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Wednesday, April 23, 2003

Manners, morale worries about public schools

Education needs tests, but is seen as hurt by other factors

By SIOBHAN MCDONOUGH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON -- Ill-mannered pupils, demoralized teachers, uninvolved parents and bureaucracy in public schools are greater worries for Americans than the standards and accountability that occupy policy-makers, a new study says.

Teachers, parents and students said they were concerned about the rough-edged atmosphere in many high schools, according to the report released today by Public Agenda, a research and policy organization in New York City.

Only 9 percent of surveyed Americans said the students they see in public are respectful toward adults. High school students were asked about the frequency of serious fights in schools, and 40 percent said they occurred once a month or more; 56 percent said they hardly ever happened; 4 percent had no opinion. Only 15 percent of teachers said teacher morale is good in their high school.

"This is a true reflection of how the public feels," said Shirley Igo, president of National Parent Teacher Association.

"It says that our young people are looking for positive role models out there."

The report, drawing together more than 25 surveys done by Public Agenda, traces how attitudes of parents, teachers, students, principals, employers and college professors have changed over the past 10 years. A typical national random sample telephone survey on standards in 2000 canvassed 803 parents of public school students in grades K-12, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The report says standard testing is important, but many other factors are hurting academic performance.

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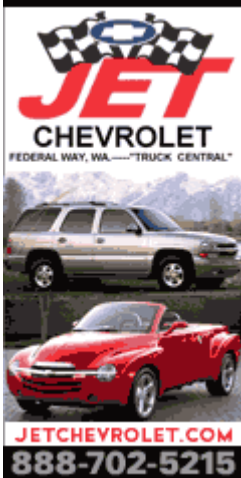
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The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act holds schools accountable for student achievement. States must devise and offer tests in reading and mathematics for every child each year in grades three through eight, beginning in fall 2005.

Under current law, states are required to test students in reading and math three times during their K-12 years.

"The standards movement has taken hold in American schools and continues to enjoy broad support. But there are some troublesome fault lines," said Public Agenda President Deborah Wadsworth.

Teachers "believe in higher standards but often feel they can't count on students to make the effort or parents and administrators to back them up," she said.

Superintendents and principals want more autonomy over their own schools, with 81 percent of superintendents and 47 percent of principals saying talented leaders most likely will leave because of politics and bureaucracy.

Teachers said their views are generally ignored by decision-makers, with 70 percent feeling left out of the loop in their district's decision-making process.

According to the report, 73 percent of employers and 81 percent of professors said public school graduates have fair or poor writing skills.

Teachers said lack of parental involvement is a serious problem, with 78 percent of teachers saying too many parents don't know what's going on with their child's education. Only 19 percent said parental involvement is strong in their high school.

Igo said part of the problem is the lack of communication between schools and homes.

"There is a lack of knowledge on the part of parents about how to be effectively involved in the school," she said. "It is two-way street -- parents have to assume responsibility and schools have to offer meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in students' education."

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The study also found that 67 percent of teachers said their school puts obstacles in the way when they are trying to accomplish goals at work; 83 percent of teachers said parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home for their kids are a serious problem; 41 percent of teachers said schools automatically promote students who have reached a maximum age.

Respondents generally said schools place far too much emphasis on standardized test scores, with 60 percent of parents, 84 percent of teachers, 52 percent of employers, 57 percent of professors and 45 percent of students agreeing.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

Views from parents, teachers, students, principals, employers and college professors on public schools:

- ≈ 81 percent of teachers take parents to task for not making sure their children study hard and behave well.
- ≈ 85 percent of parents; 75 percent of teachers; 79 percent of employers and 79 percent of professors say students work harder if they know they will be tested.
- ≈ More than 4 in 10 teachers say that in their schools, teachers spend more time trying to keep order in the classroom than actually teaching.
- ≈ More than 8 in 10 superintendents and principals complain about keeping up with government mandates.
- ≈ 76 percent of superintendents and 67 percent of principals say they want more freedom to make decisions, especially when it comes to rewarding outstanding teachers.
- ≈ 83 percent of teachers say parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home for their kids are a serious problem.
- ≈ 98 percent of teachers say it's always the same group of parents who are helping out at school.
- ≈ 77 percent of students say their high school has problems with cursing in the hallways and cafeteria.

Source: Public Agenda "Where We Are Now" report

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