

PUBLIC AGENDA



An Assessment of Survey Data on
ATTITUDES ABOUT TEACHING
Including the Views of Parents, Administrators,
Teachers and the General Public

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by Public Agenda

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Introduction

In just two years' time, every public school student nationwide will have a "highly qualified" teacher for science, English, history and math—at least that's the plan according to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The law sets relatively modest criteria: teachers must have a four-year college degree, show competence in their subject and be certified to teach in their state. Even so, just 54% of today's secondary teachers meet the requirements according to the U.S. Department of Education. "It's going to be tough," says Education Secretary Rod Paige, to find enough teachers who qualify.

Secretary Paige is not alone in believing that public schools face formidable challenges finding gifted teachers and keeping them in the classroom. A number of influential studies have suggested that unqualified teachers and poor teaching are pervasive problems in public schools across the country.* On top of this, many fear the new federal law requiring districts to hire "highly qualified" teachers for core subjects could lead to teacher shortages that will jolt schools nationwide.

* For instance, according to a 2002 Department of Education report on teacher quality, at the secondary level, 50% of English, 47% of mathematics, 55% of science and 55% of social studies teachers were "highly qualified" in the 1999-2000 school year. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that 66% of high school, 44% of middle school and 22% of elementary school teachers have either an undergraduate or graduate major in an academic field. Additionally, The National Commission on Teaching & America's Future reports that more than one-fourth of teachers enter the profession without having fully met state licensing standards.

This intense focus on teachers and teaching raises some obvious, sometimes provocative questions. Is the field attracting serious, accomplished individuals? Can you recruit and keep good teachers given mediocre teacher salaries? Given the demands of the new federal law, do we actually have enough qualified college graduates who are willing to teach? Do we emphasize the right skills and knowledge when we train and select new teachers? Do we have an effective system for evaluating teachers and motivating them to do their best? Do we have the political will to make changes where they are needed?

At the leadership level, there is active discussion of these questions, and some states and districts are re-examining long-established practices in hiring, tenure and teacher pay. But what do teachers themselves think about these issues? What about school superintendents and principals? And what do parents and members of the general public have to say? Do Americans broadly believe there are widespread problems in teaching? Do they consider this an urgent issue that must be addressed? What changes, if any, do they believe would be most useful?

For this report, Public Agenda has reviewed and analyzed a robust body of opinion research on teachers and teaching stretching back over the last decade. During this time, Public Agenda itself has conducted well over 20 major national opinion studies on public education, including over half a dozen measuring teachers' views. Public Agenda's surveys cover topics ranging from standards and testing to parental involvement to vouchers and charter schools. Our most recent report, *Stand by Me*, looks specifically at teachers' opinions about their own profession, including controversial subjects such as tenure, pay-for-performance, teacher education and certification and the role unions play in public education.

Public Agenda also reviewed surveys from other respected research organizations including the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Polls of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools and The MetLife Surveys of the American Teacher. These surveys and many others provided helpful insights; a complete list of resources is included at the conclusion of this report.

We also hope that readers looking for more detailed material will consult Public Agenda's own body of work, especially *Stand by Me*, since its findings are particularly relevant. Public Agenda's major reports on education are available on the Web free of charge through a grant from Washington Mutual. Reports can be downloaded from www.publicagenda.org.

Toplines

Parents, the public, principals and superintendents say that almost all teachers are caring and qualified. There may be problems with a few “bad apples,” these groups say, but most teachers do a pretty good job given the circumstances. The public in particular tends to view teachers as the heroes of public education. To the degree that these groups make criticisms, they tend to be about classroom management and/or student motivation. Relatively few question whether teachers have a solid command of the subject they teach, a topic that concerns many who believe that the teaching profession needs reform.

Not surprisingly, most teachers reject the proposition that teacher quality is a major problem in public schools. Teachers see a crisis in teaching, but it is one precipitated by undisciplined, poorly motivated students, uninvolved parents, unreasonable expectations and lack of resources.

Despite the substantial differences in starting point, there is some common ground between those who want to reform the profession, on the one hand, and the public, parents, administrators—and even teachers to some degree—on the other. Here is a rough road map of where the different groups tend to agree and disagree.

Tenure reform. Majorities of Americans believe it should be easier to remove teachers who are not up to the mark, and tenure reform is a top priority for principals and superintendents. Teachers also recognize that some colleagues (a small number in their view) shouldn’t be teaching, and they agree that it is now quite difficult to get them out. Still, most teachers reject the notion that “good teachers” don’t need tenure. Without tenure, teachers say, they would be vulnerable to politics, favoritism, “slash and burn” cost-cutting and unfounded charges from parents and students.

Pay-for-performance. Parents and the public give a thumbs up to the concept of merit pay and pay-for-performance, but there is little to suggest that most see this as a top priority for school reform. In contrast, principals and superintendents say that allowing them to reward good teachers (and remove bad ones) would be one of the most effective ways to improve schools. Teachers themselves are open to many forms of pay-for-performance; healthy majorities endorse extra pay for those who teach in low-performing schools, for example. Still most teachers—as well as parents and members of the public—recoil at proposals to pay more to teachers whose students get higher test scores. Learning requires student effort and parent support, people say. These aren't things teachers can always control.

Teacher education and alternative certification. There is not extensive data on how the public views teacher education and certification, and, based on Public Agenda's assessment, few typical Americans seem to have given these topics much thought at all. Superintendents, principals and teachers say teacher education should put more emphasis on classroom realities, and there is a broad and firm consensus that good teaching requires far more than strong command of the subject to be covered. Opinion research does suggest that the priorities of professors of education—the teachers of teachers—are vastly different from those of parents and the public, and to some extent, of teachers as well.

Unions. Critics of the profession often characterize teachers' unions as obstructionist and wedded to the status quo, and superintendents and principals have their share of complaints as well. Teachers are hardly enamored of their unions, but they are utterly convinced that they need them. Without unions, teachers say, their salaries would be lower, their jobs at risk and they would have no one to protect them if a parent or child made an out-of-the-blue and wholly unwarranted charge.

Some Receptivity

Reformers who want to transform the way teachers are hired, paid, evaluated and motivated will find receptivity to some of their ideas. Superintendents and principals may be particularly receptive, especially on the issue of tenure reform.

Parents and members of the public seem open to some ideas for reforming the profession, including tenure reform, some pay-for-performance proposals and others. But positive survey findings in a few areas should not seduce reformers into thinking there is broad public pressure for change. Parents and the public see other problems and issues in our nation's schools as far more urgent. To most Americans, teachers and teaching are not what's wrong with public education. Most simply have not contemplated the prospect that teachers themselves could be at the root of the schools' problems.

