



ISSUE No. 2:
**HOW BLACK AND HISPANIC
FAMILIES RATE THEIR SCHOOLS**

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Public Agenda.

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A Public Agenda Initiative to Build Momentum for Improving American Schools

REALITY CHECK 2006



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This is the second in a series of reports from *Reality Check 2006*, an ongoing set of tracking surveys on education issues. *Reality Check* surveys attitudes among public school parents, students, teachers, principals and superintendents on a regular basis. The series also includes periodic surveys of employers and college professors.

Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi and Amber Ott prepared this report.

More information about the findings in this report, including full question wording and results, can be found at:

WWW.PUBLICAGENDA.ORG

Regular updates and new reports will be available at this location throughout the year.

HOW BLACK AND HISPANIC FAMILIES RATE THEIR SCHOOLS

Introduction by Jean Johnson

It's not the kind of atmosphere most adults would find helpful if they needed to study and learn – high dropout rates, kids promoted without learning, schools short on money, profanity and disrespect, fighting, drug and alcohol abuse. Yet these are “very serious” problems in schools, according to surprisingly large numbers of the nation's black and Hispanic students. These results are from Public Agenda's 2006 Reality Check surveys of parents, students, teachers and administrators nationwide.

Too much unrest, too little help

According to the student survey, about three in ten black youngsters report very serious levels of disruption and unrest in their schools – not just “somewhat serious,” but “very serious.” Black students (40%) are twice as likely as white students (18%) to say that “schools not getting enough money

to do the job” is a very serious problem in their community. Nearly a third of black and Hispanic youngsters (29%) say that “only some” or “very few” of their teachers give students extra help when they fall behind, compared with one in five white students.

These are not the speculations of adults who rarely visit schools and sometimes base their judgments on newspaper headlines and what they see driving by the local high school. Instead, they

are first-hand reports from young people who are in schools and classrooms on a regular basis.

And even at a young age, these middle and high school students seem to sense that the schools they attend do not serve them well.

Closing the achievement gap

In recent years, the country has become more focused on the need to reduce dropout rates, improve learning and increase college completion among the nation's black and Hispanic

youngsters. Closing the achievement gap between minority and white youngsters is a stated goal of the No Child Left Behind law. It is also the subject of intense debate and analysis among education leaders at national, state and local levels.

To help inform these discussions, Public Agenda is devoting its

second “Reality Check” report for 2006 to a comparison of the views and experiences of black and Hispanic parents and students to those of white parents and students. We also take a look at the observations of teachers who work in mainly minority public schools versus those who teach in mainly white schools. These surveys, conducted in late 2005 and early 2006, explore parent, student and teacher perspectives on a wide range of educational issues. In a sense, they provide a status report from those “closest to the action” in

Even at a young age, these middle and high school students seem to sense that the schools they attend do not serve them well.

public schools. What are they seeing and hearing? What's going right and wrong based on their experiences?

Some reassuring results

On the one hand, the results provide reassurance that American kids are American kids, regardless of their race and ethnic background. About half of students from every walk of life say that they could work harder in school. Most students are confident that they are learning a lot in both reading and math – this despite serious questions being raised on this score by international test comparisons and the nation's business and education leaders. In one very nice finding, majorities of all students report that they have had a teacher who was able to get them interested in a subject that they hadn't really liked before.

Most parents too, across racial and ethnic groups, believe their children's schools are better than the ones they attended when they were young. Both parents and students, across racial and ethnic groups, tend to give teachers good scores overall.

And some less reassuring ones

Even so, "Reality Check" shows repeated and significant disparities between the educational experiences of minority parents and students versus those of most white families. And it's not just the social problems often associated with poor, urban neighborhoods. Compared to whites, black and Hispanic students and parents are more concerned and dissatisfied about a whole range of

academic issues, including low standards, high dropout rates and a shortage of resources.

For example, twice as many black parents as white parents (39% vs. 17%) give the local superintendent fair or poor marks for ensuring that the district has high standards and students get the support they need to reach them. Four in 10 black parents say that a diploma from a local high school doesn't guarantee a student has learned basics, compared to just 26% of white parents.

Putting the results in perspective

Statistics such as "4 in 10 parents" or "3 in 10 students" are sobering because they represent

millions of individuals nationwide who believe they are underserved by local public schools. Still, it is important to keep in mind that most parents and students from all backgrounds say their schools meet their expectations on most measures. It is also worth remembering that serious social

Reality Check shows repeated and significant disparities between the educational experiences of minority parents and students versus those of most white families.

and educational problems are not confined to minority students. Over one in four white students, for example, says profanity and disrespect for teachers is a very serious problem at their school, along with another 35% calling it "somewhat serious." Nearly 1 in 5 white students say drug and alcohol abuse is very serious, with another quarter saying it is somewhat serious. Forty percent of white students say that only some or a few of their teachers take a personal interest in them.

Rowdy schools a hurdle to learning?

But gaps remain, and most readers are likely to find them disheartening. Based on the judgments of many black and Hispanic families, the United States still has a long road ahead in providing sound educational opportunities for all.

If an adult had to work in an environment where disrespect, bad language, fighting and drug and alcohol abuse are practiced by a relative few, but tolerated or winked at by management, it might be considered a “hostile workplace.” Yet, this is precisely

the environment that many minority students face when they go to school. For too many youngsters, the data suggest, rowdy, unsettled schools are a significant hurdle to learning. For too many minority parents, local districts just aren’t doing enough to ensure that all children develop sound skills.

Finally, these findings offer a good reminder of how much young people themselves are aware of what they are losing. According to this study and others, the vast majority of all youngsters, white,

black and Hispanic, are aiming for college. In “Reality Check,” nearly three-quarters of black youngsters tell us that they are “definitely” going to

college. Unfortunately, just half of these young black students (49%) say they are confident they are acquiring the skills needed to succeed when they get there.

