissatisfaction Among Employers and College Professors Grows: Last year, the low ratings employers and college professors gave high school graduates on such basic academic skills as writing and mathematics were somewhat offset by the higher evaluations they gave on such “soft,” but arguably crucial, skills as having good work habits and working well with others. But this year, the bad news has gotten worse, with negative evaluations of these softer skills sometimes growing dramatically, especially among employers. For example, the number of employers giving graduates a fair or poor rating on their ability to work well with others has jumped by 16 percentage points, from 35 percent to 51 percent; disappointment with how respectful and polite graduates are has surged by 22 points, from 32 percent to 54 percent; and with their work habits by 19 points, from 58 percent to 77 percent. The chief concern of employers and professors, however, continues to be basic academic...
Teachers Least Supportive of Accountability Proposals

Percent saying proposals are a "good idea":

- Tie financial incentives for teachers and principals to student improvement.
- Replace principal tenure with contracts that would be terminated if schools failed to reach specific goals.
- Overhaul persistently failing schools by replacing teachers and principals and keeping them under strict observation.

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<th>Employers</th>
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<td>Tie incentive</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<td>Replace principal tenure</td>
<td>77%</td>
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<td>Overhaul failing schools</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td>46%</td>
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<th>Teachers: What Motivates Us To Work Hard in School</th>
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<td>Percent saying these things would motivate them &quot;a lot&quot;:</td>
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<td>Getting into a good college*</td>
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<td>Getting a college scholarship*</td>
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<td>Fear of being left back</td>
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<td>Avoiding summer school</td>
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<td>Pleasing parents</td>
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<td>Losing sports and extracurricular activities</td>
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<td>Getting paid for better grades</td>
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<td>Making teacher(s) proud</td>
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<th>Teachers: Are We Rated on Students' Performance?</th>
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<td>Are teachers at your school evaluated according to how well their students do on statewide tests?</td>
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<td>During the time you have been teaching at your school, how many teachers have been removed because of persistently poor performance by their students?</td>
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- 23% Yes, evaluated
- 64% No, not evaluated
- 25% Don't know
- 4% More than two

SOURCE: Public Agenda.
skills. Ratings in this area have not improved or have even declined slightly over the past year. In fact, ratings of graduates' skills have improved, if only modestly, on only one of 11 measures—the ability to use computers.

Do Students Have What It Takes? Employers and college professors say they consistently come across young people unprepared for the adult world of work or college. More than six in 10 employers (64 percent) say most high school graduates do not have the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. In sharp contrast, high school teachers (63 percent) continue to believe most of their students have the necessary skills. More than half of professors (55 percent) say the graduates they see do not have what it takes to succeed in college. But here, most high school teachers agree (60 percent). These findings are essentially unchanged since last year. (Throughout, we will draw comparisons with last year's data only when meaningful changes have occurred.)

Employers and Professors Still Skeptical About High School Diplomas: A wide gap persists between the way employers and college professors rate the nation's public schools and the way teachers, parents, and students view them. Only 33 percent of employers and 27 percent of professors say the local schools in their communities do an excellent or good job, in marked contrast to the overwhelming majorities of teachers (92 percent), parents (76 percent), and students (79 percent) who say this is true for their own schools. And while strong majorities of employers (59 percent) and professors (73 percent) say a diploma from their local high schools is no guarantee that students have learned the basics, relatively few teachers (23 percent), parents (31 percent), or students (20 percent) agree. Two in three college professors (66 percent) and almost half of employers (47 percent) think report card grades are higher than students deserve; most high school teachers (65 percent) and parents (60 percent) say they accurately reflect students' accomplishments and abilities.

Coping With Poor Skills: The perceived failings of the schools have hit home as far as the nation's employers and colleges are concerned. More than half of college professors (54 percent) say their schools have held formal discussions about the quality of local public school graduates. Of those, 61 percent say their colleges have even gone out to meet with local public school officials about their concerns.