Not surprisingly, teachers are the least receptive. Most strongly reject the premise that poor teaching is widespread in public schools. And teachers have an alternative and very different agenda for how to improve learning. It is not a question, teachers say, of their needing more accountability or more motivation or more chances for advancement or additional course work in their academic subject. What they need, teachers say, are schools that make teaching and learning the priority—schools that furnish a respectful, civil, orderly environment and demand student effort and responsibility. It would be hard to overstate the depth of teachers' concern about poor student behavior (and lack of parental support when problems occur). Yet this issue rarely seems to make it seriously onto the education reform agenda.

In the end, despite the enormous gap in perspective between those who teach and those who would reform the profession, there is one point of strong agreement. Both reformers and teachers themselves say that the status quo

does little to cultivate and nurture teachers who do an excellent job. Teachers cling to the protections of tenure and collective bargaining because they have so little faith that the current system rewards quality. Reformers, for their part, criticize tenure and collective bargaining for almost precisely the same reason.

The Findings

Finding 1: Is Teacher Quality a Major Problem?

Finding 2: What Do Principals and Superintendents Think of Today's Teachers?

Finding 3: Do Teachers Believe There Is a Crisis in Teaching?

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Finding 10: Do Teachers Support Testing?

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the findings reported in this assessment refer to people's attitudes and opinions about the nation's *public* schools.

Finding 1: Is Teacher Quality a Major Problem?

Teaching is an admired profession according to most Americans, and the vast majority of parents say their child's teachers are qualified and caring. While sizeable numbers concede that lack of good teachers is a problem nationwide, only small numbers see it as the most pressing issue locally. Strong majorities empathize with the problems teachers face; many parents admit that they don't know much about teacher qualifications.

1. Teaching is an admired profession.

- Seven in ten Americans consider teaching to be an occupation of either “very great” (47%) or “considerable” prestige (23%). Other occupations deemed prestigious by large majorities of the general public include doctors (80%), scientists (76%), military officers (74%) and police officers (72%). In contrast, far smaller proportions feel this way about the clergy, members of Congress, journalists and lawyers. *(The Harris Poll #54, October 2002)*
- Sixty-two percent of the American public give high ratings to teachers when it comes to honesty and ethical standards. *(Gallup Poll, November 2000)*

2. The vast majority of teachers are perceived as qualified, caring.

- Three out of four parents (75%) say that “all” or “most” of their child's teachers know their subject matter very well. *(Reality Check, 2000)*
- An overwhelming 85% of parents agree that, in their child's school, most teachers are committed to their profession and really care about their students. *(Reality Check, 2000)*
- More than seven in ten principals (73%) give their leaders an “A” for caring about their students; another 23% give a “B.” *(The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001)*

3. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement.

- Forty-seven percent of the general public think lack of good teaching contributes “a great deal” to why students fail to learn. *(2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public)*
- Fewer than half of high school students (44%) say that “all” or “almost all” of their teachers take a personal interest in students and really get to know them. *(Sizing Things Up, 2002)*
- Thirty-eight percent of parents say that their child's teachers could do more to help their child work hard at school. Similarly, 38% of middle and high school students also say their teachers could do more to help them learn. *(Reality Check, 2002)*
- A majority of parents (53%) believe that people who choose teaching as a profession tend to be “just average” compared to other college graduates. Still, more than a third do consider them to be “better than average” (31%) or “the cream of the crop” (6%). *(Reality Check, 2000)*

- Sixty percent of Americans consider teacher quality to be a problem in the nation's schools. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind, 2003 [a]*)

4. Finding and keeping good teachers is an important goal.

- Seventy-three percent of Americans say that getting good teachers is a serious problem for the schools in their community. However, similar proportions also say the same about lack of student discipline (76%) and overcrowding (71%). (*2002 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- More than six in ten Americans say that their local schools have a hard time getting (61%) and keeping (66%) good teachers. (*2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- Seventy percent of registered voters say they are concerned that there is a shortage of quality teachers in their local schools. (*Demanding Quality Public Education in Tough Economic Times, 2003*)

5. Nevertheless, most Americans are convinced that public education faces problems far more pressing than teacher quality.

- Asked to identify the biggest problems their local public schools face, only 5% point to issues of teacher quality. In contrast, 25% point to lack of funding, 16% to lack of discipline and 14% to overcrowding. (*2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- Asked about 11 items that may contribute to consistently poor school performance, only 9% point to unqualified teachers. On the other hand, 22% choose lack of parental involvement, 15% choose shortage of resources and 15% poor management/misuse of resources. (*Demanding Quality Public Education in Tough Economic Times, 2003*)
- Asked to choose the biggest problem facing public education today, Hispanic adults are approximately twice as likely to point to violence and drugs in school as they are to point to a lack of quality teachers (33% vs. 17%). (*The Latino Coalition, August 2002*)
- Similarly, only 10% of African American registered voters say that teacher apathy is the biggest problem facing their neighborhood school, compared to 20% who point to lack of discipline and 17% who point to lack of resources. (*Black America's Political Action Committee, June 2002*)

6. Among the public, there's widespread sympathy for what teachers today face.

- Parents' belief that today's teachers have to deal with a lot more discipline problems than in the past is near universal—92% agree, with 76% saying this comes “very” close to their own view. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- A large majority of parents (70%) also believe that teachers are doing as good a job as they can given the lack of parental involvement. (*Reality Check, 2002*)

- By a 62% to 20% margin, the general public is more likely to view teachers as part of the solution to help improve public education rather than as part of the problem. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind, 2003 [b]*)

7. Many parents acknowledge having limited knowledge about the credentials of their child’s teachers or their child’s academic status.

- Forty percent of parents say they “don’t have any information” on the qualifications of their child’s teachers or on where their child stands academically compared to other students in their state (39%) or in the country as a whole (52%). (*Reality Check, 2002*)

Finding 2: What Do Principals and Superintendents Think of Today's Teachers?

Superintendents and principals say finding good teachers is one of their most important responsibilities, and nearly all say they are satisfied with the quality of their own teaching staffs. Majorities say they have enough freedom to hire good teachers, but very large numbers also say that they need more leeway to reward good teachers and remove ineffective ones.