Methodology

The findings in “Reality Check 2006: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools” are based on two focus groups with parents and telephone interviews with a national random sample of

1,379 parents of children now in public school, 1,342 public school students in grades 6 through 12, and 721 public school teachers. Interviews with parents and were conducted between October 30 - December 18, 2005, interviews with students were conducted between October 30 - December 29, 2005 and interviews with teachers were conducted between November 19, 2005 - March 7, 2006. The margin of error for the sample of parents is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points; the margin of error for the sample of students is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points; the margin of error for the sample of teachers is plus or minus 4 percentage points. It is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups. Full survey results can be found at www.publicagenda.org.

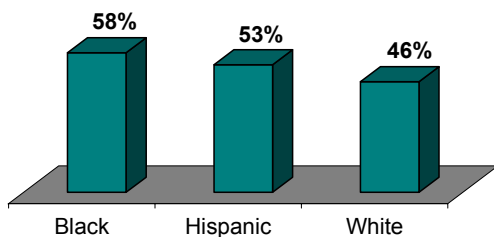
If an adult had to work in an environment where disrespect, bad language, fighting and drug and alcohol abuse were practiced by a relative few, but tolerated or winked at by management, it might be considered a “hostile workplace.”

FINDING ONE: A LOT IN COMMON

In many respects, American students bring common attitudes to school, regardless of their racial and ethnic background, and they share at least some of the same experiences. About half of all students – black, white and Hispanic – admit that they could work harder in school, and most believe in the idea of schools setting higher standards, even if it means students have to go to summer school. Most students from all groups are confident that they are learning, and surprisingly large numbers of all students say they have had a teacher who was able to turn them on to a subject that they hadn't enjoyed before.

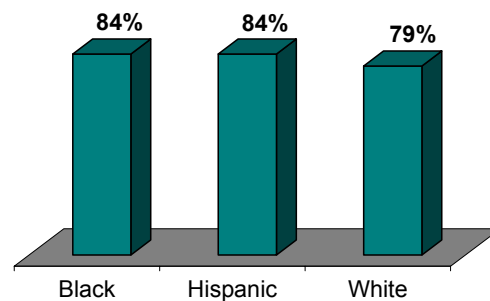
Most students, from all backgrounds, say they could work harder in school*

% who say that right now they could try a little harder in school:

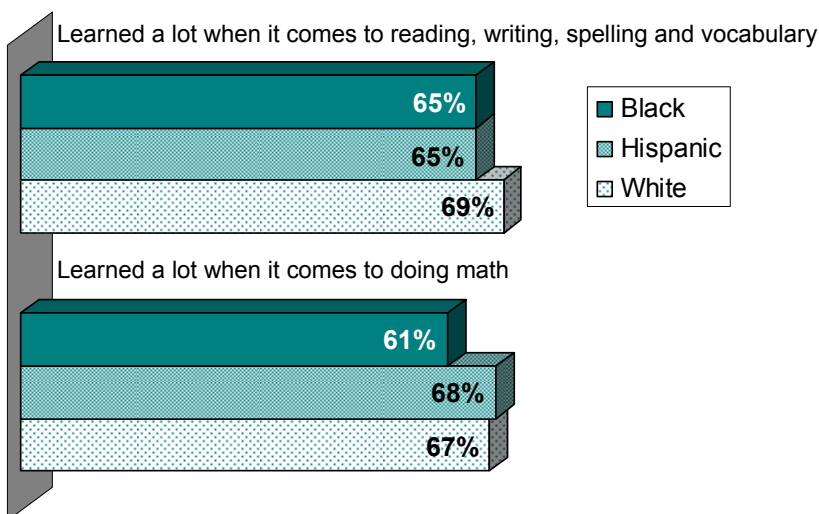


Most students support higher standards even if it means summer school*

% who think it is a good idea for school districts to require students to meet higher academic standards or go to summer school to catch up:



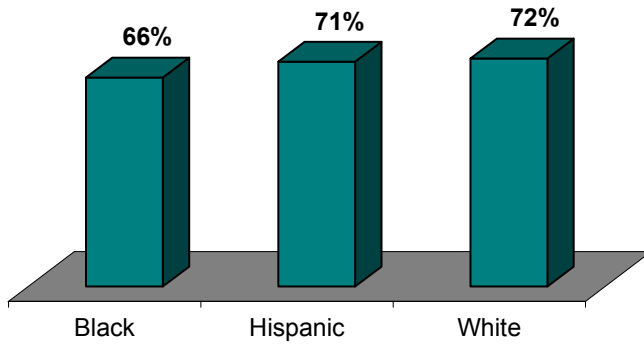
Most students, regardless of race or ethnic group, believe they are learning a lot in school*



*Note: These differences are not statistically significant

Most students of all backgrounds have had a teacher who made a not-so-interesting subject come alive

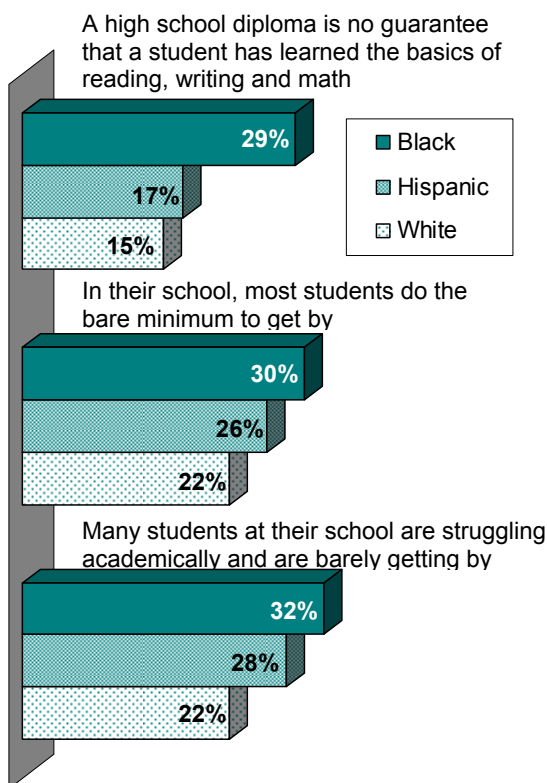
% of students who say they have had a teacher who succeeded at getting them interested in a subject they usually hate:



