

A Roper Center Data Review

To the Test

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know” is a truism often invoked by Americans when we talk about the way to success. Yet for opening all the doors that lead to what we define as success in our society, education is regarded as the master key.

Thus, despite whatever other problems we see in the United States today, we are particularly unsettled by the sense that something is wrong with public education. In recent years, education has risen to the top of the list of issues we want government to address, and by just about any measure we view it as a top priority.

The belief that all is not well with public education in general cuts to the very heart of our sense of well-being as a nation. When asked about the problems our schools might face, respondents emphasize matters of character, discipline and order over actual learning. The three-quarters of the public who believe the existing system should be reformed say that preparing people to become responsible citizens trumps even economic self-sufficiency as a reason for the public schools to exist. At bottom, if we think the schools aren’t doing their jobs, we don’t feel either upstanding or safe.

Having determined there is a problem—more than half say our public schools need either major change or a complete overhaul, and only 7% think they work well—the public now faces the challenging assignment of deciding what to do about it. At present, several major policy approaches are in play, and Americans seem prone to repeat the same delicate dance as we consider each one: at first glance we embrace it, and then, as the implications of the policy are presented to us, we begin to back away.

Vouchers? The public is evenly split when asked if parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools.

But a quarter of those who favor vouchers backs away from them when presented with the prospect of their public schools getting less money as a result. Although a majority of people believes a voucher program would prompt the public schools to fight to get better in order to hold onto their students, two-thirds think vouchers would lead to more segregation. And two-thirds think that while vouchers may be a good idea, they cannot solve the nation’s education problems.

Standards and accountability? Americans are ambivalent about the usefulness of standardized testing as an educational tool. Only a third sees test scores as the best way to measure student achievement, and two-thirds would rather see them used to decide how best to help students than as a diagnostic instrument. Three-quarters favor mandatory testing if it will help us find out how good a job the schools are doing, but two-thirds back away from using the results of such tests as a basis for withholding federal funding.

Or, rather, to be more precise, two-thirds oppose withholding funds from under-performing schools, while an equal proportion favors giving them more money—a position diametrically opposed to the strategy being put forth in the education bill debated this summer.

No clear policy mandate emerges, then, on how to “fix” whatever we see as being wrong with our schools. Indeed, the entire debate seems a bit paradoxical, in that none of the policies directly addresses that which we perceive as the main imperative of public schooling: the building of character, the keeping of order, the making of responsible citizens. No one is proposing a way to put student achievement in these areas to the test.

On one point, though, we overwhelmingly agree: most of the nation’s students are achieving only a small part of their potential in school. We remain perplexed as to how to address this deficiency and amend all the wastage and shortchanged futures that it implies. We do think, however, that the power to make a difference lies close to home—those of us who would like to see government have more involvement in solving the country’s education problems are far outnumbered by those who think parents, teachers and students should have more say in decisions affecting the public schools.

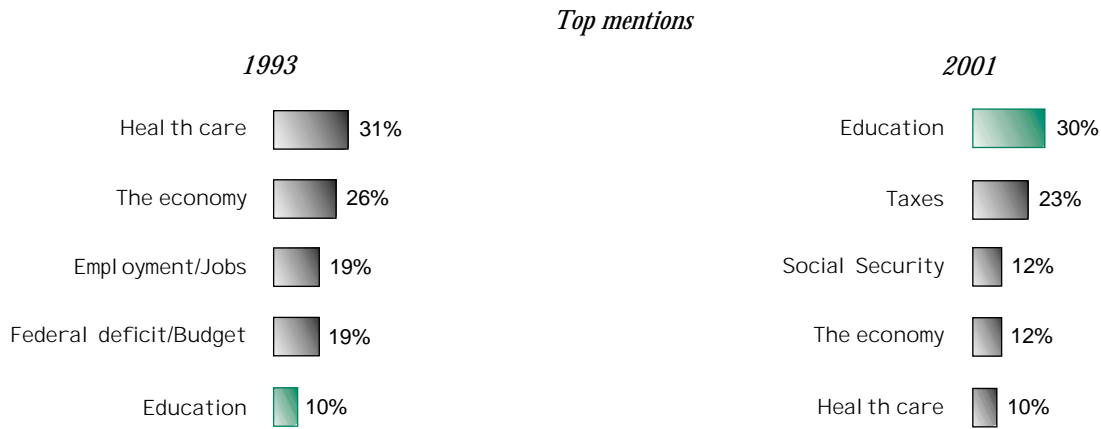
As Deborah Wadsworth writes, the public’s demand for education reform is basic, commonsensical, and, above all, personal. It is, indeed, what we know that more than anything determines the level of success Americans can hope for; and it is our own children’s success that is at stake.

