

Balancing the Educational Agenda

*Parents are Pleased with Schools' Higher Standards—
But Now They're Focused on Funding, Class Size, and Behavior*

By Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott

Necessary, but not sufficient. That might be one way to sum up attitudes about standards and testing five years into No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and over a dozen years into the so-called standards movement in American education. Based on results from Public Agenda's 2006 "Reality Check" opinion surveys, there is strong belief in the intrinsic value of standards and testing and broad support for key elements such as high school exit exams. But as of now, every group surveyed by Public Agenda—parents, students, teachers, principals, and superintendents—considers other educational issues more urgent. Among parents, concern about low academic standards in local schools has dropped over the last decade.

Public Agenda has been monitoring Americans' views on academic standards, standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, and other key elements of the standards movement for more than a decade. Our Reality Check surveys and other research have shown repeatedly that support for raising standards is broad and heartfelt—and, based on the 2006 data, that core of support remains intact. In multiple findings, parents, teachers, and students say standards and testing are necessary.¹ Parents and teachers give local districts high marks for pursuing stan-

dards-based reform carefully and reasonably.

But Reality Check 2006 also shows quite convincingly that relatively few parents, teachers, principals, or superintendents see more of the same as the best course for the future. In this year's survey, respondents were asked to choose among four hypothetical candidates for the local school board—one running on a platform of standards and testing, a second backing vouchers, a third backing charter schools, and a fourth calling for more money for schools and smaller classes. Among parents, the standards and testing candidate ranks a distant second to the candidate calling for smaller classes and more money for schools. Fewer than one-in-four parents (22%) chose the standards candidate. Among the educators, support for a school board candidate focusing primarily on more standards and testing is in the single digits.

This tepid support for more standards and testing is not a rejection of the idea itself, nor is it the long-anticipated and much-feared "backlash to testing." Neither parents nor students report significant concern about the number or types of tests youngsters currently take. The majority of teachers are troubled and frustrated by testing, but even here, the concern is the amount of testing and how the tests are used—not whether testing can be useful in and of itself. More than 8-in-10 teachers back a high school exit exam covering either basics (62%) or more advanced learning (24%).

Nor is the negative response grounded in broad hostility to No Child Left Behind, although just 15 percent of teachers say the law is improving local education. Relatively few principals (22%) and superintendents (9%) say meeting the law's requirements is their most pressing problem. Among parents, knowledge about and attention to the law is still sparse. Over half of parents admit that they don't know enough about the law to say whether it is hurting or helping. Among those who are familiar with it, the reviews are split.

Instead, the lack of enthusiasm for standards and testing as a

Jean Johnson is executive vice president and director of programs with Public Agenda, where Ana Maria Arumi is director of research and Amber Ott is research associate. This article is excerpted with permission from Reality Check 2006: Is Support for Standards and Testing Fading? The sidebar on page 24 is excerpted with permission from Reality Check 2006: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools. Both reports are available on Public Agenda's Web site at www.publicagenda.org. Funding for these surveys was provided by the GE Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and the Wallace Foundation. [CLICK LINK TO READ THE FULL TEXT OF REPORT AT WWW.PUBLICAGENDA.ORG/SPECIALS/REALITYCHECK06/REALITYCHECK06_MAIN.HTM](http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/realitycheck06/realitycheck06_main.htm).

As promotion standards toughened, as graduation standards were raised, as parents began to see their own children doing harder work than they did when they were in school, the problem of “low standards” began to lose its edge.

top priority for the future comes from two sources. One is the judgment among most parents, students, teachers, and school administrators that standards and testing are not the be-all and end-all of school reform. They see other issues as equally pressing. Not surprisingly perhaps, educators say funding is a higher priority, but they are not alone. About 4-in-10 (39%) parents say that it’s a “very serious” problem in their community that “schools are not getting enough money to do a good job.” Among black (49%) and Hispanic parents (52%), the numbers are substantially higher.