1. Administrators: Finding and keeping good teachers is one of their most important responsibilities.

- Majorities of both principals and superintendents think it is “absolutely essential” for a good leader to be able to:
 - Recruit and develop a talented teacher corps (86%, 82%)
 - Hold staff accountable for getting results (80%, 82%)
 - Motivate and inspire staff (87%, 76%)
 (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)

2. Administrators give teachers in their schools good ratings.

- Ninety-eight percent of principals and superintendents are satisfied with the overall quality of their current teaching staff. Sixty-nine percent of principals say they are “very” satisfied, as do 47% of superintendents. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Both principals and superintendents are more likely to point to the *supply* of teachers (51% and 49%, respectively) than to the *quality* of teachers (28% and 35%) as the bigger problem in their own district. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Principals universally agree that the teachers in their school are very committed to teaching (98%). (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001*)

3. Administrators say they are on top of hiring and training.

- Large majorities of principals (71%) and superintendents (78%) say they have enough freedom and autonomy when it comes to hiring teachers and other school staff. (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)
- About half of principals and superintendents say that the issue of teacher quality and training “got about the right amount” of their attention over the last school year (46% and 50%, respectively). Only about one in three say it “got less attention” than it deserved (36% and 34%, respectively). (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)

4. Still, they need more freedom to manage.

- Majorities of principals (67%) and superintendents (76%) say they need more freedom and autonomy when it comes to having the capacity to reward outstanding teachers and staff. (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)

- Similarly, majorities of both groups say they need more freedom and autonomy to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom (67% and 72%, respectively). (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)
- Eighty-four percent of superintendents from the nation's largest school districts agree with the statement: School staff, led by principals, should be able to select and hire new teachers. (*An Impossible Job? 2003*)
- Large district superintendents also universally agree with the statement: Superintendents should have the authority to close failing schools, reassign staff and reopen them under new management (97%). (*An Impossible Job? 2003*)

5. Very few administrators say teacher quality is their most urgent problem.

- Almost half of principals (46%) say that a lack of high quality teachers is not a problem at all for them. Only one in ten (10%) say it is "a big problem"; 44% say it is "somewhat of a problem." (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001*)
- Asked to choose among poor teacher quality, lack of talented administrators, lack of parental involvement and insufficient funding, only 4% of principals and superintendents choose poor teacher quality as the most pressing issue facing their own school district. Majorities point to insufficient funding (53% and 66%, respectively). (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)
- Preliminary data from an upcoming Public Agenda study of principals and superintendents strongly indicate that this trend is holding. (*Public Agenda, 2003*)

Finding 3: Do Teachers Believe There Is a Crisis in Teaching?

Most teachers say they love teaching, but many also say they are discouraged. Among their major complaints are being left out of the loop when it comes to decision-making and parents who fail to hold their kids accountable. Most teachers say reducing class size would be the best way to improve schools. Strong majorities say they would forego a significantly higher salary to work in a school with good student behavior and parental support.

1. Teachers love the job of teaching.

- Seventy-nine percent of teachers “strongly” agree with the statement: I am passionate about teaching. (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001*)
- Seventy-four percent of teachers say that teaching is a lifelong career choice. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Virtually all new* teachers (96%) say that teaching is work they love to do. Eighty percent say that if they could choose their life’s work all over again, they would stick with teaching. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Ninety-one percent of new teachers feel that teaching matches their skills and interests very well. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

2. But they often feel discouraged and frustrated.

- Seventy-six percent of teachers say that teachers today are often made the scapegoats for all the problems facing education. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Seven in ten teachers (70%) agree with the statement: Rank-and-file teachers are often left out of the loop in their district’s decision-making process. Forty-three percent of teachers say they “strongly” agree. (*Just Waiting to Be Asked? 2001*)
- Only 15% of high school teachers describe the teachers in their school as having high morale. Just over half (52%) characterize teacher morale as moderate, and another third (33%) say it is low. (*Sizing Things Up, 2002*)

3. Lack of parental and student support are serious problems for teachers.

- Eighty-three percent of teachers say they have serious problems in their school with parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- More than eight in ten (81%) also say they have serious problems with parents who refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- A large majority of teachers (78%) agree that too many parents have little idea of what is going on with their own child’s education. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Among high school teachers, 60% say their school has a serious problem with insufficient parental involvement. More than eight in ten say that parental

* Unless otherwise indicated, “new” teachers refers to those with five years of experience or less.

involvement in their high school should be “a lot” (46%) or “a little” (35%) better. (*Sizing Things Up, 2002*)

- A sizeable proportion of teachers (43%) say the following statement describes their school: Teachers spend more time trying to keep order in the classroom than teaching students. (*Reality Check, 2001*)

4. Teachers also complain about poor school management and lack of resources.

- Two out of three new teachers say their school “often” (21%) or “sometimes” (46%) puts obstacles in the way when they are trying to accomplish teaching goals. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Eight in ten teachers (80%) think there’s a serious problem in their own community with schools not getting enough money to do a good job. (*Given the Circumstances, 1996*)

5. Class size is a perennial concern.

- Sixty-five percent of teachers say public schools in their community have a serious problem with classes that are too crowded. (*Given the Circumstances, 1996*)
- Seventy percent of teachers would give the highest priority to class-size reduction as an area for federal funds to be used for school improvement. (*1999 Phi Delta Kappa Poll of Teachers*)
- Eighty-six percent of new teachers think reducing class size would be a “very” effective way to improve teacher quality. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*) By contrast, 44% of high school teachers say their school has a serious problem with class size being too big. (*Sizing Things Up, 2002*)

6. Low pay is a serious concern for teachers, but other problems are even more pressing.

- Seventy-five percent of new teachers themselves agree with the statement: I am seriously underpaid. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Given a choice between two otherwise identical schools, new teachers say they would prefer to work in a school where student behavior and parental support were significantly better than in a school that paid a significantly higher salary (86% vs. 12%). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Given a choice between two otherwise identical schools, new teachers say they would prefer to work in a school where administrators gave teachers strong support than in a school that paid a significantly higher salary (82% vs. 17%). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

Finding 4: Just How Far Can Most Students Go?

Majorities expect all children to command at least basic skills, and most want all kids, regardless of background, to be held to the same standards. Majorities of white, African American and Hispanic parents say it is essential for their own child to attend college, but only half of Americans say all students can reach “a high level” of learning. Sizeable numbers of teachers voice doubts about whether they will succeed with their hardest-to-reach students. For most Americans, parental involvement is a more important factor in student learning than the quality of teachers or schools.