FINDING TWO: LOW STANDARDS, UNSETTLED SCHOOLS

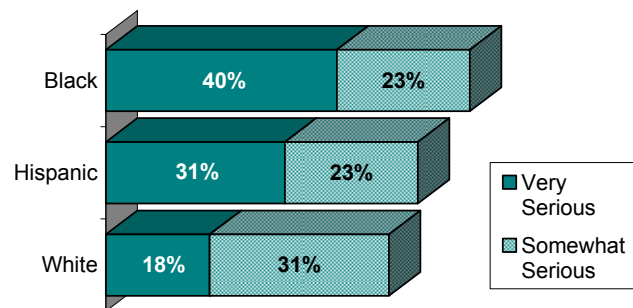
“Reality Check’s” surveys of students show repeated and troubling differences between the way minority youngsters describe their experiences in schools compared to what white students report. Asked to rate their schools on a range of key academic and social dimensions, black and Hispanic students are more likely to report “very serious” problems in nearly every category. Twenty-three percent of Hispanic students and 39% of black students say that kids dropping out is a very serious problem at their school, compared to 12% of whites. Likewise, 29% of Hispanics and 37% of blacks say truancy is a very serious problem, compared to 14% of whites. Just half of black students (49%) believe that they will have the skills to succeed in college by the time they get there. And while it may be an unfortunate fact of modern life that youngsters across the board say problems like disrespect for teachers, profanity and drug and alcohol abuse are at least “somewhat serious” in their schools, these problems appear more prevalent and troubling for minority students. About 3 in 10 black students report very serious levels of unrest and distraction in their schools.

Minority students are more likely to report widespread academic shortfalls

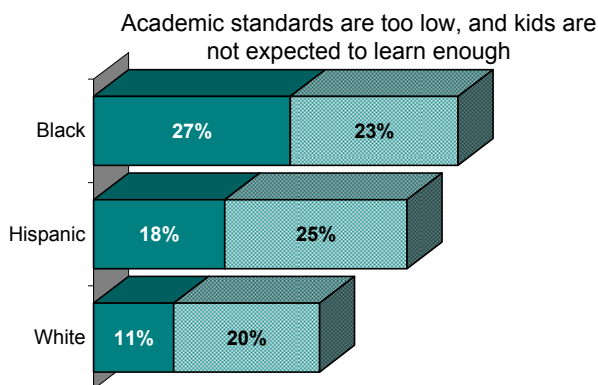
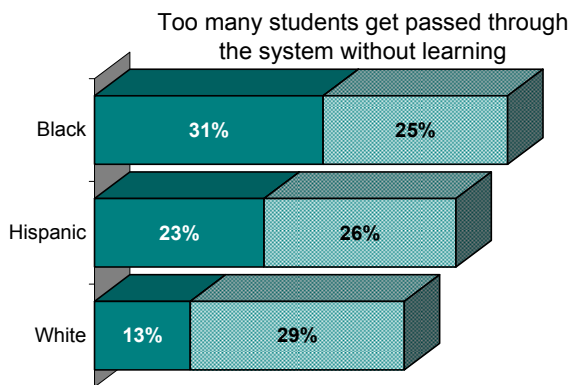
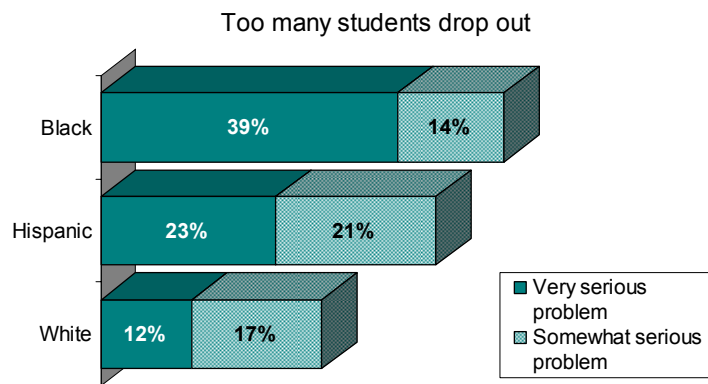


Large numbers of minority students say their schools aren't getting enough money to do a good job

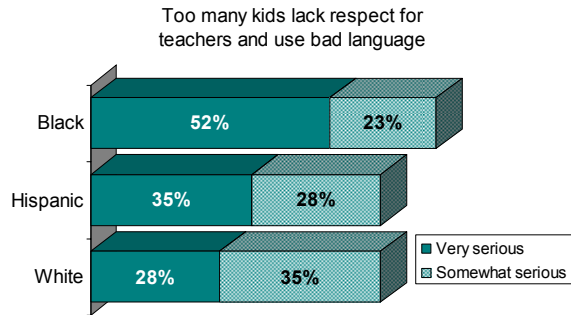
% of students who say it's a serious problem that schools are not getting enough money to do a good job:



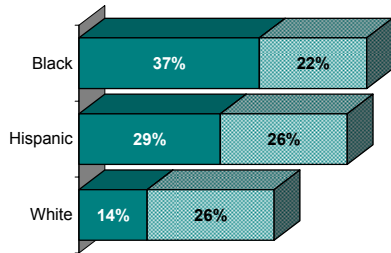
Minority students are more likely to say dropouts and low standards are serious problems



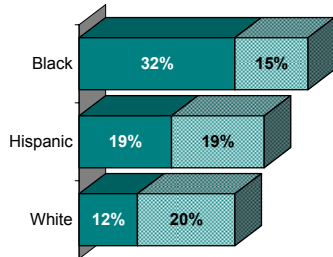
Minority students are more likely to report serious social and behavior problems



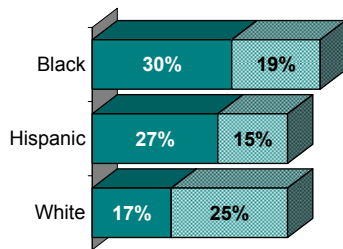
Too many kids cut class or ditch school



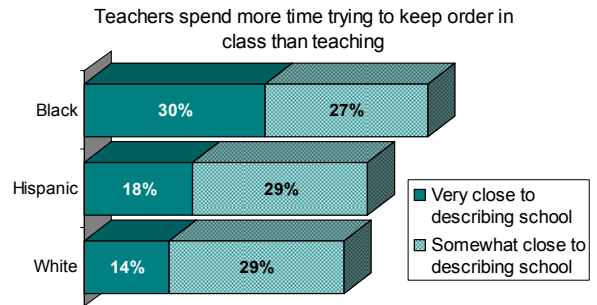
There's too much fighting, too many weapons on school grounds



