



The NCLB Debate: What Parents, Students and Teachers See in Schools Today

Do parents and teachers think No Child Left Behind is a success? Are students seeing real differences in their schools and classrooms? What kinds of changes do teachers, principals, and superintendents really want in the country's education policies?

As officials in Washington decide the future of NCLB, Public Agenda's *Reality Check* offers in-depth information on how the people inside public schools every day see the issue.

Education's Top Topics

Reality Check is Education Insight's signature set of opinion tracking surveys covering the most important issues in education today. The surveys cover standards, testing and accountability, high school reform, school leadership, teacher quality, school climate, funding, math and science education and other key areas.

"The findings suggest that many minority kids are struggling in the equivalent of a hostile work environment."

*Ben Feller
Associated Press*

Here's a quick recap of what we are seeing:

"Issue No. 1: Are American Parents and Students Ready for More Math and Science?" Employers and education experts have made urgent calls for major reform in math, science and technology education. The math skills of American students lag behind the international competition. President Bush and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings have emphasized the importance of science and math education. But where leaders see a crisis, parents and students see a situation that is just fine, thank you.

Reality Check found that parents support proposals to make high schools globally competitive, but nearly 6 in 10 (57 percent) also say the amount of science and math their child studies now is about right. In fact, parents' concern about math and science achievement has actually declined since the mid-1990s. In 1994, 48 percent of parents thought their children were not getting enough math and science compared to only 32 percent of parents now.

"Issue No. 2: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools" Black and Hispanic students are significantly more likely to report very serious problems in their schools in nearly every key academic and social dimension – resources, promotion policies, dropout rates, truancy, fighting, drug and alcohol abuse and others.

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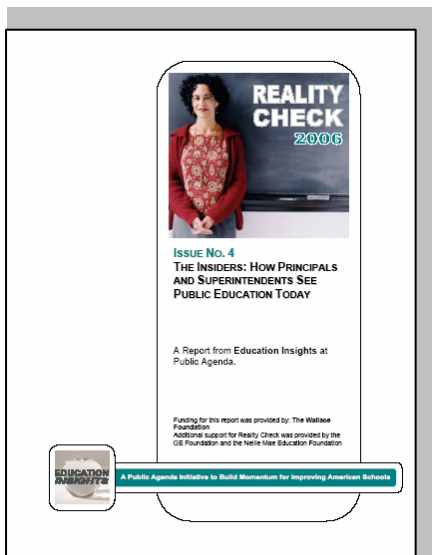
When Communities Get Involved in Improving Math and Science Education

Education Insights is working to close the gap between parents and leaders on math and science education in two new projects aimed at getting communities talking on the subject.

The **Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation** has launched a 10-year education initiative to improve math and science achievement among Kansas City area students and is working with Public Agenda to bring local communities into the conversation.

Public Agenda has prepared a public engagement toolkit including a video discussion starter and guides for organizers, facilitators and participants. The materials will be the centerpiece of community forums that will take place over the next three years. The project also includes in-depth surveys of parents and students in Kansas and Missouri on math and science topics set for this spring. Contact Lara Birnback at lbirnback@publicagenda.org to find out more about this project.

The **GE Foundation** supports high-impact initiatives to improve the access, equity and quality of public education in GE communities around the world, and it is also working with Public Agenda on the math/science issue. This coming year, Public Agenda will conduct surveys on math, science and technology with parents in two GE communities, Erie, Pennsylvania, and Atlanta, Georgia.



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Does Public Engagement Last?

Harvard Report Says Yes

In “*Embedded Deliberation: Entrepreneurs, Organizations and Public Action*,” researchers from the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government looked at a variety of programs across the country and assessed their efforts at bringing about substantive progress in communities. Its evaluation of Public Agenda’s Community Conversations about Education in Connecticut concluded, “Some communities found conversations so useful for providing public input and building action-oriented coalitions that they adapted the deliberative model to their local needs and convened several conversations through time. Public deliberation became fully embedded in some communities, especially the city of Bridgeport. Also, the state department of education employed conversations to test a proposed policy, demonstrating that conversations’ success had resonance not just at the community level, but also among larger public institutions.”

“This was a completely independent evaluation looking at several different approaches to public engagement, and we were really happy that our work was so positively assessed,” said Public Agenda Vice President for Public Engagement **Will Friedman**.