—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Editor

Data follow—pages 17-23

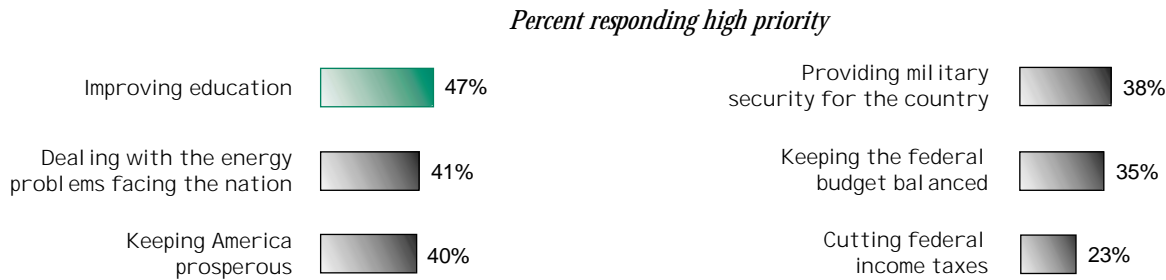
Educational Requirements

Question: What do you think are the two most important issues for the government to address?



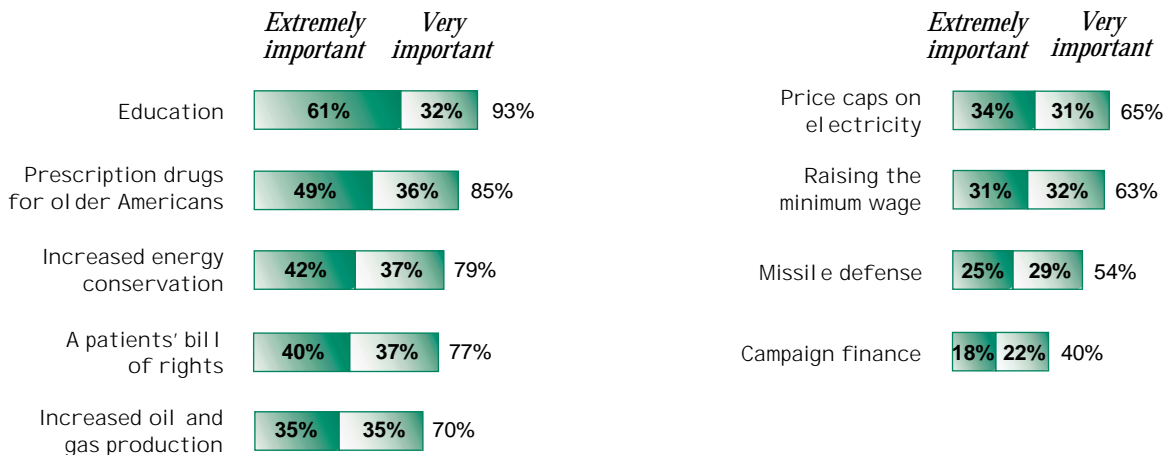
Source: Surveys by Louis Harris and Associates and Harris Interactive, latest that of February 22-March 3, 2001.

Question: How important is it that the Bush administration does each of the following? Is it a top priority, high priority, low priority, or not a priority at all?...



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, May 7-9, 2001.

