

TAKE SCHOOLS that have strong public support from the communities they serve. Impose on those schools a major federal mandate that attempts to reach worthy goals using strategies that lack public approval, and you have the ingredients for a failed system. Recognizing the importance of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the extent to which it involves the federal government in decisions affecting schools at the K-12 level, those who plan this annual poll decided to focus this year's edition on NCLB. To the surprise of this report's authors, the findings point to the situation described in the first two sentences. While the public sees improved student achievement as an important goal, it rejects the strategies used in NCLB. What is reported in the following pages should be cause for reflection and concern on the part of those who believe that success for every child is vital. We hope that this year's poll leads to a lively debate focused on strategies that will advance that goal.



Executive Summary

The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools comes at a time when relationships at the federal, state, and local levels with regard to K-12 education are increasingly complex, change is the mantra of the day, and money is short in almost every state. Attention is currently directed at efforts to improve student achievement, with special emphasis on those minorities and other groups that have traditionally been less successful in gaining the quality of education needed for future success. These differences in school success have come to be known as the "achievement gap," a gap that virtually everyone agrees must be closed. How this is to be done and the relative roles of the parties involved are, however, matters involving uncertainty and controversy. This poll, the 35th in this series, addresses those issues.

The poll focuses on NCLB, the extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which became law in January 2002. Some questions deal directly with NCLB, while others address strategies associated with the act's implementation. Since NCLB's intention is to improve the public schools, a number of traditional poll questions — those dealing with grading the public schools, vouchers, problems the public schools face, the nature of the achievement gap, the challenge of getting and keeping good teachers, and the merits of the current emphasis on standardized testing — all fit nicely into the poll's focus. Taken as a whole, the results offer sig-

nificant and timely information about the public's view of the state of our schools and current improvement efforts.

We begin this report with seven overarching conclusions. In each case, we refer by number to the tables in which data supporting the conclusion can be found. We then offer additional findings, followed by a comprehensive set of tables. Readers are invited to judge the appropriateness of the conclusions and to make their own interpretations of the data and what they tell us about the public's view of the public schools.

The authors believe the data support the following general conclusions:

1. The public has high regard for the public schools, wants needed improvement to come through those schools, and has little interest in seeking alternatives. The number assigning an A or a B to schools in their community is 48%, with an additional 31% assigning the grade of C. The number of A's and B's rises to 55% for public school parents and to 68% for parents asked to grade the public school their oldest child attends. The number believing that reform should come through the existing public schools is 73%, up from 69% in 2002, while the number of those seeking an alternative is down to 25%. (See Tables 1 through 4.)

2. The public sees itself as uninformed on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, with 69% saying they lack the information needed to say whether their impression of the act is favorable or unfavorable. Forty percent say they know very little about the NCLB, with an additional 36% saying they know nothing at all about the act. Somewhat surprisingly, public school parents consider themselves just as uninformed as others. (See Tables 5 and 6.)

3. Responses to questions related to strategies associated with NCLB suggest that greater familiarity with the law is unlikely to lead to greater public support.

- A total of 83% of respondents believe decisions regarding what is taught in the public schools should be made at the state level (22%) or by the local school board (61%). NCLB involves major federal intervention. (See Table 7.)
- Eighty-four percent believe the job a school is doing should be measured on the basis of improvement shown by students. NCLB requires that a specified percentage of students — in the school as a whole and in each subgroup — must pass a state test, and improvement is not a factor. (See Table 8.)
- Sixty-six percent believe a single test *cannot* provide a fair picture of whether a school is in need of improvement. NCLB bases this judgment on a state test administered annually in grades 3 through 8. (See Table 9.)
- Only 15% believe testing on English and math alone can produce a fair picture of whether or not a school is in need of improvement. Eighty-three percent believe it cannot. Under NCLB, whether a school is in need of improvement is determined solely by the percentage of students whose test scores meet the goal in English and math. (See Table 10.)
- Only 26% believe it is possible to accurately judge a student's proficiency in English and math on the basis of a single test. Seventy-two percent believe it is not possible. NCLB uses a state test given annually to determine student proficiency in English and math and then judges the school according to the percentage meeting the standard. (See Table 11.)
- Eighty percent are concerned either a great deal or a fair amount that relying only on testing in English and math to judge a school will mean less emphasis on art, music, history, and other subjects. NCLB relies only on English and math scores to judge a school. (See Table 12.)