Similarly, all groups cite problems related to student behavior, motivation, and cooperation as more urgent than low standards. This focus on discipline and school climate is not new. Public Agenda’s “First Things First” report in 1994 outlined the broad belief that unless schools are safe, calm, respectful and purposeful, teaching and learning are unlikely to thrive. Most teachers give schools good marks on discipline issues, but 76 percent say they could teach more effectively if they didn’t have to spend so much time dealing with disruptive students; 85 percent say the school experience of most students suffers at the expense of a few chronic troublemakers.² Among parents, 73 percent say that the most pressing problems in local high schools are social problems and kids who misbehave. Just 15 percent say low academic standards and outdated curricula are more urgent. Since the standards movement, with its strong emphasis on academics and testing, touches on these concerns only peripherally, it is not surprising that people are beginning to yearn for something that addresses them more directly. But it’s critical to note that concerns about low standards, violence, poor discipline, and ineffective principles are

substantially greater among black and Hispanic parents and students, and teachers in largely minority schools, than among white parents and students, and teachers who teach at predominantly white schools.³

The second source of the lack of enthusiasm for standards and testing as a top priority, especially among parents, is a different sense of what “the standard” needs to be. This gap between parents’ views on optimal standards and those of key business, government, and educational leaders emerged strongly in an earlier Reality Check 2006 report, “Are Parents and Students Ready for More Math and Science?” Many in leadership believe that standards in American high schools need to be raised dramatically to ensure the country’s economic prosperity in a more competitive world.⁴ Meanwhile, most parents, especially white parents, are quite satisfied with the academic portion of their children’s education. Majorities of all parents (65%) believe the work their child does in school is harder than what they themselves studied when they were younger.

It is probably worth remembering that much of the public’s initial support for raising standards grew out of anxiety over basics. Parents and the public feared that too many youngsters were floating through the system without mastering even fundamental reading and math skills. Consequently, the strong calls for higher standards, more testing, more solid graduation, and promotion requirements touched a responsive chord with many segments of the community. But as promotion standards toughened, as graduation standards were raised, as parents began to see their own children doing harder work than they did when they were in school, the problem of “low standards” began to lose its edge.

For leaders who are convinced that American schools and students need to strive for much higher levels of learning, these findings suggest a two-pronged agenda. One essential goal for leaders is to get their own message out more effectively. If leaders believe that it is imperative to arm the next generation with top-notch skills in math and science, in foreign languages, and in other areas, they need to move beyond panel discussions at business conferences and “get out there.”

But leadership may also need to broaden its agenda. Based on the results here, the strong focus on standards and testing is beginning to strike key segments of the public as a “Johnny-One-Note” approach. Among different groups there is unease about school funding, class size, school climate, student cooperation and motivation, family support, and social problems that seep into the schools. Teachers seem especially troubled about the current course, and majorities say they feel left out of discussions on how to improve schools and learning.⁵ Some of the teachers’ doubts and frustrations may be affecting progress. After all, few generals would choose to go into the field with a demoralized, unconvinced fighting force.

The Reality Check 2006 results pose a fundamental strategic question for leaders who believe higher standards are essential. Just how long will communities continue to support the movement without hearing some serious discussion of their other pressing issues as well?

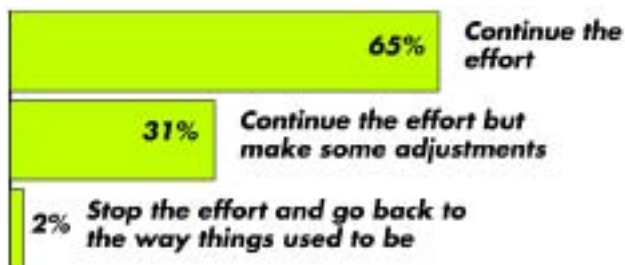
Finding One: Parents and Students Support Standards and Testing...

The vast majority of parents and students continue to voice strong support for raising academic standards. Eight-in-ten students say that requiring students to meet higher standards for graduation and promotion is a good idea. Most parents (86%) say their own district has been “careful and reasonable” in its efforts to raise standards and virtually none (2%) believe schools would be better if districts returned to the policies of the past.

Most parents support continuing to raise standards.

When it comes to raising academic standards, do you think your school district should:

Based on the 63% of parents who say that their public schools are making an effort to raise standards.



Most students say requiring them to meet higher standards for promotion and graduation is a good idea.