Question: How important is it to you that the president and Congress deal with each of the following issues in the next year—is it extremely important, very important, moderately important, or not that important?

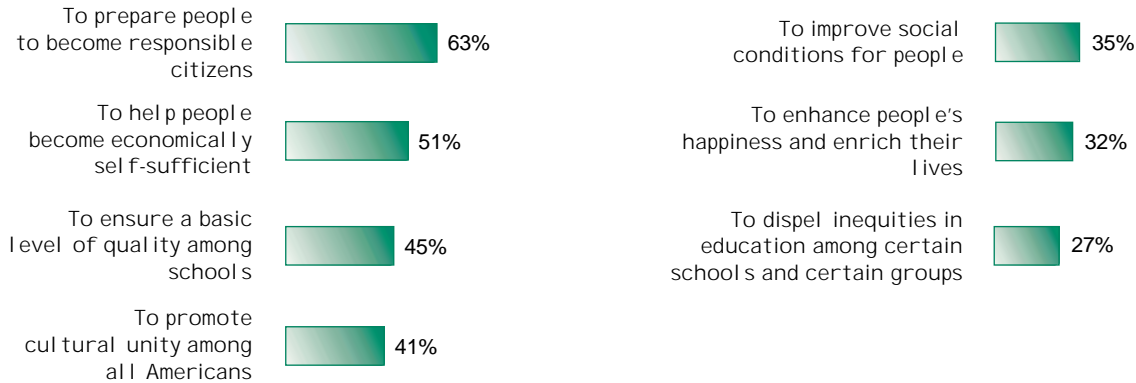


Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, June 8-10, 2001.

The Job at Hand

Question: Please indicate how important you think [each item is in explaining why America needs a system of public schools] by selecting a number between one and ten—with ten meaning of the highest importance and one meaning not at all important....

Percent responding 10



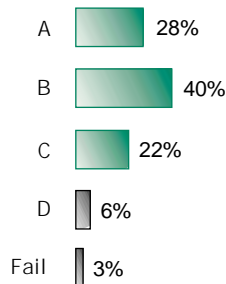
Note: Asked of those who said efforts to improve public education should focus on reforming the existing system.

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, June 5-29, 2000.

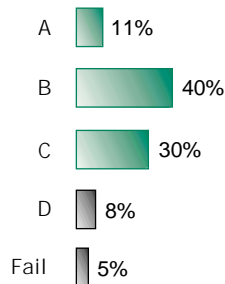
Neighborhood, Nation

Question: [Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves... were graded in the same way.] [W]hat grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?... [How about] the public schools... in your community?... How about the public schools in the nation as a whole?...

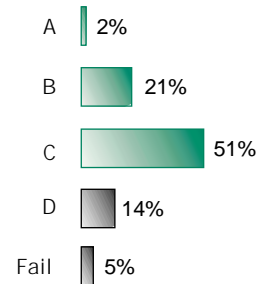
*School oldest child attends**



Schools in your community



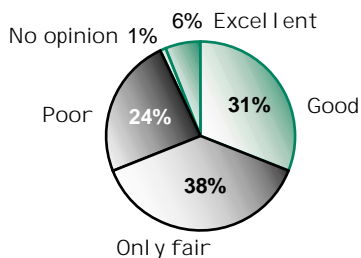
Schools in the nation



*Responses of parents of public school students.

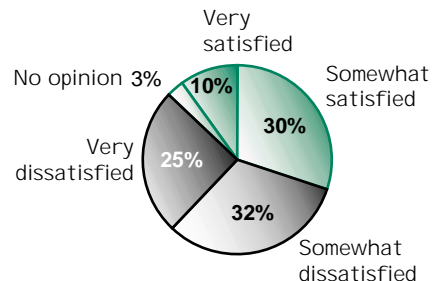
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

Question: How would you rate the job the United States' public school system is doing in educating our young people—excellent, good, only fair, or poor?



Source: Survey by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, January 5-7, 2001.