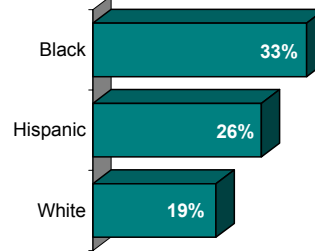
There's too much drug and alcohol abuse



More minority students report teachers and schools struggling with discipline issues

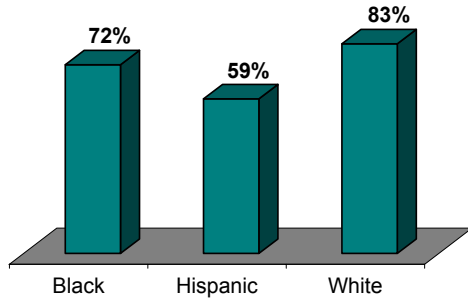


Their school is not consistent in its policies for enforcing rules on discipline and student behavior

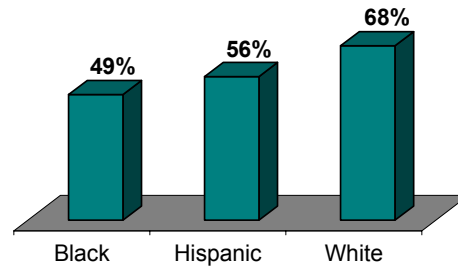


Most minority students aim for college, but many lack confidence they will succeed there

% of students who say they are definitely going to college:

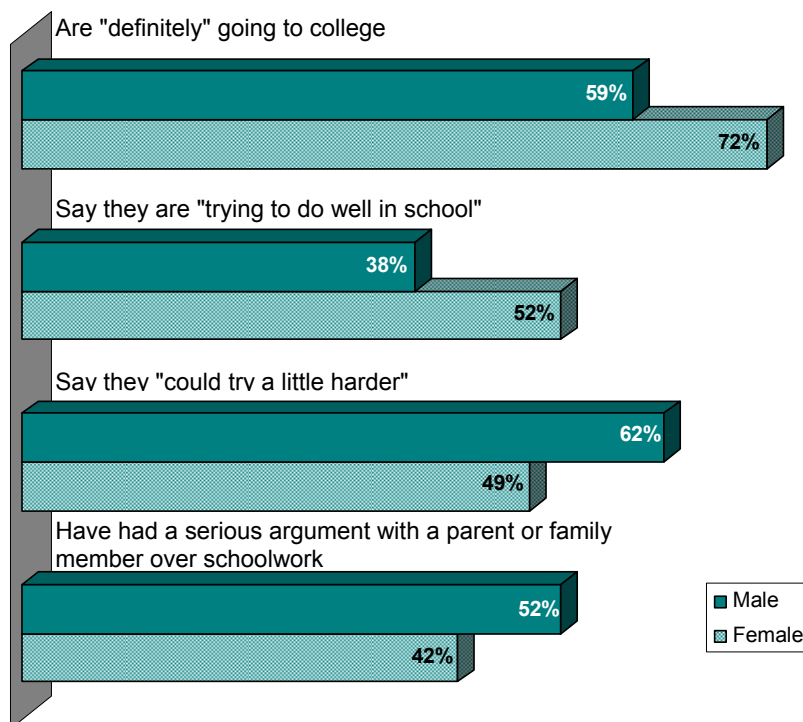


% of students who believe they will have the skills needed to succeed in college by the time they graduate from high school:



Are minority boys in trouble? Fewer boys than girls say they are college-bound or doing their best in school. They're also more likely to report arguing with parents over schoolwork

% of black and Hispanic boys and girls who:

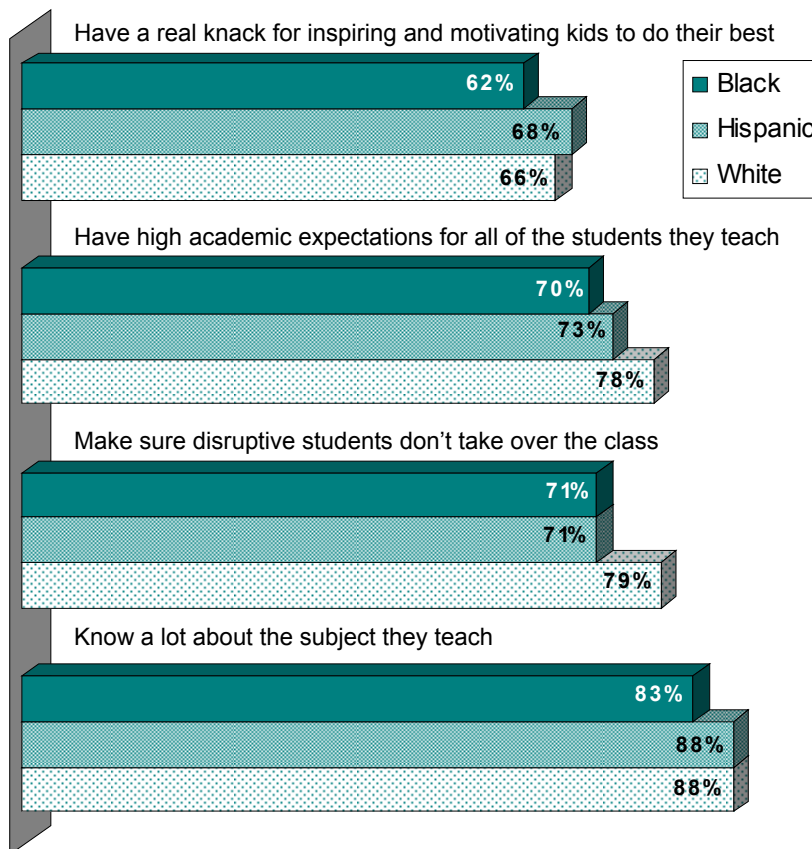


FINDING THREE: GOOD MARKS FOR TEACHERS, BUT TOO LITTLE EXTRA HELP

Overall, black, white and Hispanic students give their teachers good ratings for knowing the subjects they teach, making sure unruly students don't take over classes, having high expectations and inspiring kids to do their best. But minority students are significantly more likely to report that "only some" or "a few" of their teachers give students extra help when they are falling behind. Black students are twice as likely as white or Hispanic students to say that "only some" or "a few" of their teachers treat them with respect.