Some employers have taken steps to implement their own "standards and assessments." One-fourth say they require new hires to take written exams to show mastery of skills in math or writing; and one-fifth say they have programs to teach basic skills that employees should have learned in high school. Three in 10 report they have had to simplify jobs because of the lower quality of recent applicants.
But Parents Are Pleased: In somewhat jarring contrast to employers and professors, parents say they are pleased with the schools, particularly with the quality of communication about children's academic progress and behavior. According to most parents (76 percent), the schools their children attend are doing an excellent or good job. Majorities give high marks for such things as enforcing strict promotion requirements (67 percent of elementary school and 68 percent of middle school parents), sending home progress reports (75 percent), and informing parents quickly if their children are consistently late or absent (75 percent) or if they are having academic problems (64 percent). Eight in 10 say that most of their children's teachers "know their subject matter very well."

What's more, public school parents think things are getting better. More than six in 10 think that children these days are learning harder material (61 percent) at a faster pace (65 percent) compared to when they were in school. More parents this year give the nod to their local public schools for providing a better education than private schools (up to 37 percent from last year's 29 percent).

What's Missing? While parents may be responding to improvements employers and college professors have not yet seen, the research also raises troubling questions of whether parents are critical consumers. Parents readily admit having limited knowledge on specific questions of academic quality and how their children and schools are performing compared with others.

Only small increases have occurred over the past year in the number of parents who say they know a lot about how their children rank in their grades, how their schools rank in their districts, and their schools' curriculum and goals. Only a handful of parents say they know a lot about how their children rank compared with other students throughout the world, and no more than one-fourth know how their children rank compared with others in the country or their states.

While about three in four parents overall say they know their schools' average class size, relatively few high school parents know the percent of students who go on to college (31 percent), the dropout rate (25 percent), or the attendance rate (23 percent) at their schools.

Underestimating Social Promotion: Yet another sign of parents' lack of knowledge is their underestimation of the pervasiveness of social promotion. There is little doubt among both teachers (80 percent) and parents (81 percent) that it is worse for a struggling student to be passed to the next grade than to be held back. But while nearly half of classroom teachers (48 percent) say students at their schools can get promoted simply for trying hard, only 37 percent of parents agree.

Teachers Report Hopeful Signs: Standards—at least as a concept or district directive—are now ubiquitous. Vir-
uitarly all classroom teachers (97 percent) say their states or districts have them, and eight in 10 (79 percent) consider them instrumental in improving students' academic performance. More teachers this year also say they are using state standards for guidance about what to teach (up to 46 percent, from 37 percent last year).

High school teachers also report hopeful improvements. They say the number of students dropping out is on the decline (39 percent of teachers say it has decreased, compared with 24 percent last year). Enrollment in Advanced Placement or honors classes is on the rise (68 percent of teachers say it has increased, compared with only 50 percent last year). In addition, large majorities of teachers continue to report that most of their students consistently arrive for class on time (96 percent), generally have excellent attendance (90 percent), and consistently hand in their work on time (80 percent). Six in 10 (61 percent) say their students regularly ask questions that show they are interested and engaged in learning.

Some Disquieting Findings: Nevertheless, some disquieting results indicate halting progress on standards. Only 49 percent of teachers say state or district guidelines have led them to expect more from their students. As many as four in 10 teachers continue to report that their schools automatically promote students who have reached a maximum age. And, according to students, "teaching to the test" is prevalent: Almost eight in 10 students (78 percent) say their teachers usually spend class time helping students prepare for standardized tests.

Teachers Spurn Accountability Measures: A new feature of this year's Reality Check is a series of questions on accountability, since some have called for holding educators directly responsible for student performance. The survey suggests that few districts have actually instituted such measures, and that most teachers—in sharp contrast to other groups surveyed—oppose them in principle.

Few teachers report that their schools now connect accountability measures to teacher evaluations or screening. For example, only one-fourth say teachers at their schools are evaluated according to students' scores on statewide tests. Almost two in three teachers (64 percent) say no teacher has been removed because of persistently poor student performance since they have been at their schools. (Of the teachers in the sample, 71 percent have been teaching at their current schools for at least five years.) More than three in four teachers (77 percent) say prospective teachers are not tested in their subject material before they are hired.

Small numbers of teachers report that other accountability measures have taken hold in their districts. Only 15 percent of teachers say their districts have tied financial incentives for teachers and principals to student improvement; only 12 percent say their districts have replaced principal tenure with employment contracts; and only 10 percent say their districts have gone through the "reconstitution" of a school, meaning that the school has been closed and then reopened with new management and a crop of different teachers.