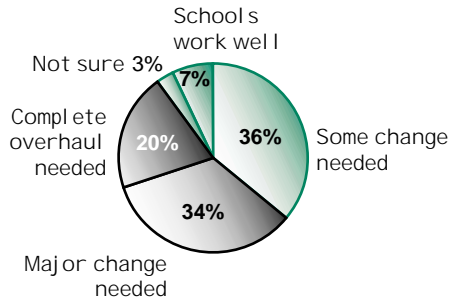
Question: [Are you] very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied [with]... the quality of public education in the nation?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, January 10-14, 2001.

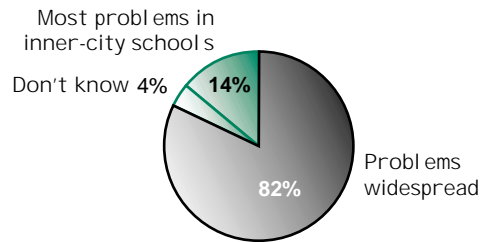
Big Change Needed Everywhere

Question: Please tell me whether you think our public schools work pretty well as they are now, some changes are needed but basically they should be kept the same, major changes are needed, or a complete overhaul is needed.



Source: Survey by NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, June 23-25, 2001.

Question: Do you think most of the problems facing the nation's public schools are in the inner-city schools, or are the problems widespread, affecting schools across the nation?

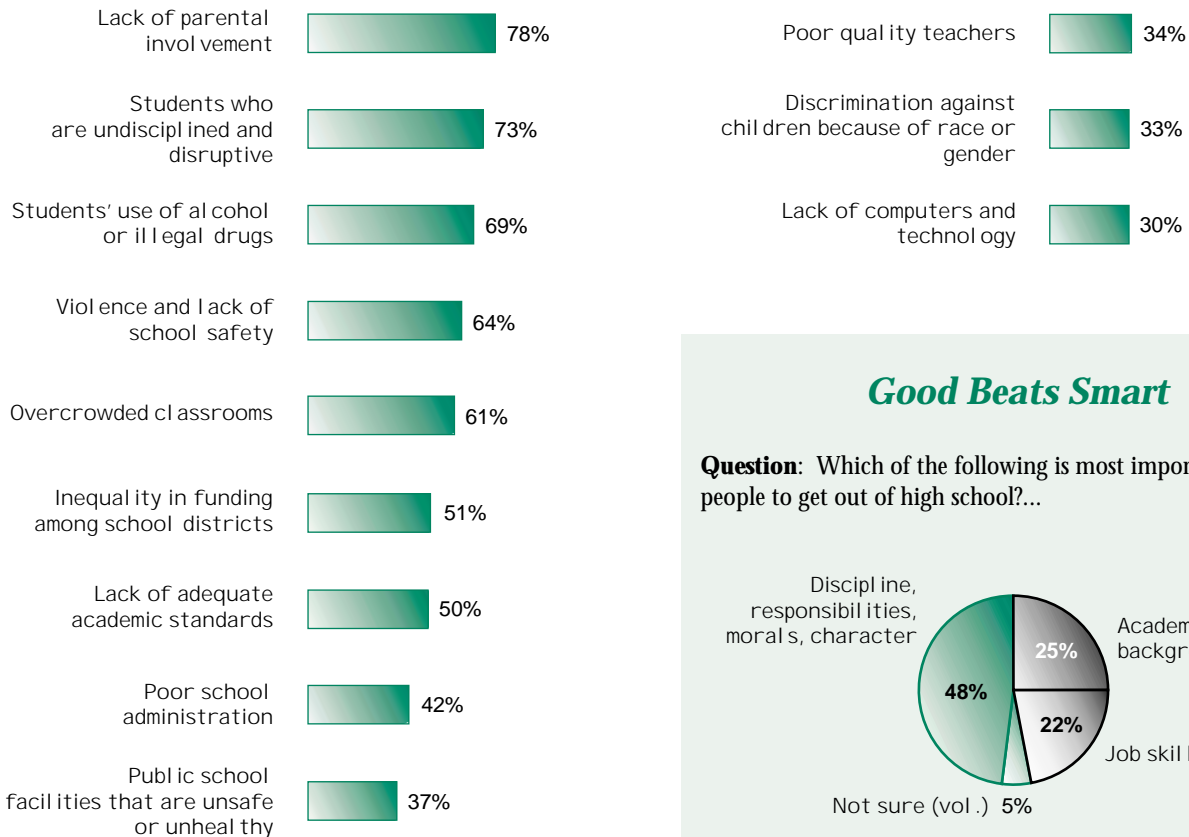


Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.