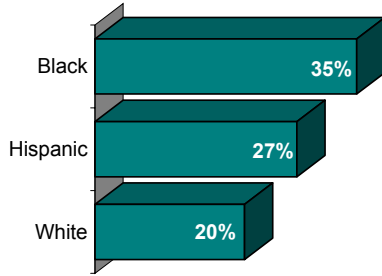
Most students give their teachers good ratings in most areas

% of students who say "all" or "almost all" of their teachers:



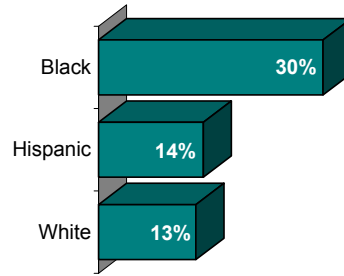
But minority students are more likely to say their schools are short on teachers who offer remedial help

Only some or very few of their teachers give students extra help when they are falling behind



Black students especially are concerned that not enough teachers take a personal interest in them

Only some or very few of their teachers treat students with respect

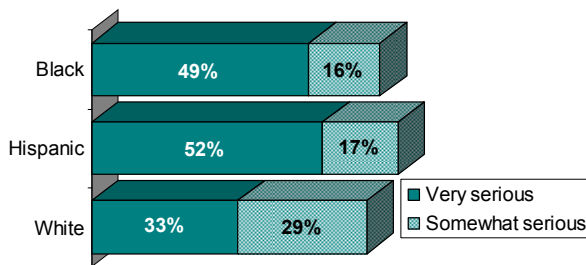


FINDING FOUR: MINORITY PARENTS LESS SATISFIED TOO

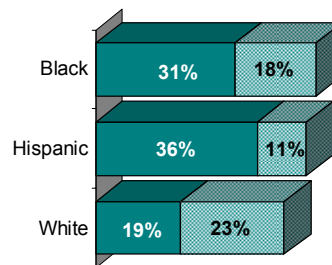
Whether the issue is standards and curriculum, drug abuse and fighting or school funding and crowded classrooms, minority parents are more likely than white parents to be dissatisfied with local schools. Over 4 in 10 black and Hispanic parents, for example, doubt whether students leaving middle school have learned the basics, compared to 29% of white parents. Black and Hispanic parents are twice as likely as white parents to say school superintendents have not done a good job keeping schools safe and orderly. They are also twice as likely to report that fighting and weapons on school grounds are very serious problems in their schools. About half of black and Hispanic parents complain that local schools do not get enough money to do the job compared to a third of white parents.

Minority parents are more concerned about school funding and classroom overcrowding

% of parents who say it's a problem that schools are not getting enough money to do a good job:

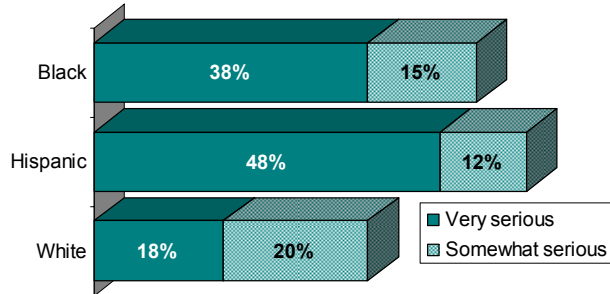


% of parents who say it's a problem that classes are too crowded:

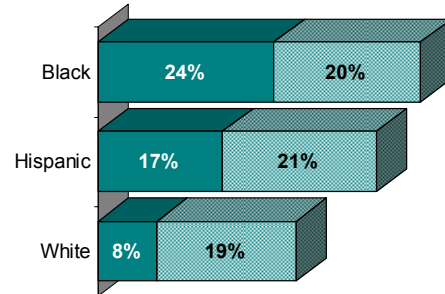


Black and Hispanic parents are more likely to say low standards are a very serious problem in local schools

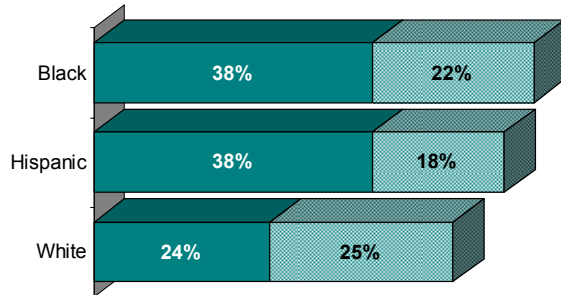
Too many students drop out



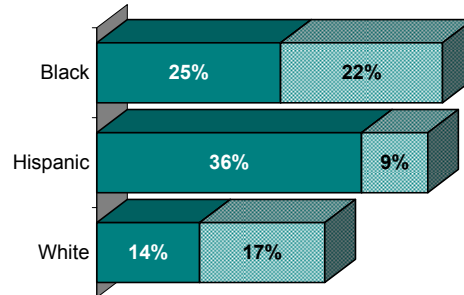
Kids are not taught enough math and science



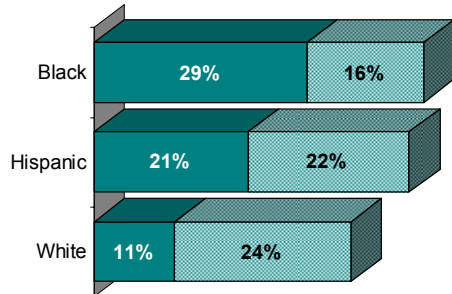
Too many students get passed through the system without learning