1. All children should have the basics.

- Fifty-four percent of parents, 58% of teachers, 61% of employers and 53% of professors think that students should be required to pass a basic skills test before being awarded a high school diploma. (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- And sizeable numbers think students should be expected to pass an even more challenging test in order to receive their diploma: 32% of parents; 21% of teachers; 28% of employers; 32% of professors. (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- Ninety-two percent of the general public think it’s “absolutely essential” for public schools to teach basic reading, writing and math skills. To put this in context, far smaller numbers think it’s “absolutely essential” to teach American history (63%), the sciences (59%), advanced math (37%) or world history (35%). (*Assignment Incomplete, 1995*)

2. All children should meet high standards—even those from troubled schools.

- Seventy-seven percent of African American and 82% of white parents of students in public or private school think that enforcing standards and passing kids only when they learn what they are supposed to is an excellent or good way to deal with failing schools. (*Time to Move On, 1998*)
- More than six in ten parents—both African American (61%) and white (66%)—think that public schools should expect inner-city kids to achieve academic standards that are as high as those for kids from wealthy backgrounds. (*Reality Check, 2000*)
- Sixty-four percent of teachers also agree that inner-city kids should be expected to achieve the same standards as their wealthier peers. (*Reality Check, 2000*)
- Eighty percent of teachers, and 89% of principals, “strongly” agree that all children can learn. (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001*)

3. Parents have high expectations for their own children, but not necessarily for others.

- Most parents of high school students—especially Hispanic parents—say that a college education is “absolutely necessary” for their child (78% of Hispanic, 67% of African American and 57% of white high school parents). (*Great Expectations, 2000*)
- Fifty-six percent of high school parents think it would be best for their own child to go to a four-year college after high school. Another 36% would want their child to go to a trade school or a community college; only 4% think it would be best for their child to get a job. (*Great Expectations, 2000*)
- But almost half of Americans (49%) also say there are too many students in college who don’t belong there. (*Great Expectations, 2000*)
- Just over half of Americans (52%) say “all” students have the ability to reach a high level of learning; 46% say “only some” have such ability. (*2001 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)

4. For the most part, the public and parents believe there’s only so much teachers and schools can do.

- Fifty-five percent of parents think that *parents* are a more important factor in determining whether students learn in school, compared to 36% who think the *school* is more important. (*2000 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- Americans are twice as likely to say they believe the “involvement and attention of the parents” matters more in determining the quality of a child’s education than the “quality of the teachers and the school” (42% vs. 21%). (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind, 2003 [c]*)
- Eighty-nine percent of parents say children’s academic success still has a lot to do with natural abilities no matter how much parents try to help. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Asked if the achievement gap between white and minority students is mostly related to the quality of schooling or to other factors, the overwhelming majority of Americans (80%) point to other factors. (*2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)

5. Many teachers doubt they can reach their hardest-to-reach students.

- Almost nine in ten teachers (89%) say they are confident that most of their students will learn the skills and knowledge they were supposed to by the end of the year. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- But almost four in ten teachers (38%) doubt they can get through to their hardest-to-reach students by the end of the year. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- A sizeable number of new teachers (42%) say student achievement is mostly determined by parental involvement and socioeconomic status, compared to 54% who say teacher quality is just as important. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

6. Teachers are more optimistic about reaching individual students than about turning schools around.

- Most teachers (65%) say that “good teachers lead even students who are poor and have uninvolved parents to learn what they are supposed to,” but over a quarter (27%) say that “it is too hard even for good teachers to overcome these barriers.” (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Only 26% of new teachers say that bringing in exceptionally talented teachers would be enough to turn things around in a low-achieving school with low parental involvement; 73% say this would not be enough on its own. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- About four in ten principals (41%) say that bringing in talented teachers could turn things around in a school with low student achievement and uninvolved parents. Superintendents, however, are more optimistic: 55% think gifted teachers alone could turn things around. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

Finding 5: Who's Teaching Now?

Only small numbers of new teachers say they fell into teaching by chance, and an overwhelming majority say teaching is something they love to do. Majorities of superintendents and principals say the new teachers they see are better than average, and many say that the quality is improving. Relatively few college graduates in fields other than teaching say they would never consider teaching as a career. Low pay and certification are hurdles for these non-teaching college grads, but so are worries about personal safety and lack of respect by society.

1. Teachers love their job and are committed to their profession.

- Only about one in ten new teachers (12%) say they fell into teaching by chance; most wanted to be a teacher for quite some time (52%) and about a third (34%) made the decision in college. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- Ninety-two percent of teachers say they are satisfied with their job, with 52% saying they are “very” satisfied. *(The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001)*
- Ninety-six percent of new teachers say teaching is something they love to do. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*

2. Principals and superintendents say new teachers are qualified and many say quality is improving.

- Very large majorities of principals (78%) and superintendents (80%) say most new teachers are very knowledgeable about their subject matter. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- Large majorities of principals and superintendents say that people who choose teaching as a profession are better than the average college graduate (59% for both groups) or even “the cream of the crop” (4% and 2%, respectively). *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- Relatively small proportions of principals (34%) and superintendents (28%) think that too many new teachers become teachers for the wrong reasons. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- About half of principals (49%) and superintendents (55%) believe that the quality of new teachers coming into the profession in recent years has improved. Fewer than one in ten say the quality has declined (9% and 8%, respectively). *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*

3. Relatively few college grads totally reject teaching as a possible career.

- Almost one in five young college graduates in careers other than teaching (18%) say they would very seriously consider teaching as a career, and another 50% say it is one of many jobs they would consider. About a third (32%) say they could never imagine being a teacher. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- Other indicators that young college graduates currently in non-teaching careers may be open to trying their hand at teaching:
 - Forty percent say they chose their current (non-teaching) profession more by chance than by choice.
 - Half of (non-teaching) college graduates (50%) expect to change careers at some point.
(A Sense of Calling, 2000)

4. The prospect of low pay is a problem.

- Almost eight in ten young college graduates (78%) believe teachers are seriously underpaid. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- Almost seven in ten young college graduates (69%) think teachers don't have good opportunities for advancement. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*
- According to 56% of parents, some qualified people who might become teachers avoid the profession because of low salaries. *(Reality Check, 2000)*

5. But there are other obstacles to recruiting new teachers as well.

- Young college graduates in other fields hold a number of negative assumptions about what it means to be a teacher.
 - Teachers often have to worry about personal safety (89%).
 - Teachers today are often made the scapegoats for the problems facing education (76%).
 - Teachers do not get the sense they are respected and appreciated (66%).
(A Sense of Calling, 2000)
- More than eight in ten principals (85%) and superintendents (84%) agree that negative media coverage of education discourages talented, well-educated people from pursuing teaching as a career. *(A Sense of Calling, 2000)*

6. Certification may be a hurdle.

- Most principals (52%) and superintendents (63%)—as well as 51% of new teachers—agree that too many regulations and certification rules discourage talented, well-educated people from pursuing teaching as a career. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Among the young college graduates who would very seriously consider becoming a public school teacher, 55% say they would be “a lot more likely” to consider it if they could do so without having to go back to school. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

Finding 6: Should Teacher Pay Be Increased?

Majorities of parents, teachers, superintendents, principals and the general public say teacher pay should be increased. There is also broad support for many forms of pay-for-performance, especially among newer teachers. But majorities of both teachers and the general public reject tying teacher pay directly to student test scores; most teachers also fear merit pay could promote unhealthy competition or favoritism. And despite their concerns over pay, most teachers would choose to work in schools with supportive parents, administrators and colleagues rather than in schools with better salaries.