What's the Problem?

Question: ...I am going to read you a list of problems schools might face. For each one, please tell me how big a problem you think it is—a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem for the public schools in the nation as a whole. How about...?

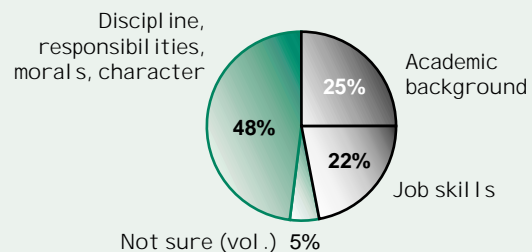
Percent responding major problem



Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, June 25-July 19, 1999.

Good Beats Smart

Question: Which of the following is most important for young people to get out of high school?...

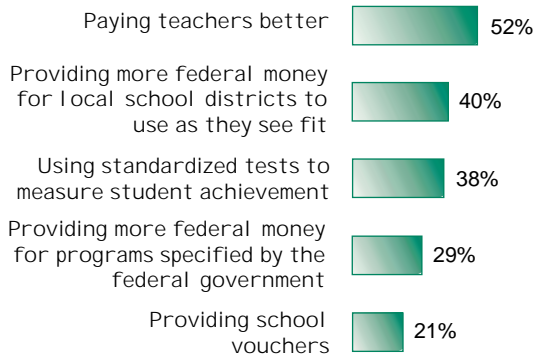


Source: Survey by Yankelovich/*Time*/CNN, June 9-10, 1999.

Courses to Take

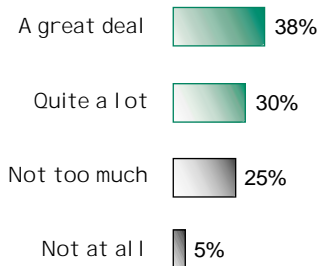
Question: Please tell me how much each of the following proposals would improve public schools—a great deal, fair amount, not much, or not at all. How about...?

Percent responding a great deal



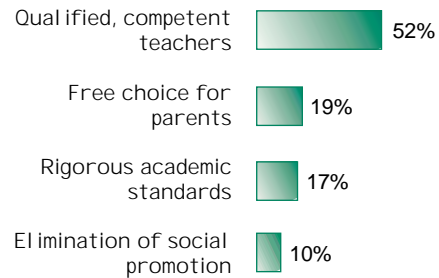
Source: Survey by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, January 5-7, 2001.

Question: In your opinion, how much does the amount of money spent on a public school student's education affect the quality of his or her education—a great deal, quite a lot, not too much, or not at all?



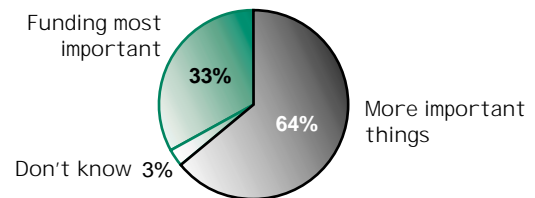
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

Question: Which ...do you think offers the most promise for improving the public schools in your community? Rigorous academic standards, a qualified, competent teacher in every classroom, the elimination of social promotion, that is, moving students from grade to grade to keep them in their own age group, free choice for parents among a number of private, church-related and public schools.



Source: Survey by Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, June 5-29, 2000.

Question: Do you think increasing funding for public schools is the most important thing that the federal government could do to improve education, or do you think that there are more important things?