There's not enough emphasis on basics, such as reading, writing and math

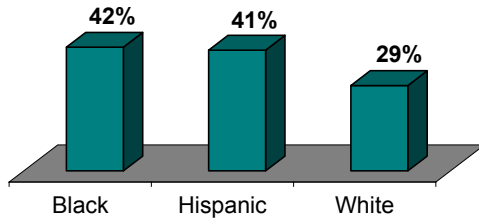


Academic standards are too low and kids are not expected to learn enough



Minority parents are more worried about middle-school students' preparation for high school

% of parents who say there's no guarantee that students leaving middle school have learned the reading, writing and math skills they need for high school:



Minority parents are more likely to report very serious social problems in schools

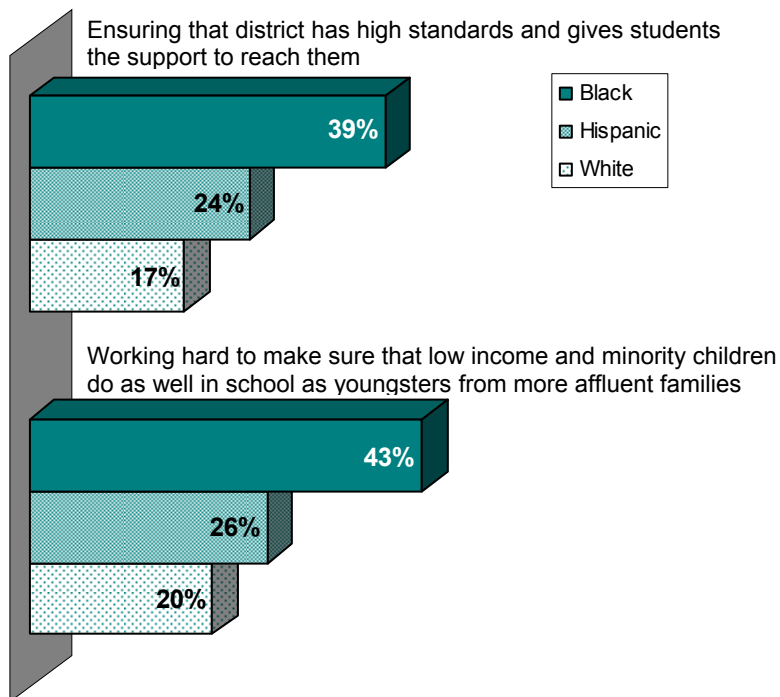
% of parents who say:	Black	Hispanic	White
Too many kids lack respect for teachers and use bad language	43%	41%	29%
Local superintendents do a "fair" or "poor" job at making sure district schools are safe and orderly	31%	20%	13%
Too much drug and alcohol abuse is a very serious problem in schools	25%	38%	20%
Too much fighting and too many weapons on school grounds is a very serious problem	27%	30%	13%

FINDING FIVE: FOR BLACK PARENTS, SPECIAL CONCERNS ABOUT ACADEMICS AND FAIRNESS

Although black and Hispanic parents have many concerns about schools in common, black parents are significantly more likely to give local superintendents poor marks for helping low-income, minority children achieve as much as white youngsters. They are also more skeptical about whether a high school diploma guarantees that a student has mastered basic skills. School discipline policies are another area of concern for many black parents. Four in 10 black parents say they feel a teacher has unfairly punished their child, and more than a third say that only some or a few teachers at their child's schools handle discipline issues fairly and quickly.

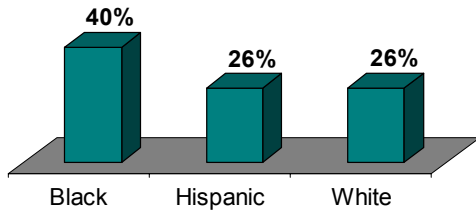
Black parents are more likely to give local leaders low marks for helping minority students succeed

% of parents who give local superintendents “fair” or “poor” marks for:

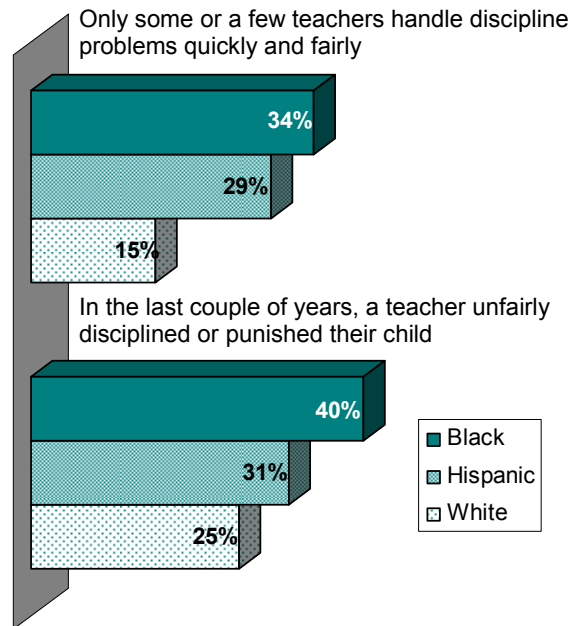


Black parents are more doubtful about whether a diploma guarantees basic skills

% of parents who say that a high school diploma is no guarantee that a student has learned the basics:



Black parents are more likely to have concerns about fairness in school discipline

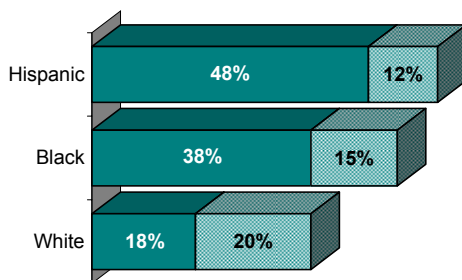


FINDING SIX: FOR HISPANIC PARENTS, SPECIAL CONCERNS ABOUT DROPOUT RATES AND BASIC SKILLS

As a group, Hispanic parents also have some distinctive concerns. Almost half say that local schools have a very serious problem with dropout rates. Hispanic parents are more likely than either black or white parents to worry whether schools are paying enough attention to basic skills. Hispanic parents are also more likely to report serious problems with drug and alcohol abuse in local schools.