The research was made possible with support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has placed the report online at: <http://www.prevnet.org/ru21/common/pdf/Hewlett-Masterfile-April06.pdf>

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Reporting on the survey, Steve Inskip of NPR’s Morning Edition said: “Close to one-third of black students say their teachers spend more time keeping order than teaching.” The study concluded that far too many minority students face what amounts to a “hostile work environment” on a daily basis.

“**Issue No. 3: Is Support for Standards and Testing Fading?**” Five years into No Child Left Behind and over a dozen years into the so-called standards movement, most key groups now see these reforms as “necessary, but not sufficient.” This is consistent across all groups surveyed by Public Agenda – parents, students, teachers and administrators.

Jean Johnson, Executive Director of Public Agenda’s Education Insights said, “It is important to remember that much of the public’s initial support for raising standards grew out of anxiety that too many youngsters were floating through the system without mastering even fundamental reading and math skills. But as promotion standards toughened, as graduation standards were raised, as parents began to see their own children doing harder work than they did when they were in school, the problem of ‘low standards’ began to lose its edge.”

“**Issue No. 4: The Insiders: How Principals and Superintendents See Public Education Today**” showed major disconnects between the priorities of

national policy-makers versus those of local school leaders. Whether the issue is teacher quality, standards or the need to ramp up science and math coursework, the two groups often seem very far apart.

For example, majorities of principals say they are “very satisfied” with the teachers in their school, and most superintendents believe the quality of new teachers is improving. Meanwhile, federal officials enforcing No Child Left Behind and other key education leaders raise serious questions about the quality of the nation’s teaching corps. And while relatively few

superintendents say low standards are a serious problem where they work, testing from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggests that students’ skills are not nearly as strong as local testing suggests.

Healthy majorities of superintendents and principals say one of the best ways to help them be better school leaders would be to reduce red tape and bureaucracy associated with school mandates like No Child Left Behind. Meanwhile, other experts, alarmed by the NAEP results, have begun calling for national academic guidelines and standards.

Reality Check tracking surveys will be repeated periodically as a service of Education Insights. The 2006 *Reality Check* research was supported by the **GE Foundation**, the **Nellie Mae Education Foundation** and the **Wallace Foundation**.

“Public Agenda...does excellent work in teasing out public attitudes, especially about education, and this report, like others I’ve written about, is worth a look”

*Linda Seebach
Rocky Mountain News*

“Concern about high school improvement, teacher quality and mathematics and science instruction may be grabbing headlines of late, but they’re not keeping most of the nation’s superintendents up at night, a new survey suggests.”

*Jeff Archer
Education Week*

Rallying the Troops

When research and analysis sits on the shelf, it doesn't do anyone much good, so Education Insights is working with several long-term partners to convene educators, researchers, reformers and other important voices to discuss new research and bring fresh perspectives to enduring issues.

With the release of *Reality Check* Issue No. 4 focusing on superintendents and principals, Public Agenda worked with **The Wallace Foundation and the Institute for Educational Leadership** to host a forum exploring how school leaders are facing today's educational challenges.

The roundtable discussion at The National Press Club in Washington, DC included Institute for Educational Leadership Senior Fellow Michael Usdan, Wallace Foundation Director of Education Richard Laine, Fort Wayne Community Schools Superintendent Wendy Robinson, along with Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Peter McWalters.

Public Agenda has also joined with the **Kettering Foundation** on a series of roundtables focusing on the public's role in education. The first session was held in Washington, DC in February 2006 and a second in Cincinnati in July 2006.

In Washington, former Public Agenda President Deborah Wadsworth moderated a panel that included Kettering President David Mathews, Education Sector Co-Founder Tomas Toch and Public Education Network President Wendy Puriefoy. In Cincinnati, Public Agenda's Ruth Wooden was joined by David Mathews, KnowledgeWorks Foundation President Chad Wick and University of Cincinnati President Nancy Zimpher to talk about school and community cooperation.