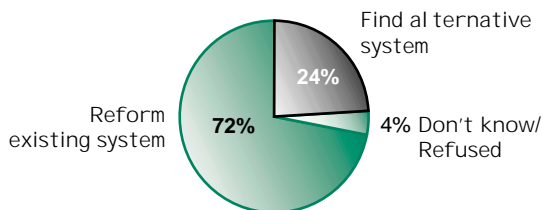


Note: Asked of registered voters

Source: Survey by *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, May 11-22, 2000

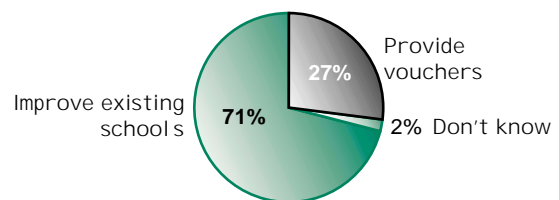
Considering Alternatives

Question: In order to improve public education in America, some people think the focus should be on reforming the existing public school system. Others believe the focus should be on finding an alternative to the existing public school system. Which approach do you think is preferable?...



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

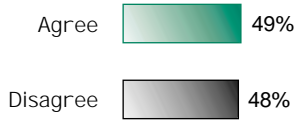
Question: Which of these two plans would you prefer: improving and strengthening the existing public schools, or providing vouchers for parents to use in selecting and paying for private and/or church-related schools?



Note: Asked of those who preferred reforming the existing public school system.
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

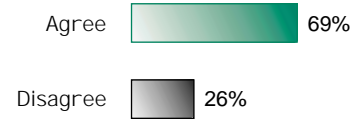
Public Funding, Private Schools

Question: Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statement. Parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools.



Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, March 8-12, 2001.

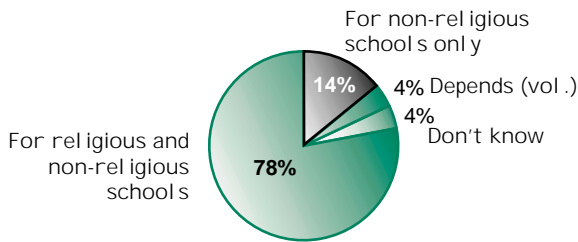
Question: What if that meant the public schools in your community would receive less money, then would you agree or disagree that parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools?



Note: Asked of those who say parents should get tax-funded vouchers. Agree responses represent 34% of the total sample.

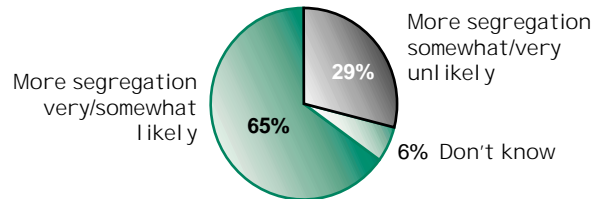
Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, March 8-12, 2001.

Question: [Suppose that your state government decided to start a school voucher program and you could have a say over what it looked like.] If you had to choose, would you want to allow parents to use the vouchers only for non-religious schools [or] to allow parents to use the vouchers to send their kids to religious schools as well?



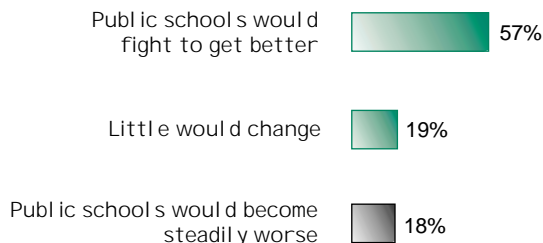
Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.

Question: There will be more segregation [with a voucher program] because many parents will send their kids to schools where there are students from similar backgrounds. Do you think this is likely or unlikely to happen?



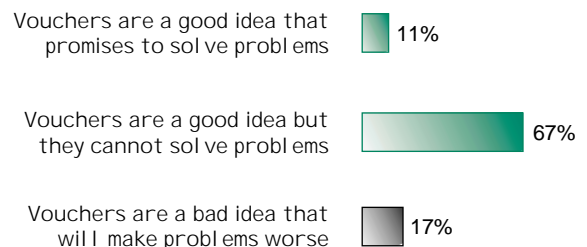
Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.