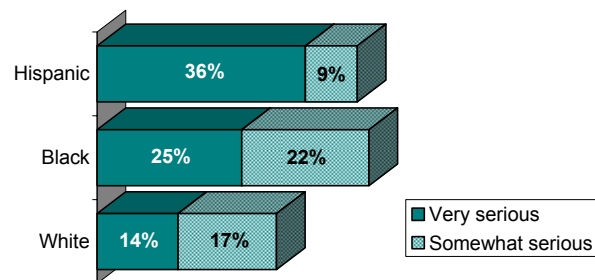
Nearly half of Hispanic parents say the dropout problem is very serious in local schools

% of parents who say it is a problem that too many students drop out:



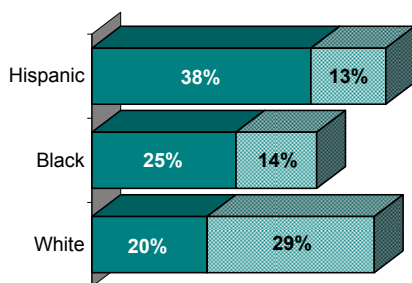
Hispanic parents are more likely to say lack of basics is a very serious problem

% of parents who say it is a problem that there is not enough emphasis on basics, like reading, writing and math:

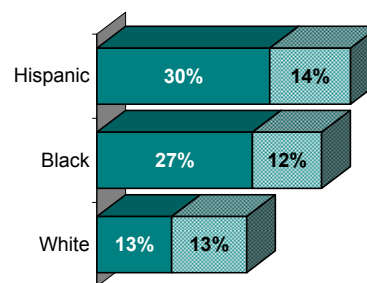


Nearly 4 in 10 Hispanic parents report that local schools have very serious problems with drugs, fighting and weapons

There's too much drug and alcohol abuse



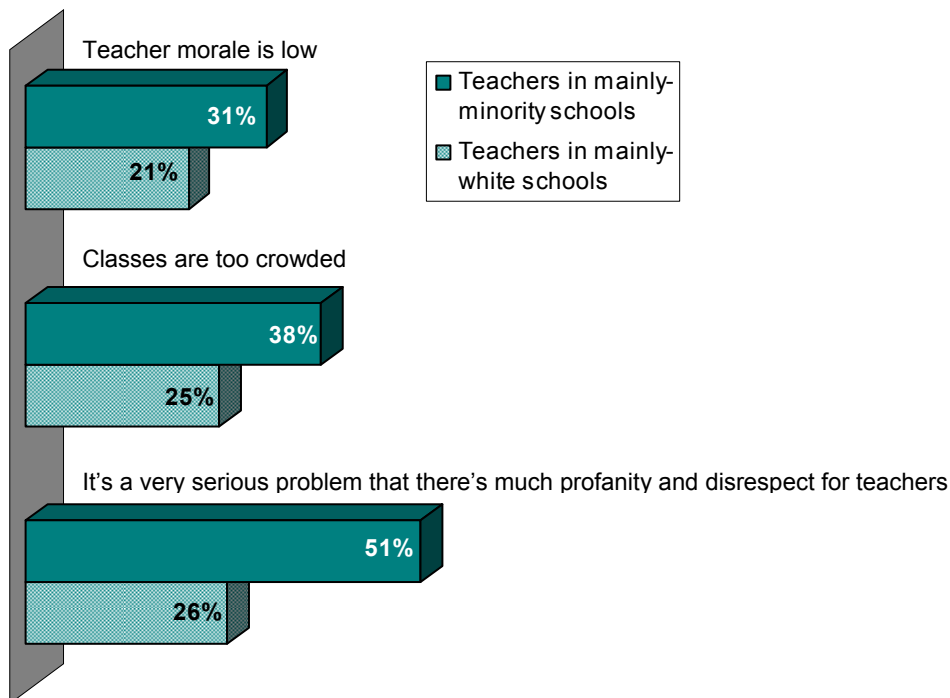
Too much fighting and too many weapons on school grounds



FINDING SEVEN: FROM THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

In addition to looking at the views of minority parents and students, “Reality Check” also explores attitudes among teachers, comparing the views of teachers in mainly-minority schools to those of teachers in mainly-white schools. Teachers share some common concerns regardless of where they teach. For example, large majorities of all teachers everywhere say schools need more money to do a good job. However, several notable differences do leap out. Teachers in mainly minority schools are more likely to say classes are crowded, and over a third say teacher morale is low. They are significantly more troubled by parents who don’t hold their children accountable or control TV and video game time. Although the vast majority of teachers in mainly-minority schools say academic expectations are high at their schools, they also report broad instances of students not learning even basic skills. Teachers in mainly minority schools are also significantly less likely to give administrators good ratings for selecting principals, getting money to the classroom and keeping schools safe and orderly.

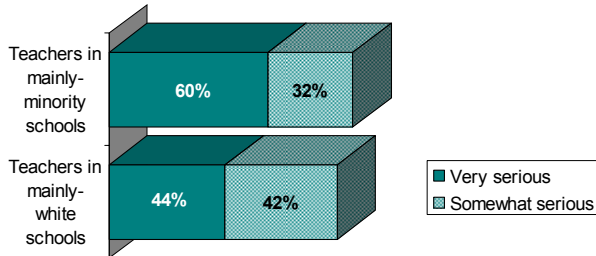
Teachers in mainly minority schools are more likely to report low morale and poor working conditions*



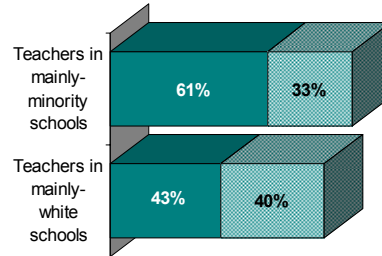
* Mainly-minority schools are defined as those with more than 50% of students from minority backgrounds. Mainly-white schools are those with fewer than 25% minority students enrolled.