1. Majorities say teachers need higher pay.

- Fifty-nine percent of Americans say teacher salaries are “too low.” (2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public)
- Fifty-two percent of Americans say paying teachers better would improve the public schools “a great deal.” (Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, January 2001)
- Large majorities of principals (67%) and superintendents (70%) agree that higher salaries for teachers would be the most effective way to improve teacher quality. (*A Sense of Calling*, 2000)
- Eighty-nine percent of teachers and 62% of parents favor increased pay for all teachers as a solution to attract and retain good public school teachers. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind*, 2003 [d])
- Eighty-five percent of teachers—and 72% of principals—say that providing financial incentives would “help a lot” when it comes to attracting and retaining good teachers. (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, 2001)
- Almost six in ten members of the general public (58%) “strongly” favor a proposal that would increase teachers’ salaries to hire and retain more well-qualified teachers—and 50% continue to “strongly” favor this proposal, even if it means taxes would be increased. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind*, 2003 [e])
- Forty percent of new teachers “strongly” agree that they are seriously underpaid, and another 35% “somewhat” agree. (*A Sense of Calling*, 2000)

2. The general public and parents support pay-for-performance, but not based on test scores.

- Ninety percent of parents favor increased pay for teachers who demonstrate high performance as a way to attract and retain good teachers. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind*, 2003 [d])
- Eighty-one percent of the general public favor increased pay for most teachers, including doubling the pay of the top twenty percent of teachers, based on performance and qualifications. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind*, 2003 [f])

- Well over half of parents (59%) consider it to be a good idea to tie improvements in students' academic performance to financial incentives for teachers in communities with underachieving kids; 37% think it's a bad idea. (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- Sixty-five percent of the general public think teachers should be paid higher salaries as an incentive to teach in schools that have been identified as needing improvement. (*2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- But more than half of Americans (54%) disapprove of a proposed plan that would base teachers' salaries on how well their students perform on statewide standardized tests. (*2002 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)

3. Teachers, too, are open to pay-for-performance, but not based on test scores.

- Teachers favor giving financial incentives to teachers who:
 - Work in tough neighborhoods with low performing schools (70%)
 - Consistently work harder, putting in more time and effort than other teachers (67%)
 - Teach difficult classes with hard-to-reach students (63%)
 - Consistently receive outstanding evaluations by their principals (62%)
 - Receive accreditation from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (57%)
 (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- But only 38% favor financial incentives for teachers whose kids routinely score higher than similar students on standardized tests. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

4. Larger numbers of newer teachers are interested in pay-for-performance, but not based on test scores.

- Teachers with less than five years of experience favor giving financial incentives to teachers who:
 - Work in tough neighborhoods with low performing schools (75%)
 - Consistently work harder, putting in more time and effort than other teachers (73%)
 - Teach difficult classes with hard-to-reach students (66%)
 - Consistently receive outstanding evaluations by their principals (78%)
 - Receive accreditation from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (72%)
 (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- But only 37% of newer teachers favor financial incentives for teachers whose kids routinely score higher than similar students on standardized tests. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

5. Administrators are partial to the idea of paying more to teachers in shortage areas.

- Majorities of principals (57%) and superintendents (67%) say they are facing a shortage of teachers in certain areas. Another 16% of principals and 14% of superintendents say the shortage is widespread. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Among those whose districts are facing a shortage, overwhelming majorities point to specific subject areas (87% of principals and 92% of superintendents), and large majorities say it is a shortage of minority teachers (62% and 73%, respectively). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Principals are divided on whether paying more money to teachers in subjects like math or science is a good idea or a bad one (48% vs. 50%). But among superintendents, a clear majority think it's a good idea (61% good vs. 37% bad). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*) In contrast, a smaller proportion of teachers (42%) favor paying more money to those who specialize in hard-to-fill subjects. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- A large majority of parents (73%) think it would be a good idea to pay more money to teachers in areas of severe shortage, such as urban schools or subjects like math and science; 21% say it is a bad idea. (*Reality Check, 2000*)

6. Teachers fear the downsides of pay-for-performance plans.

- Asked which would be more likely to happen if some form of merit pay were to be implemented at their school, teachers projected that:
 - There would be unhealthy competition and jealousy among teachers (63%) rather than an increase in teachers who would be motivated to work harder and find ways to be more effective (22%).
 - Principals would play favorites and reward teachers who are loyal to them or who don't rock the boat (52%) rather than giving principals a way to reward the teachers who really help kids learn (23%).
 (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

7. For teachers, pay is not always the most important issue.

- Given a choice between two schools in otherwise identical districts, large majorities of new teachers say they would rather work in:
 - A school with significantly better student behavior and parental support than one with a significantly higher salary (86% vs. 12%)
 - A school with administrators who are strongly supportive than one with a significantly higher salary (82% vs. 17%)
 - A school with highly motivated and effective teachers than one with a significantly higher salary (77% vs. 23%)
 - A school with a mission and teaching philosophy similar to their own than one with a significantly higher salary (74% vs. 25%)
 (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

Finding 7: Should Policy Regarding Tenure Be Changed?

Teachers recognize that some of their colleagues should not be in the classroom, and both teachers and administrators acknowledge that getting rid of poor-performing teachers—especially those with tenure—is a difficult task. Tenure, teachers and administrators say, is no guarantee of competence, and there is broad support for changing the current rules of the tenure system. Although open to reform, teachers also say that without tenure they would be vulnerable to politics and favoritism.

1. Majorities agree that there are some bad apples in teaching.

- Almost six in ten teachers (59%) acknowledge that there are “a few” teachers in their own building who fail to do a good job and simply go through the motions. Another 17% say there are “more than a few” such teachers; and 2% say there are “quite a large number.” (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Almost half of parents (47%) say that the statement, “Too many teachers are simply going through the motions,” comes close to describing their own child’s school. (*Reality Check, 2000*)
- In Public Agenda’s upcoming study on school leadership, preliminary findings indicate that large numbers of administrators would fire at least “a handful” of tenured teachers in their district if they could. (*Public Agenda, 2003*)

2. Tenure comes pretty easily.

- The vast majority of teachers indicate that tenure is available rather quickly in their districts—after either three or four years (73%). Another 12% say it comes after the first or second year. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- A majority of teachers (58%) say that, in their district, tenure does not necessarily mean that a teacher has worked hard and proved themselves to be very good at what they do. Twenty-eight percent say tenure does mean this. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Preliminary findings from Public Agenda’s upcoming study show that principals and superintendents have similar views about the veracity of tenure. (*Public Agenda, 2003*)