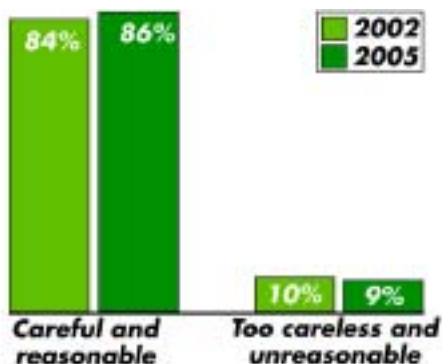
Percentage of students who say that requiring students to meet higher standards in order to be promoted or to graduate is a good idea:⁶



Large majorities of parents say local schools have been careful and reasonable in raising academic standards.

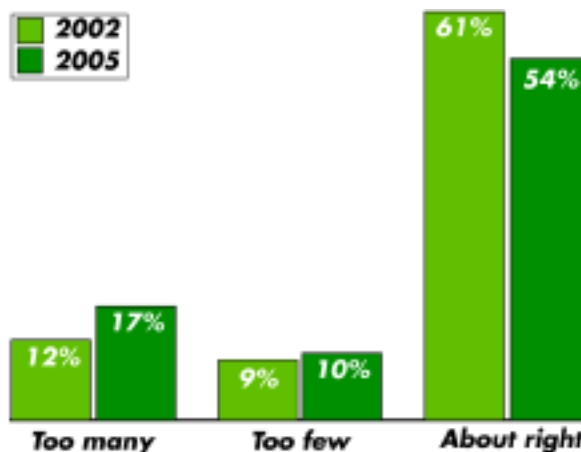
Overall, would you say that the schools are careful and reasonable in putting in place the higher academic standards, or are they being too careless and unreasonable?⁷

Based on the 63% of parents who say that their public schools are making an effort to raise standards.



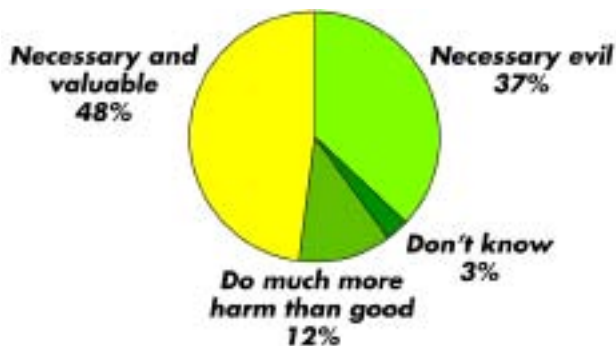
Relatively few parents complain that their child has to take too many tests or that tests are harmful.

Would you say that your child is required to take too many standardized tests, too few, that things are about right, or don't you know?⁸



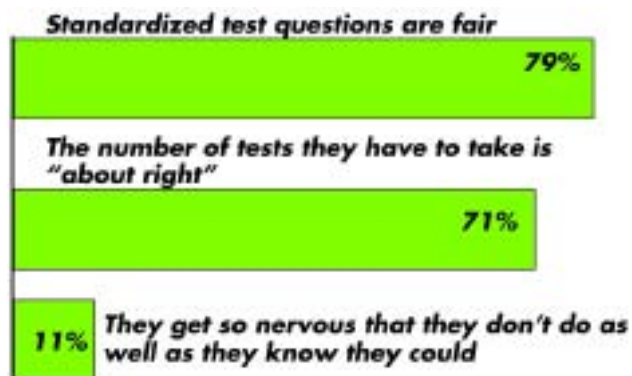
Most parents think tests are necessary.

Please tell me which comes closest to your view? Standardized tests: 1) are necessary and valuable—they are a reliable yardstick for measuring student performance; 2) are a necessary evil—ultimately, the schools need some kind of standardized assessment; or 3) do much more harm than good—the schools would be better off if they were completely abandoned.



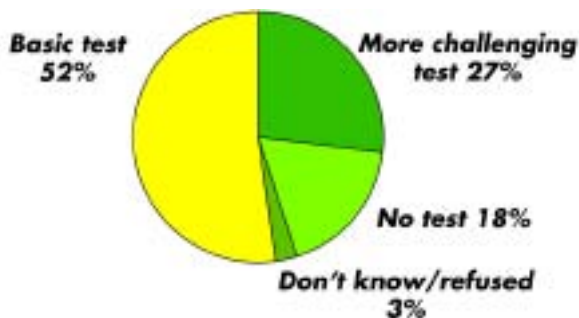
Relatively few students complain about too much testing or say they get overly nervous about them.