Question: Now what do you think would happen to the public schools after the voucher program was in place for a few years? Do you think it's more likely that the public schools would fight to get better and eventually improve in order to hold onto their students; become steadily worse as they lose more and more students and money; or do you think very little would change?



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.

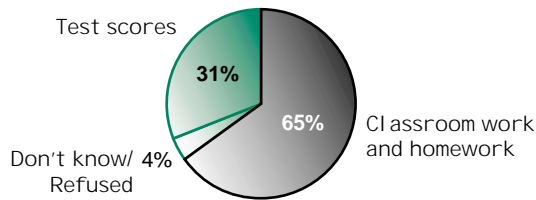
Question: Which of the following comes closest to your own view? Vouchers are a good idea that promises to solve the nation's education problems. Vouchers are a good idea, but they cannot solve the nation's education problems. Vouchers are a bad idea that will make the nation's education problems worse.



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.

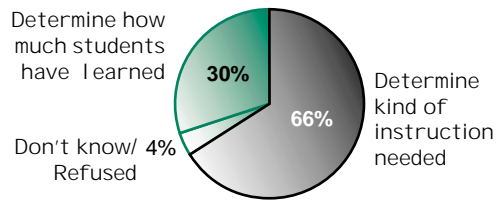
To the Test

Question: In your opinion, which is the best way to measure student achievement—by means of test scores, or by classroom work and homework?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

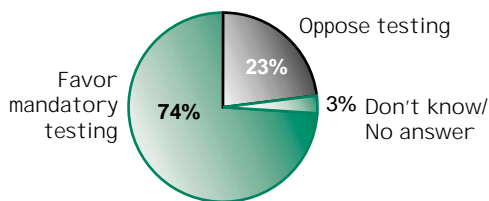
Question: In your opinion, should the primary use of tests be to determine how much students have learned, or to determine the kind of instruction they need in the future?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

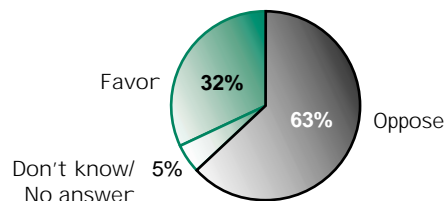
Power of the Purse

Question: Do you favor or oppose mandatory testing of students in public schools each year as a way to determine how well the school is doing educating students?



Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, June 14-18, 2001.

Question: What about using the results of these (mandatory-once-a-year) kinds of test to determine whether or not a school can receive federal funds, giving federal money to schools where students score well on tests and withholding federal money from schools where students score poorly on tests? Would you favor or oppose that?



Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, June 14-18, 2001.

Question: If the public school in your community does not show progress toward meeting state approved standards for student learning, would you favor or oppose each of the following measures? How about...?

Withholding state or federal education funds from the school



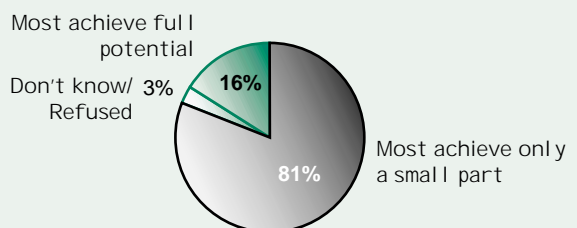
Awarding more state and federal education funds to the school