3. Principals, superintendents and teachers alike say that removing poor performing teachers is a difficult undertaking.

- Asked how difficult it would be to make sure that a tenured teacher with extremely unsatisfactory performance would be gone by the next academic year, large majorities of principals (73%) and superintendents (60%) say it would be “very” difficult. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*) Preliminary data from Public Agenda’s new study confirms this sentiment. (*Public Agenda, 2003*)
- Just 14% of teachers say there is rarely a problem weeding out bad teachers in their district; 36% say that between tenure and the documentation requirements it’s too hard for administrators to remove any but the very worst teachers; and 32% say there’s a fair process for removing bad teachers, but administrators fail to exercise their responsibility properly. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

4. There is broad support for changing the tenure system.

- Almost seven in ten parents (68%) think the tenure system should be changed to make it far easier to remove bad teachers. A large majority of employers (69%)—and a modest majority of college professors (53%)—concur. (*Reality Check, 2000*)
- Large majorities of principals (73%) and superintendents (83%) say that eliminating teacher tenure would be an effective way to improve the quality of teachers. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- In a survey of likely voters, almost half (49%) say that changing the tenure laws to make it easier to terminate teachers would be a “very” effective way to improve education; another 27% say this would be “somewhat” effective and 16% say it would not be effective. (*Zogby International, December 1998*)
- More than half of teachers (53%) agree that the tenure system should be changed to make it far easier to remove bad teachers. (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- More than half of professors of education (52%) say the following statement comes close to their own view: More often than not, teacher tenure is an obstacle to improving the schools. (*Different Drummers, 1997*)

5. But teachers say that without tenure they would be vulnerable.

- Just 23% of teachers think good teachers don’t have to worry about tenure. In contrast, the majority of teachers (58%) view tenure as something that protects them from “district politics, favoritism and the threat of losing their jobs to newcomers who could work for less.” (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

Finding 8: Are Unions an Obstacle to Reform?

School administrators see teachers' unions as problematic and resistant to promising reforms. Teachers generally see unions as playing an important role, but, at the same time, they acknowledge that unions sometimes protect teachers who really should not be in the classroom. Most recognize that the union protects them from such things as capricious administrators, poor working conditions and groundless charges from parents or students. Newer teachers, who tend to be less interested in the union, support this sentiment. The public's view of teachers' unions is generally positive.

1. School administrators view unions as problematic.

- In a recent survey of superintendents of the nation's largest school districts, almost half (47%) indicate that rigid union contracts that prevent the implementation of some reforms are a challenge to district leadership. (*An Impossible Job? 2003*)
- Only very small proportions of principals (15%) and superintendents (17%) say that their local teachers' union helps to remove bad teachers. In fact, eight out of ten say the union fights to protect all teachers, regardless of whether they deserve to be there or not (80% and 79%, respectively). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- More than four in ten superintendents (43%) report that collective bargaining or other union issues got more of their attention than it deserved over the past school year. (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)
- Preliminary findings from an upcoming Public Agenda study about school leadership suggest that most principals and superintendents view teachers' unions as sometimes resistant to doing things that would improve education. The findings also suggest that administrators think unions sometimes protect teachers who really should not be in the classroom. (*Public Agenda, 2003*)

2. Teachers have mixed views on unions.

- A plurality of teachers (46%) view unions as "absolutely essential," and another 38% say they are "important but not essential." Only 12% of teachers say unions are something they "could do without." (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Two out of three union members (66%) indicate they are not involved in union activities. A relatively small 34% say they are. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- About half of teachers (51%) say that most union decisions are made by a small group of active members, compared to about a third (31%) who think decision making is more widespread. (Another 18% say they are "not sure.") (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- A plurality of teachers (47%) agree that "the union sometimes fights to protect teachers who really should be out of the classroom." Sizeable numbers either disagree with this statement (29%) or say they are "not sure" (24%). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

3. Newer teachers exhibit much less interest in the union compared to veteran teachers.

- While 57% of teachers with more than 20 years of experience consider the teachers' union to be "absolutely essential," only 30% of newcomers (those with less than five years' experience) feel this way. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Almost half of veteran teachers (46%) say they are involved in their local union, compared to 20% of newcomers. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- But more than six in ten of both veterans and newcomers agree with this statement: New teachers tend to place less value on the union (62% and 61%, respectively). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

4. But without the union, most teachers say, bad things would happen.

- Without the union, teachers would be vulnerable to school politics or administrators who abuse their power (81%). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Without collective bargaining, the working conditions and salaries of teachers would be much worse (81%). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Without the union, teachers facing unfair charges from parents or students would have nowhere to turn (77%). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Despite their seeming lack of interest in their unions, large majorities of newer teachers also agree with these findings about union protections (76%, 73% and 70%, respectively). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)

5. Teachers' unions are viewed more positively than negatively in the public's mind.

- Only 21% of the general public believe that the local teachers' union has "too much" say in school decisions. About a third (32%) think the union has "too little" say, and another third (35%) that it has "about the right amount." (*2000 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- Fifty-one percent of Americans perceive teachers' unions to be supportive of educational excellence, compared to 30% who view them as an obstacle. (*1997 National Survey of Americans' Attitudes Toward Education and School Reform*)
- Forty-seven percent of Americans believe the nation's teachers' unions are playing a positive role in improving the nation's educational system, compared to 34% who say it's negative. (*CBS News/New York Times Poll, October 1996*)
- Forty-two percent of Americans say they have a positive feeling about teachers' unions, compared to 28% who say their feelings are negative. (*Educational Testing Service, 2002*)

Finding 9: Is Teacher Preparation and Certification Adequate?

Newer teachers are not properly prepared for the realities of the classroom, say teachers and administrators, especially when it comes to managing, motivating and disciplining kids. Interestingly, the priorities of professors of education are vastly different from those of the public and teachers on these things. Most Americans—and educators too—support the concept behind teacher certification, but many see the current system as inadequate and are open to alternatives. Professional development gets mixed reviews from teachers.

1. Many teachers say their newer peers are not adequately prepared for the realities of the classroom.

- More than four in ten teachers overall say that “quite a large number” of the new teachers they come across need a lot more training on effective ways to handle student discipline (45%) and on effective ways to reach struggling kids (42%). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Most new teachers themselves say that teacher training programs do a “fair” or “poor” job making sure teachers are able to deal with the pressure and stress of teaching (63%) and making sure teachers know how to maintain student discipline (57%). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Most new teachers (56%) also say that their own training had too much theory and not enough focus on practical classroom challenges. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Nearly six in ten new teachers (59%) say that upon entering the profession, they were often at a loss when trying to help students who were doing poorly. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

2. Like teachers, administrators believe that teacher training programs leave much to be desired, often leaving new teachers unprepared.