Percentage of students who say:



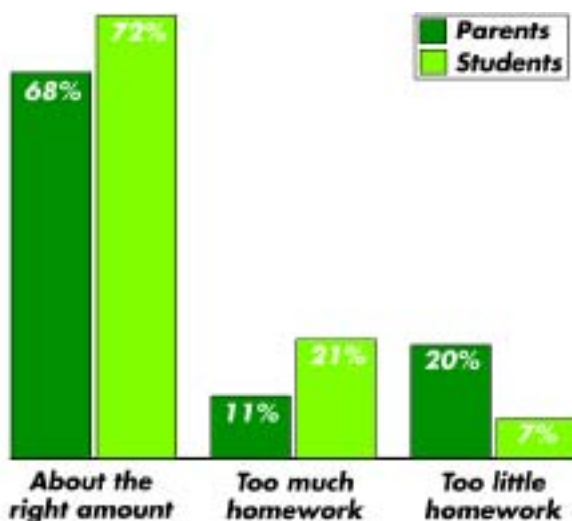
Most students support a high school exit exam.

Before students are awarded a high school diploma, would you want your school district to require students to: 1) pass a basic skills test in reading, writing, and math; 2) pass a more challenging test showing they have learned at higher levels; or 3) kids should not be required to pass a skills test?



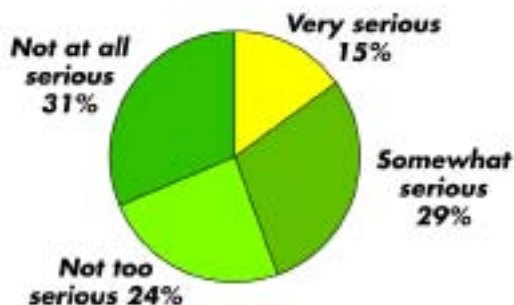
Relatively few parents and students voice serious complaints about too much homework.

Overall, do you feel that your child is/you are getting too much homework, too little, or about the right amount?



Relatively few students say too much academic pressure is a “very serious” problem.

Percentage who say it’s a serious problem that there is too much pressure to make good grades in classes and on tests:



Finding Two:

... But Other Issues Are Now Top Priorities for Parents, Students, and Teachers

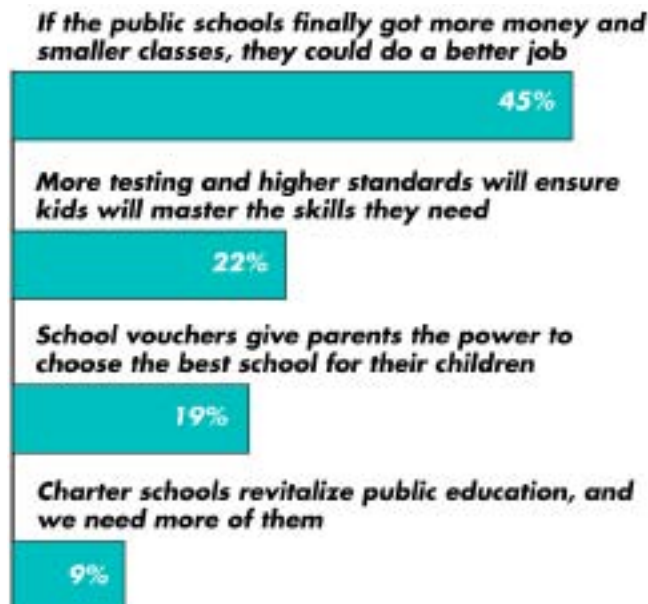
Despite broad support for standards as a crucial element of public education, Reality Check shows that most parents see other issues as more urgent. The survey presented respondents with four hypothetical candidates for a local school board election. Among parents, a candidate calling for more testing and higher standards comes in a distant second to a supporter of smaller classes and more funding. Parental anxiety about low academic standards has fallen over the last decade. Concern about a lack of emphasis on basic skills has fallen, as well.