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- When offered two options for dealing with a school in need of improvement, 74% of respondents select making additional efforts to help students achieve in their present school, while 25% choose offering students the opportunity to transfer to a school not in need of improvement. NCLB does not rule out efforts to help students in their current school, but it mandates that the choice of a transfer be offered. (See Table 13.)
- Sixty-seven percent believe special education students should not be required to meet the same standards as other students. NCLB requires that the percentage of special education students showing proficiency must be the same as the percentage required for the total school and for all subgroups. (See Table 14.)
- Sixty-six percent believe the emphasis of NCLB on standardized testing will encourage teachers to teach to the tests, and 60% believe this would be a bad thing. NCLB mandates testing in grades 3 through 8 and in at least one high school grade. (See Tables 15 and 16.)

4. The public is concerned about getting and keeping good teachers, thinks teacher salaries are too low, and is willing to see higher salaries paid to teachers teaching in more challenging situations. Sixty-one percent say schools in their communities have trouble getting good teachers, and 66% say they have trouble keeping good teachers. Fifty-nine percent say teacher salaries are too low, and 65% believe higher salaries should be paid as an incentive for teaching in schools determined to be in need of improvement. (See Tables 19 through 22.)

5. The public continues to believe that closing the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students is important but blames the gap on factors unrelated to the quality of schooling. Ninety percent believe closing the gap is either very important or somewhat important. The number attributing the gap to the quality of schooling dropped from 29% a year ago to 16% in 2003. In identifying factors that are either very important or somewhat important in creating the gap, 97% point to home life and upbringing; 97%, to the amount of parent involvement; 95%, to student interest or the lack thereof; and 94%, to community environment. (See Tables 23, 24, and 26.)

6. The public is not convinced that narrowing the achievement gap requires spending more money on low-achieving students. While divided on this matter, the public leans in the direction of spending the same dollars on each student. When asked whether the dollars spent on each student should be the same or should vary on the basis of student needs, 52% said the same, while 45% said the dollars spent should vary. And 58% of Americans believe that it is possible to narrow the achievement gap without spending more money on low-achieving students. (See Tables 25 and 38.)

7. A majority of respondents are opposed to vouchers and would oppose having their state adopt them, despite the 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision stating that voucher plans do not violate the U.S. Constitution. The number of Americans in favor of allowing private school attendance at public expense fell to 38% this year, compared to 46% a year ago. The number opposed climbed from 52% to 60%. When reminded of the Supreme Court decision permitting such plans, 56% expressed opposition to having legislation enacted in their state that would permit private school attendance at public expense. (See Tables 28 and 29.)

Additional Findings and Conclusions

- Respondents regard funding as the biggest problem schools in their communities must face. Twenty-five percent mentioned funding, followed by 16% who mentioned discipline and 14% who mentioned overcrowded schools. (See Table 35.)

- The public is divided on whether parents in the community would have enough information to choose another school for their children to attend, as NCLB allows if their current school is identified as needing improvement. (See Table 17.)

- A slight majority of parents, 52%, would want a child of theirs who was failing in school to be tutored in his or her own school, not by an outside tutor as NCLB provides. (See Table 18.)

- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the standard used by NCLB to determine whether a school is in need of improvement. It is based on the percentage of students showing proficiency in English and math. Questions in the poll designed to measure the public's expectations regarding the annual determination of AYP that NCLB requires the state to make for each school provide interesting information but shed little light on such expectations. The collective responses to the two questions would, however, seem to call into question NCLB's goal of having every student demonstrate proficiency by 2013-14. (See Tables 36 and 37.)

- The public is evenly divided regarding the extent to which providing vouchers would improve achievement in schools in the community, with 48% of respondents saying achievement would improve and 48% saying it would get worse. Fifty-four percent believe achievement would improve for students using vouchers to go to private schools, and 59% believe achievement for students staying in the public schools would remain the same. (See Tables 30 through 32.)

- Given a full-tuition voucher, 62% of respondents would choose a private school for their child, while 35% would choose a public school. The choices change if the value of the voucher drops to half the cost of tuition, with 47% choosing a public school. (See Tables 33 and 34.)

- The public identifies factors unrelated to schooling as the causes of the achievement gap in which Asian students generally outperform their white peers. There is, in fact, little difference between the factors the public believes to be responsible for this "reverse gap" and those it believes to be responsible for the gap between whites and other minorities. (See Table 27.)

- The public attributes the failure of some students to learn to factors related to life outside the school and to lack of student interest, along with the school-related factors of lack of discipline and the quality of teaching. (See Table 39.)

- The public has little interest in the four-day school week as a means of cutting costs. (See Table 40.)

- And finally, respondents believe that the public will view schools that do not make AYP as "schools in need of improvement" and



not as “failing schools.” This is an interesting question that has been given added importance by the United States Department of Education. After routinely describing schools not making AYP as “failing schools” in the days immediately after the passage of NCLB, the department is currently stressing that such schools should be regarded simply as “schools in need of improvement.” It will be interesting to see how the final arbiter, the media, deal with this issue. (See Table 41.)