Teachers in mainly minority schools are more troubled about lack of parental support

% who say it is a problem that parents fail to control child's time with TV, computers and video games:

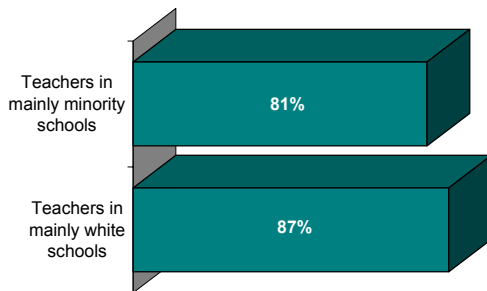


% who say it is a problem that parents refuse to hold their children accountable for behavior and academic performance:



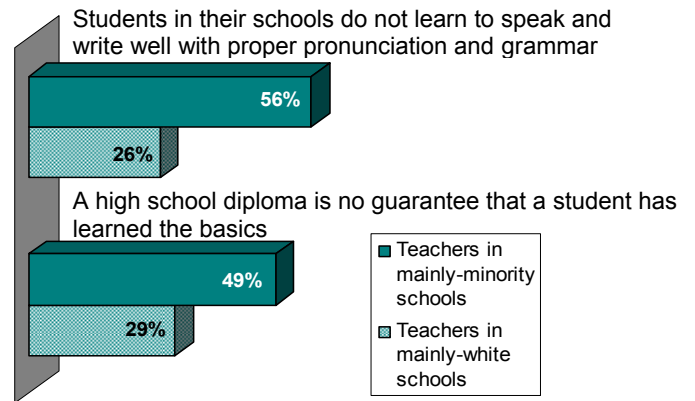
Teachers in mainly minority schools say academic expectations are high*

% of teachers who say all or almost all teachers have high academic expectations of students:



But many also report broad underachievement

% of teachers who say:



* Note: This difference is not statistically significant

Teachers in mainly minority schools are less likely to give administrators good marks for choosing principles and keeping schools safe

% of teachers who say their superintendent is doing a good or excellent job:	Teachers in mainly-minority schools	Teachers in mainly-white schools
Recruiting and retaining great principals	48%	63%
At making sure money gets to the classroom	52%	61%
Making sure schools are safe and orderly	61%	81%
Making sure low income/minority kids do as well as more affluent kids	57%	69%

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS

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Reality Check 2006: Issue No. 1: Are Parents and Students Ready for More Math and Science? Supported by the GE Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The Wallace Foundation. 2006. 13 pgs. Print Edition Price:\$5.00. “Of course, just offering students more advanced math and science courses isn’t enough. We have to change the way our students look at these classes as well... A [Public Agenda study] found that 70 percent of high school parents say their children already get enough math and science in school. You and I know why this matters, and we must work together to make sure parents and students do, too.” – U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings

Life After High School: Young People Talk about Their Hopes and Prospects. Supported by The College Board, GE Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and KnowledgeWorks Foundation. 2005. Full Report: 42 pgs. Executive Summary: 10 pgs. Print Edition Price: \$5.00. ISBN: 1-889483-86-9. “A new survey of young adults on their plans after high school finds they understand the limitations of life without a college degree, but often lack the money, motivation or guidance to pursue higher education. The survey, conducted by the nonpartisan research group Public Agenda, also shows that most young people who forgo college find themselves falling into jobs by chance.” – Lou Dobbs on CNN’s Lou Dobbs Tonight

Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today’s Public Schools Foster the Common Good? Supported by Common Good. 2004. 60 pgs. Print Edition Price: \$5.00. ISBN No. 1-889483-84-2. “I was eager to read a major report on discipline in our schools being released today by...Public Agenda, one of the most interesting and useful chroniclers of opinion inside American classrooms. It is both an intriguing and a disturbing document. The vast majority of teachers surveyed say they are often treading water in a sea of adolescent misbehavior and parental mistrust.” – Jay Mathews, *The Washington Post*

Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters. Supported by The Broad Foundation, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and The Sidney J. Weinberg, Jr. Foundation. 2003. 64 pgs. Print Edition Price: \$10.00. ISBN No. 1-889483-82-6. “The research group Public Agenda consistently offers insightful studies of education, and its latest report is a winner. *Stand by Me* draws out teachers’ views of the policies that shape their professional lives – what they think about unions, merit pay, tenure, alternative certification, standardized testing and more.” – Scripps Howard News Service

Where We Are Now: 12 Things You Need to Know About Public Opinion and Public Schools. Supported by Washington Mutual. 2003. 35 pgs. Print Edition Price: \$5. ISBN No. 1-89483-81-8. “Drawing on 10 years’ worth of surveys, focus groups and other analyses of public opinion, Public Agenda has developed a compelling analysis of current attitudes toward the nation’s schools. Although toughened standards and high-stakes tests have drawn the bulk of policymakers’ and press attention, Public Agenda’s findings demonstrate that education is influenced far more by classroom-level conditions.” – *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

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About Public Agenda

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich, and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning web site www.publicagenda.org offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Recently recognized by Library Journal as one of the Web's best resources, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

About Education Insights

Education Insights is a multi-year initiative launched by Public Agenda to expand community and parent engagement in public education. Building on our extensive opinion research in education and seminal work in developing practical public engagement projects, Education Insights addresses the miscommunication and lack of consensus that sometimes hampers reform. The initiative reflects our belief that the drive to transform American education is at a critical juncture. With astute leadership and genuine community engagement, we believe public education reform can attract broad and sustained support. But without a genuine effort to bring a broader group of Americans into the movement, we fear that the momentum for change could weaken, leaving the country with too many school systems beset with weaknesses and inequities.

About Reality Check

Reality Check is a set of public opinion tracking surveys on important issues in public education. From 1998 through 2002, Public Agenda conducted annual surveys of parents, teachers, students, employers and college professors covering primarily standards, testing, and accountability issues. In 2005 and 2006, Public Agenda revised and updated these Reality Check surveys to cover a broader range of questions, including high school reform, school leadership, teacher preparation and quality, school funding and other key issues. The new Reality Check surveys also include responses from public school principals and superintendents. The tracking surveys will be repeated periodically as a service of Education Insights. The 2005-2006 Reality Check research is supported by the GE Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The Wallace Foundation.

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