- Overwhelming majorities of principals (89%) and superintendents (86%) agree that teacher preparation programs need to do a better job of weeding out students who are unsuitable for the profession. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Large majorities fault teacher training programs with doing only a “fair” or “poor” job making sure teachers are able to deal with the pressure and stress of teaching (71% of principals and 78% of superintendents). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Large majorities also say that teacher training programs do only a “fair” or “poor” job making sure teachers know how to maintain student discipline (70% of principals and 65% of superintendents). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)

3. The major concerns about teacher preparation center on classroom management and teaching skills, not on command of subject matter.

- Most parents appear satisfied with teachers' knowledge: three out of four (75%) say that "all" or "most" of their child's teachers know their subject matter very well. (*Reality Check, 2000*)
- According to majorities of principals (78%) and superintendents (80%), most new teachers are very knowledgeable about the subjects they teach. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- By a wide margin, more Americans think that prospective teachers are not being taught the skills for making information interesting to children (67%) as opposed to not being taught their subject matter (14%). (*Educational Testing Service, 2002*)
- Approximately half of principals (49%) and superintendents (53%) say that too many new teachers fall short when it comes to having a talent for really motivating kids. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Fifty-nine percent of principals and 50% of superintendents say that too many new teachers fall short when it comes to being able to maintain discipline and order in the classroom. (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Preliminary data from an upcoming Public Agenda survey indicates that majorities of both principals and superintendents say that "quite a large number" of the new teachers they come across lack effective skills for reaching struggling students.

4. The priorities of professors of education are vastly different from those of the public and teachers on teaching basics, good work habits and classroom discipline.

- Only 12% of education professors consider it "absolutely essential" for teachers to expect students to be neat, on time and polite. (*Different Drummers, 1997*) Yet overwhelming majorities—93% of teachers and 88% of the general public—think that emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable and disciplined would substantially improve academic achievement. (*Given the Circumstances, 1996*)
- Only 19% of education professors consider it "absolutely essential" for teachers to stress correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. (*Different Drummers, 1997*) Yet 60% of the general public say their community's schools have a serious problem when it comes to placing enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing and math. (*First Things First, 1994*) Also, a large majority of high school teachers say things should be "a lot" (30%) or "a little" (50%) better in their school when it comes to students learning to speak and write well. (*Sizing Things Up, 2002*)
- A relatively small 37% of education professors consider it "absolutely essential" to develop teachers who are trained to maintain discipline and order in the classroom. (*Different Drummers, 1997*) Yet 54% of the general public

say teachers are doing only a “fair” or “poor” job dealing with discipline in their classrooms. (*First Things First*, 1994)

- Sixty-one percent of education professors believe that a teacher who faces a disruptive class probably has failed to make lessons engaging enough to the students. (*Different Drummers*, 1997)

5. Support for some form of teacher certification is nearly universal among the public and is strong among teachers as well.

- Ninety-six percent of Americans say it’s important—with 80% saying it’s “very” important—for teachers to be licensed by the state in the subject matter they teach. The same overwhelming proportion (96%) also thinks teachers should be required to take a statewide competency test before being licensed. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind*, 2003 [g])
- According to most new teachers (74%), reducing the regulations and requirements for teacher certification would *not* be an effective way to improve teacher quality. (*A Sense of Calling*, 2000)

6. State certification leaves much to be desired, according to principals, teachers and superintendents.

- Only 13% of principals and 7% of superintendents believe that certification in their state guarantees that the typical teacher “has what it takes” to be effective in the classroom. The remainder say it “only guarantees a minimum of skills” or “guarantees very little.” (*A Sense of Calling*, 2000)
- Teachers are somewhat more positive about state certification: 30% say it guarantees that the typical teacher “has what it takes,” 46% that it “guarantees only a minimum of skills” and 15% “very little.” (*Stand by Me*, 2003)

7. There is considerable openness to alternative certification, but most people still want some type of formal training.

- Fifty percent of teachers think it’s generally a good idea to give people many different routes to enter the profession, compared to about a third (32%) who thinks it’s a bad idea and 19% who are unsure. (*Stand by Me*, 2003)
- Almost half of the general public (47%) indicate support for offering alternative teacher certification options. (*Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind*, 2003 [a])
- An overwhelming majority of registered voters (78%) say they support efforts to encourage individuals from other fields to enter teaching by alternative routes. (*Demanding Quality Public Education in Tough Economic Times*, 2003)
- More than half of parents (53%), however, think it’s a bad idea to open the teaching profession to qualified people who want to teach but who haven’t had formal teacher training; 42% think it’s a good one. (*Reality Check*, 2000)

8. There is support for professional development, but teachers are split regarding its effectiveness.

- Teachers are as likely to say that the professional development they've had in the recent past made them a better teacher (50%) as they are to say it made little difference (50%). (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- More than half of teachers (55%) say their recent professional development was immediately useful to them in the classroom, although a sizeable number (38%) say it was not. (*Stand by Me, 2003*)
- Virtually all principals, superintendents and new teachers think that increasing professional development opportunities for teachers would be an effective proposal for improving teacher quality. Large majorities say it would be "very" effective (64%, 72% and 57%, respectively). (*A Sense of Calling, 2000*)
- Virtually all principals and superintendents also think that improving professional development for administrators would be effective for improving leadership in the nation's schools. More than half say it would be "very" effective (54% of principals and 56% of superintendents). (*Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game, 2001*)

Finding 10: Do Teachers Support Testing?

Parents, teachers and the public at large are strongly supportive of the movement to raise academic standards and the use of mandatory testing to gauge students' progress. But most also believe that testing can go too far, and majorities are wary about using the results of a single test to determine a child's future. Teachers are more likely than parents to have concerns about testing.

1. Support for raising academic standards is very strong among parents, teachers and the general public.

- Overwhelming majorities think that having guidelines for what students should learn and know helps improve students' academic performance (82% of parents and 80% of teachers). (*Reality Check, 2002, 2001*)
- Overwhelming majorities favor a policy that would require students to pass a standardized test in order to be promoted and require failing students to attend summer school or be held back (92% of parents and 87% of teachers). (*Reality Check 2001*)
- Most Americans (72%) say they would favor stricter standards for social promotion even if it meant that significantly more students would be held back. (*1999 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)

2. Support for testing also garners strong support.

- Majorities want high school students to be able to pass a basic skills test in reading, writing and math before they are awarded their diploma (54% of parents and 58% of teachers). (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- And substantial numbers would want high school students to be required to pass an even more challenging test showing they have learned at higher levels (32% of parents and 21% of teachers). (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- Two out of three Americans (67%) favor the use of an annual test to track student progress in grades 3 to 8. (*2002 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- Seventy-one percent of Americans say they support mandatory testing of students in public schools each year as a way to determine how good a job the schools are doing. (*Associated Press, July 2001*)
- In a question that asked registered voters how likely they would be to re-elect an official who supports high-stakes testing, 53% say they would be more likely and 24% less. (Fifteen percent say it would make no difference.) (*Demanding Quality Public Education in Tough Economic Times, 2003*)