Moreover, classroom teachers repudiate each of these proposals even as broad majorities of employers and parents endorse them. Most employers (60 percent) and parents (53 percent) think tying financial incentives to student improvement is a good idea; only 22 percent of teachers agree. Even greater numbers of employers (77 percent) and parents (70 percent) approve of replacing principal tenure with employment contracts; only one in three teachers (33 percent) joins in. More than six in 10 employers (66 percent) and parents (62 percent) endorse overhauling persistently failing schools by replacing the entire professional staff; half as many teachers (28 percent) concur. College professors tend to fall in the middle.

School Ratings and School Report Cards: Many communities publicize ratings that compare the schools in their districts, or have individual school report cards that evaluate specific schools—but teachers are far more likely to know about them than parents. Nearly nine in 10 teachers (88 percent) say they are aware of districtwide ratings of schools, compared with only 46 percent of parents. About half of teachers (52 percent) say their own schools have report cards, compared with only 31 percent of parents. Both groups consider these evaluations motivating. For example, majorities of both parents (74 percent) and teachers (60 percent) believe communitywide ratings motivate teachers and principals to work harder. Interestingly, even as they say it helps motivate them, over half of teachers (55 percent) also say such ratings tend to give people an unfair and inaccurate portrayal of their schools. Nine in 10 parents say they found the report card useful in evaluating their children's schools; 86 percent of teachers say it helped identify weak spots that needed improvement.

Getting the Best Out of Students: Most adults think children could be working harder in school, and youngsters themselves readily agree. Two in three
students (68 percent), and half of parents (53 percent) and teachers (49 percent), believe most students do just enough work to get by, and 59 percent of parents acknowledge there is room for improvement when it comes to their own children's schoolwork. Moreover, seven in 10 teachers (70 percent) complain that parents don't pay attention “until they see report cards,” and while most parents (55 percent) believe teachers are doing all they can, four in 10 say teachers could do more to help their children work hard at school.

What Makes Students Work: The key question here is: How can parents, teachers, and the community at large tap children's discretionary effort? Students themselves are clear about what motivates them to work hard in school: concrete factors. Overwhelming majorities of high school students say that getting into a good college, getting a college scholarship, or having to proffer their transcripts to get a job would motivate them “a lot” to work hard at school. Fear of being left back or going to summer school also keeps students on their toes. Getting paid for better grades ranked toward the bottom of the list.

Exit exams, too, appear to be effective motivators. Half the high school students surveyed (52 percent) say seniors are required to pass an exit exam to graduate from their schools. Of these, two in three (68 percent) say the exit exam makes them work harder.

The Untapped Power of the Transcript: The question of whether the schools are tapping the power of these motivating factors remains. Almost half (48 percent) the teachers surveyed say social promotion continues to be widespread in their schools, and 44 percent say summer school is “just something kids do because they have to,” rather than something they take seriously. And although exit exams motivate teenagers to work harder, few high school students say such exams are hard to pass (17 percent). Some reformers have urged employers to step up their use of transcripts when hiring, and they may be on the right track. More than eight in 10 high school students (84 percent) say that having to show their high school transcripts to get a job they wanted would do a lot to get them to work harder at school. But the number of employers requiring high school transcripts has increased only barely, from 10 percent to 16 percent. For their part, employers may have little incentive to rely on high school records given their belief that grades overstate students’ academic skills and abilities, and their doubts about the value of a high school diploma.

Methodology: Telephone interviews were conducted in October and November 1998 with national random samples of: 700 K-12 public school teachers; 708 parents with children currently attending public school in grades K-12; 702 public school students in middle or high school; 252 employers who make hiring decisions for employees recently out of high school or college; and 257 college professors at four-year colleges who taught freshmen or sophomores in the last two years.

The margin of error for teachers, parents, and students: plus or minus 4 percentage points; for employers and college professors: plus or minus 6 percentage points.

Funding for this research was provided by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the GE Fund. Fully annotated survey results are available from Public Agenda (cost is $42.50).

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.

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