

# Talk

## about Today's Public Schools

**Editor's Note:**

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### *Annual Poll Shows Public Schools Not Losing Support*

Sixty-nine percent of American parents assign a grade of "A" or "B" to the school their oldest child attends, according to the latest Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll.

Confirmation for the American public's belief in our public schools again comes from the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll's annual survey on education. This, the 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, published by Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., in August 2005 reflected strong public opinion in support of public education and indicated a strident public call for increased funding and attention for our schools.

According to the poll's authors, an "important contribution of the poll results is that they should help to destroy one of the myths surrounding the public schools: that the public schools are losing public support. The trend lines in this poll suggest the exact opposite. The grades the public assigns the schools remain as high as ever and are truly impressive when public school parents give their evaluation; the public continues to express a strong preference for change through the existing public schools; support for choice shows no sign of increasing and could be said to be lagging; and it is the public schools to which the public turns for closing the achievement gap."

Some of the poll's findings include the following:

- Lack of financial support is solidly entrenched in the public mind as the major problem facing the nation's public schools. Responding to an open-ended question, 20 percent of those surveyed mention lack of financial support. This problem has been among the top problems mentioned for 15 straight years and has been the top problem for six years running. This year, it attracts almost twice the number of mentions of any other problem.
- The high level of support Americans give to schools in their community is unchanged, and support for the public schools grows in direct proportion to the closeness of respondents to those schools. In this poll, 24 percent assign an "A" or a "B" to the nation's schools; 48 percent award an "A" or a "B" to schools in the community. This figure rises to 57 percent when public school

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parents grade the schools in the community and to 69 percent when parents grade the school their oldest child attends.

- The public's strong preference is for improvement that comes by reforming the current public schools rather than by finding an alternative system. Asked to choose between the two options, the public has, since this question was first asked, consistently chosen reform through the existing system.
- The public opposes permitting parents and students to choose to attend private schools at public expense. Fifty-seven percent of respondents oppose making this choice available as compared to 38 percent who favor it. The percentage in favor peaked at 46 percent in 2002 and has declined by 8 percent since that time.
- A plurality of respondents support the idea of charter schools. However, strong majorities say that such schools should be accountable to the state in the same way as regular public schools and should not be created if doing so means less funding for regular public schools. While 49 percent favor charter schools, 80 percent say they should be accountable to the state just as regular public schools are accountable. In addition, 65 percent of respondents oppose having charter schools in their community if it means reducing regular public school funding.
- The public believes that the amount of achievement testing in schools is just about right, and a majority of respondents support additional testing in three grades at the high school level. The 40 percent saying there is about the right amount of testing and the 17 percent saying there is not enough constitute a majority in support of testing at least at current levels, while 67 percent support testing in high school at grades 9, 10, and 11.
- The public is divided regarding the use of student scores on standardized tests for the purpose of evaluating teachers and principals. Fifty-two percent believe student performance on standardized tests should be one measurement used in determining a teacher's ability; 44 percent say it should not. As for evaluating principals, 50 percent endorse taking student test scores into consideration, while 46 percent disapprove. It is important to note that the question asks if standardized test results should be "one measure."
- The public believes that the current emphasis on standardized tests will lead teachers to teach to the test and does not regard this as a positive outcome. Fifty-eight percent say that teaching to the test will be encouraged, and 54 percent say that this is a bad thing.
- The public approaches consensus on the importance of closing the achievement gap, attributes the gap to factors other than schooling, believes parents and students have more to do with whether students learn than teachers, but still believes that it is the responsibility of the schools to close the gap:

\*Ninety percent say it is either very important or somewhat important to close the gap.

\*Seventy-five percent relate the gap to factors other than the quality of schooling received.

\*Sixty-three percent say that parents or students themselves determine student performance.

\*Nevertheless, 58 percent say that it is the responsibility of the public schools to close the gap.★

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