3. But, parents, teachers and the general public believe testing can go too far.

- Most agree that it's wrong to use the results of just one test to decide whether a student gets promoted or graduates (75% of parents and 89% of teachers). (*Reality Check, 2002*)

- Eight in ten agree that the schools should use standardized test scores *along with teacher evaluations* to decide if students should be promoted or graduate (83% of parents and 80% of teachers). (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- Only about one in four think that the best way to measure academic achievement is by using test scores (26% of the general public and 22% of parents). Most would be more inclined to think the best way is to use classroom work and homework (53% and 61%, respectively). (*2002 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)
- Two out of three Americans (66%) believe that students' performance on a single test will not provide a fair picture of whether or not a school needs improvement. (*2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public*)

4. Teachers are more likely to have concerns about testing.

- More than eight in ten teachers (84%) say that the schools today place far too much emphasis on standardized test scores, compared to 60% of parents. (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- Similarly, 79% of teachers think that teachers will end up teaching to the test instead of making sure real learning takes place, compared to 66% of parents. (*Reality Check, 2002*)
- But few teachers indicate that testing is distorting their own teaching. Only 26% say that they spend so much class time preparing students for standardized tests that real learning is neglected. The large majority of teachers (73%) say this is not the case for them. (*Reality Check, 2002*)

Finding 11: Just How Skilled Are Today's High School Graduates?

Most parents and teachers say a high school diploma signifies that a student has at least learned the basics, although majorities of employers and professors say it guarantees no such thing. Most employers and professors (and many high school teachers as well) give disappointing ratings to young people on some fundamentals such as the ability to write clearly and to use proper grammar. While most parents of high school students think their child will have the skills to succeed in the work world and in college, sizeable numbers of employers and professors are doubtful about the young people they come across.

1. Does a high school diploma mean students have basic skills?

- Most parents, teachers and students believe that a high school diploma means a typical student has at least learned the basics:
 - 67% of parents
 - 77% of teachers
 - 73% of high school students
(Reality Check, 2002)
- But large majorities of the employers who hire high school graduates, and the professors who teach them in their first two years of college, have a different view. Most think a high school diploma is *no guarantee* that the typical student has learned the basics:
 - 58% of employers
 - 68% of professors
(Reality Check, 2002)

2. Are high school graduates ready for the work force?

- Again, there's a disconnect between parents and teachers on the one hand and employers on the other. A large majority of parents of high school students (67%) think their child will have the skills to succeed in the work world, and a large majority of high school teachers (78%) say the same about their students. But only 41% of employers say that the young people they see have such skills. *(Reality Check, 2002, 2001, 2002)*

3. Are high school graduates ready for college?

- When it comes to having the skills to succeed in college, a strong majority of parents of high school students (62%) believe their child will be able to cut it. But barely a majority of high school teachers would agree (51%) based on the students they see, and only 47% of college professors say it's true for the young people they come across. *(Reality Check, 2002, 2001, 2002)*

4. Large majorities of employers and college professors say basic skills are lacking.

- According to large majorities of employers and college professors, public school graduates have “fair” or “poor” skills in:
 - Writing clearly (73% of employers and 75% of professors)
 - Grammar and spelling (73% of employers and 74% of professors)
 - Basic math skills (63% of employers and 65% of professors)

(Reality Check, 2002)

5. High school teachers also see problems with the basics.

- Only one in five high school teachers (20%) say that students in their school learn to speak and write well, with proper pronunciation and grammar. Fifty percent say things should be “a little” better, and 30% say “a lot” better. *(Sizing Things Up, 2002)*

Finding 12: Is Lack of Parental Involvement a Problem?

Lack of parental involvement is a serious concern to most teachers. Both parents and teachers say parental involvement starts at home, and neither group voices much interest in getting parents more active in school governance. Parents admit their own shortcomings and acknowledge they still have work to do when it comes to conveying to their children the importance of always doing their very best in school.

1. Teachers are very concerned about uninvolved parents.

- Two out of three teachers (66%) rate the parents at their school as “fair” or “poor” in terms of involvement with their child’s education. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- More than eight in ten (83%) say they have a serious problem with parents who fail to control how much time their kids spend with TV, computer and video games. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Teachers almost universally agree (98%) that it’s always the same group of parents who help out at the school. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Almost eight in ten teachers say that their school “tries hard to get parents involved but there’s just no reaching some parents” (79%) and that “most parents of underachieving kids wait for their children to fail before they intervene” (78%). (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Forty-four percent of teachers say that “all” or “most” of their students have parents who need to be more involved in what their child is learning in school. (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2001*)

2. Parents admit their own shortcomings.

- Of the 82% of parents who believe it is “absolutely essential” to teach their kids to always do their very best in school, 50% say they have succeeded; 50% say there is still work to be done. (*A Lot Easier Said Than Done, 2002*)
- As many as half of parents (50%) say they have had serious arguments with their child where there was yelling or crying over schoolwork. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Half (49%) have walked away and let their child deal with the consequences of not doing their schoolwork rather than dealing with the constant stalling. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- More than one in five (22%) have done part of their child’s homework because it was too difficult for the child or because the child was too tired. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Seventy percent of parents say most of the parents they know need to get more involved in their children’s education. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)

3. Teachers and parents say emphasis should be at home.

- Ask which approach they prefer for getting parents involved in their child's education—either getting parents directly involved in running the school or getting them more involved at home by limiting TV and checking homework—overwhelming majorities of teachers (87%) and parents (72%) would choose the latter. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)

4. Neither teachers nor parents voice much interest in parents getting involved in school governance.

- Only 15% of teachers and 4% of parents think the partnership between parents and school should be characterized by parents being involved with choosing staff and curriculum. (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Relatively few parents say they would be “very comfortable” doing each of the following—and even fewer say they have done so:
 - Helping to plan the school curriculum (25% would be very comfortable, and 15% have done this in recent years)
 - Serving on a committee to propose changing how teachers teach in their classrooms (27% and 12%, respectively)
 - Serving on a committee to decide which new teachers or principal to hire (31% and 7%, respectively)
 - Helping decide how to spend the school's money (36% and 19%, respectively)
 - Helping to evaluate the quality of the school's teachers (37% and 17%, respectively)
 (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)
- Relatively few teachers would approve of parents participating in committees that:
 - Evaluate the quality of the school's teachers (26%)
 - Make hiring decisions on incoming teachers and administrators (25%)
 - Propose changes to classroom teaching methods (15%)
 (*Playing Their Parts, 1999*)

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