

Poll Finds Drop in Public's Regard for Schools

By Linda Jacobson

Americans express less confidence in the nation's public schools and less support for the renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act than they did a year ago, according to the results of an [opinion poll](#) released today.

The poll, a project of the [Program on Education Policy and Governance](#) at Harvard University, shows that 26 percent of respondents give public schools a grade of D or F, compared with just 20 percent who give the schools an A or a B. When a similar poll by the same research group asked the same question last year, 27 percent gave the nation's schools an A or a B.

Those results should be heeded by the presumptive Democratic and Republican nominees for president, argue the authors of an article analyzing the findings that is slated to run in the fall issue of *Education Next*, a journal of research and opinion published by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

"If Barack Obama and John McCain want to walk in step with the American public, they should acknowledge the flagging performance of schools, for while Americans retain an abiding commitment to public education, the grades that they assign the nation's schools are increasingly mediocre," says the article, written by William G. Howell, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Chicago; Martin West, an assistant professor of education at Brown University, in Providence, R.I.; and Paul E. Peterson, a professor of government

at Harvard. Mr. West is an executive editor of *Education Next*, and Mr. Peterson is the editor-in-chief.

Partisan Advantage

The poll shows that 62 percent of Americans believe Democrats are more likely than Republicans to improve the schools. That finding marks a shift in attitudes since 2000, when surveys showed that Americans' opinions were much more closely divided on which party was more likely to improve schools.

Sen. McCain, R-Ariz., has said he would direct federal money to alternative teacher-certification programs, give parents greater access to supplemental educational services, and expand private school choice, partly through online education. Sen. Obama, D-Ill., has called for increasing spending on education, and expanding teacher-residency programs, which help give preservice teachers more experience in the field as they earn their certification. He has been opposed to allowing public money to go to private school vouchers. (["Candidates' K-12 Views Take Shape,"](#) July 30, 2008.)

As other surveys have shown, however, the new poll found that Americans are more supportive of their local schools than they are of public schools in general. A slight majority of respondents also indicated that they think schools are making improvements overall.

"Fifty-six percent of the public say that the local public schools are heading in the right direction, compared to 44 percent who believe

they are on the wrong track," the authors write.

Still, Americans are more likely to give favorable grades to the local police force and the post office than they are their local schools, the poll shows. The nationally representative survey of 3,200 people, which was conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks last winter, has a margin of error of 1 percentage point.

"The minute that you scratch beneath the surface, you get a lot of more skepticism at the local level," said Jean Johnson, an executive vice president at **Public Agenda**, a nonpartisan public-opinion-research organization based in New York City. "They feel, 'This institution is not doing really what we need it to do.'"

NCLB and Accountability

The public is divided on the future of the No Child Left Behind Act, with half saying the federal law should be renewed as it is or with a few adjustments, and the other half saying it needs major changes or should be abandoned altogether, according to the poll findings.

Not surprisingly, public school teachers—who constituted 700 of the people surveyed—are far less supportive of the law, which requires schools to meet annual targets on standardized tests. Only 26 percent would like to see the act renewed with minimal changes, 33 percent are in favor of a complete overhaul, and 42 percent of the teachers surveyed think Congress shouldn't renew the NCLB law.

"Teachers feel caught between a rock and a hard place," Ms. Johnson said, adding that she has seen

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similar results among teachers in Public Agenda's polls. "They're being held to higher standards, but a lot of teachers feel like they don't get the parent and student cooperation they need."

Still, Americans are supportive of academic standards and of holding schools accountable through tests. In the new poll, 69 percent of the respondents said they are in favor of national standards and tests in math, science, and reading.

Unexplored Issues

The survey covered a variety of current education topics, including online education, school integration by race or income, and mainstreaming of students with behavior and emotional problems.

"I think they are going into some areas that people haven't been asked about a lot," Ms. Johnson said of the survey from the Program on Education Policy and Governance.

The results also reveal some differences among respondents based on race. For example, 16 percent of the entire sample, compared with 30 percent of African-Americans, said that school districts should definitely or probably be allowed to consider students' race when assigning students to schools. The poll found less support for integrating schools on the basis of family income, an approach that has been promoted as an alternative to using race in student assignments. Only 13 percent support the idea of income-based integration, and 72 percent are opposed.

African-Americans and Hispanics are also somewhat more supportive of using public funds to give low-income families vouchers for private schools—a distinction that has been found in previous polls. Still, given that 40 percent of all respondents said they completely

or somewhat favor vouchers for low-income families, the authors argue that the poll suggests that many American's are "open to ideas."

Respondents were also asked for their opinions of educating students with emotional or behavior problems in regular classrooms, a practice known as mainstreaming. Only 28 percent of respondents—and 25 percent of teachers—were in favor of the idea.

Another topic to receive attention in the survey is online education—an area that revealed differences in opinion depending on which students would be taking the online courses. For example, 64 percent of respondents said they favor using online education to help high school students in rural areas gain access to more courses, and 68 percent said they favor students' using online education to earn college credit.

But support dropped significantly—by more than 20 percentage points—for giving high school dropouts and home-schooled students access to Web-based courses.

"Clearly, the willingness of Americans to support this innovation critically depends upon the targeted population of students," Mr Howell said in an e-mail. "I expected Americans either to support or oppose online education for all students. I certainly didn't expect their views to vary so dramatically across different student populations."

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