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

Potential

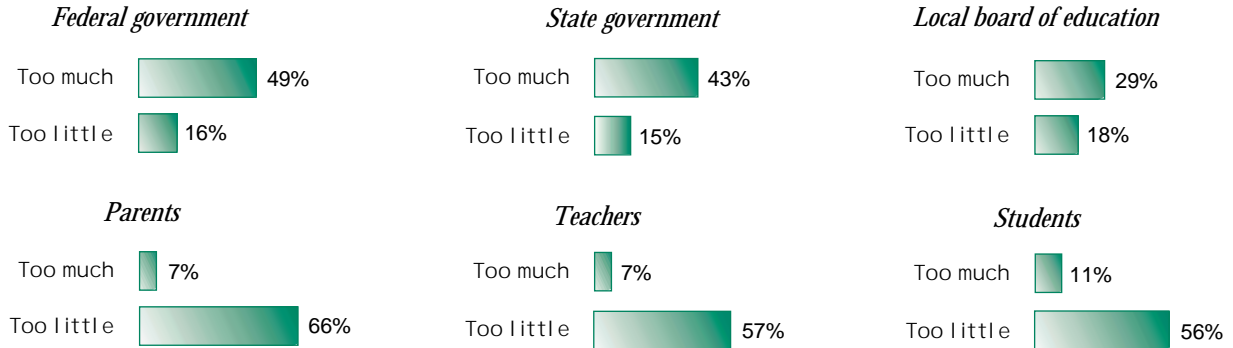
Question: Which more accurately reflects your own views of students' ability to achieve their academic potential in school? Do you think most students achieve their full academic potential in school, or do you think most students achieve only a small part of their academic potential in school?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 23-June 7, 2001.

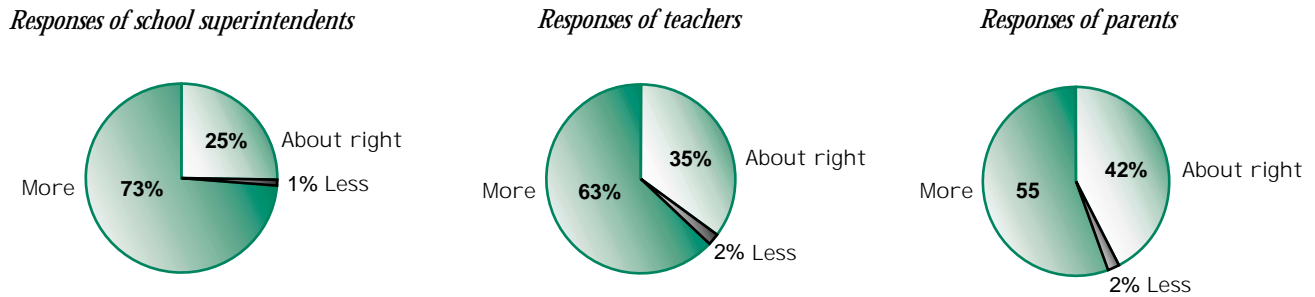
Parts to Play

Question: ...As I name a specific group or individual, please tell me whether you think that group or individual has too much, too little, or just the right amount of say in the decisions that affect the local public schools [in your community]...



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, June 5-29, 2000.

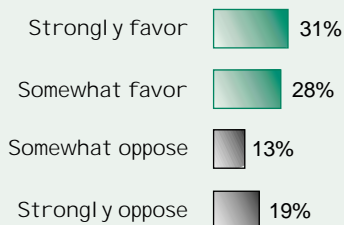
Question: Would you like to see more community involvement in the schools, less of it, or are things about right?



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, superintendents surveyed July 2000; teachers October 24-November 12, 2000; and parents October 6-15, 2000.

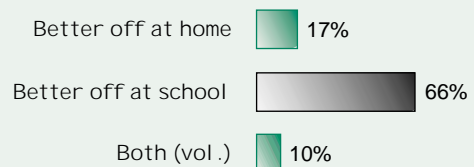
Schools Dismissed

Question: Home-schooling is when a parent takes a child out of school and teaches them at home. The parent is expected to devote a lot of time teaching the child, and state officials require the parent to show that the child is learning. Do you favor or oppose this idea?



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.

Question: And which of these statements comes closer to your own view? Kids are better off learning at home because their parents can protect their values and keep them away from bad influences at school. Kids are better off learning at school because that's where they can learn social skills and how to get along with different kinds of people.



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, June 11-24, 1999.