School Leadership Panelists Michael Usdan, Jean Johnson, Wendy Robinson and Richard Laine.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

EXCERPTS FROM SOME RECENT ARTICLES AND SPEECHES

Toss Out the PR Playbook: Send in the Public Engagement Team

by Deborah Wadsworth



"I'm often asked to interpret public-opinion research in relation to the priorities of major education groups. These groups are seeking information that can help them refine their "messaging" strategies to promote a particular agenda. "Messaging," when it assumes that the solution is a given, merely in need of better packaging, is the last thing education reform needs more of. What is undeniably needed in its stead is authentic public engagement, and lots more of it." **Read more at:**

http://publicagenda.org/aboutpa/aboutpa_articles.cfm

EDUCATION WEEK

Dear Public: Can We Talk? Public engagement encourages a broad, lasting base of support

by Jean Johnson and Will Friedman

THE SCHOOL Administrator

"In the past decade, schools nationwide have been caught up in a whirlwind of change. No Child Left Behind is the law of the land. Every state in the nation is wrestling with academic standards and school funding. Foundations, businesses and reform groups have pushed for revamped curricula, reduced school size, more effective school leadership and a better prepared teaching corps. Educational conferences and professional journals constantly churn out new thinking about how to boost learning and close achievement gaps among students. While there are tantalizing indications of progress in many quarters, there also are signs that the pace of change — and the natural rivalry between different groups with different ideas about what works best — is causing confusion, tension, miscommunication and outright division among those who need to work together."

Read more at: http://publicagenda.org/aboutpa/aboutpa_articles.cfm

It's Time to Address the Human Factor in Education Reform

by Jean Johnson

School Board News A Service for National Affiliates



Improving schools requires concerted action on many levels — astute analysis of the problems, new ideas on how to address them, legal and structural reform, and often, bringing new resources to bear. But, added to this is the human element. Will the attitudes and habits of the people involved also evolve? Addressing this human side of reform is indispensable to progress in education, and I believe that it has not received nearly enough attention."

Read more at: http://publicagenda.org/aboutpa/aboutpa_articles.cfm



New Projects



Education Insights Executive Director
Jean Johnson and Public Engagement
VP Will Friedman plan new projects.

FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS

When new teachers set foot in their own classrooms, are they ready? What have they learned during their training? What kind of help and advice do they get in their first year on the job? In a project with the **National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (NCCTQ)** and **REL Midwest**, Public Agenda is surveying first-year teachers – both those coming to the field from traditional schools of education and from alternative certification programs. The goal: helping policymakers develop better ways to attract, train and hire and keep good teachers.

STATEWIDE ENGAGEMENT PROJECT ON EQUITY

In a new public engagement project with the **Nebraska State Board of Education**, Public Agenda will give Nebraskans a chance to engage in dialogue about “essential educational opportunities for all students” regardless of where in the state they live or the socio-economic status of their families. This new project builds on the previous Public Agenda work, “Nebraskans Weigh in on Essential Educational Opportunities for All Students,” available for download at: www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_cases.cfm?list=1

NEW ACHIEVING THE DREAM COLLEGES

Public Agenda is continuing its work with the national Achieving the Dream project of the **Lumina Foundation for Education**, adding projects in several community colleges in Pennsylvania. Achieving the Dream is Lumina’s multi-year initiative designed to increase the success of community college students. Public Agenda has been working with participating colleges on engagement efforts aimed at helping communities, faculty, students and others talk about the challenge of increasing student success. With support from **The Heinz Endowments**, Public Agenda will begin public engagement work with community colleges in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION PROJECT

With out-of-pocket costs for college outpacing out-of-pocket costs for health care and the rapidly-changing demands of the work world, do most Americans think that a piece of parchment is still worth the price? Does a university degree still represent an equalizing force in America? **The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education** and Public Agenda are currently completing a major public opinion poll gathering American’s feelings about the cost, quality and condition of the country’s universities. This work will update previous surveys done over the past 15 years.

WOODROW WILSON TEACHING FELLOWSHIP

Have you ever considered becoming a teacher, but at some point shied away from the calling? Public Agenda is now working with **The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation** exploring what kinds of programs and fellowships might be effective in attracting more highly qualified candidates to join the teaching ranks.

Education Insights at Public Agenda offers presentations and briefings based on our research and planning and technical assistance in community, staff, and leadership engagement. Our goal is to address the lack of consensus, misunderstandings and division that sometimes derail progress in public education. Please contact Paul Gasbarra at Public Agenda for more information.

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