When asked about a range of issues facing local schools, relatively few parents or students say low academic standards are a “very serious” problem in their area. Parents are twice as likely to choose lack of money (39%) and lack of respect for teachers and the use of profanity (34%) as “very serious” problems over low standards (15%). Students, too, say that schools not getting enough money and lack of respect are the more serious issues based on what they see. Adding to the sense that low standards are not a top priority item now is the judgment of most parents that schools are better and the material studied is harder than when they themselves went to school.

Like parents and students, most teachers see other issues as more important than low standards in local schools. Over half of teachers (54%) say that schools “not getting enough money to do a good job” is a “very serious” problem in their community. Many also see lack of respect and crowded classrooms as “very serious” issues. Just 10 percent of teachers say low academic standards are a “very serious” problem where they teach.

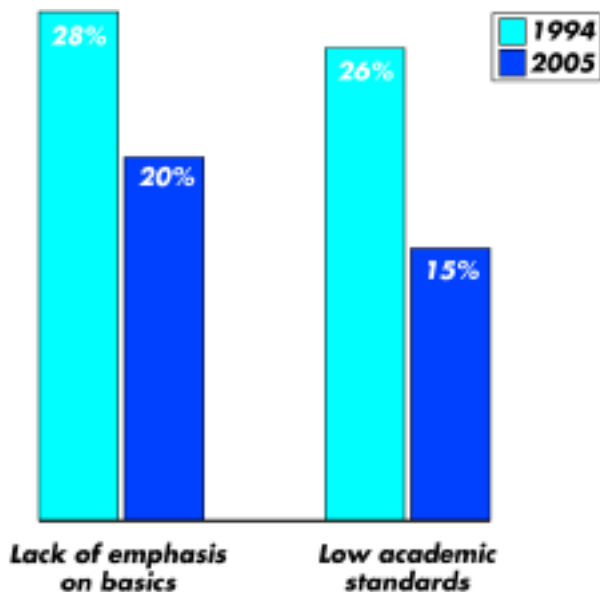
Fewer than one-in-four parents would support a school board candidate running mainly on a testing and standards platform.

Suppose you were voting in a local school board election. Which of the following candidates would you be most likely to support? A candidate who believes:



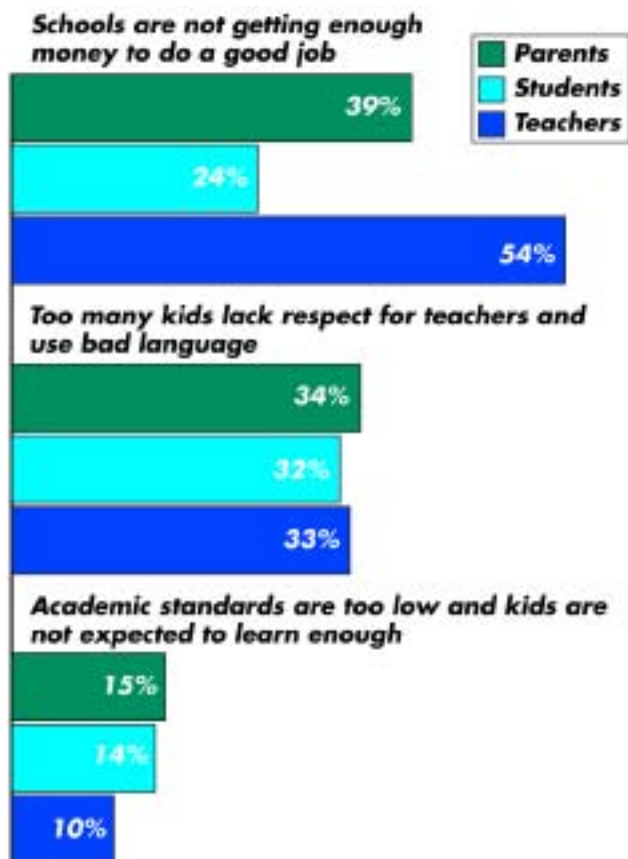
Parents' concern about low academic standards and teaching of basics has fallen since 1994.

Percentage of parents who say the following are "very serious" problems in their child's school:



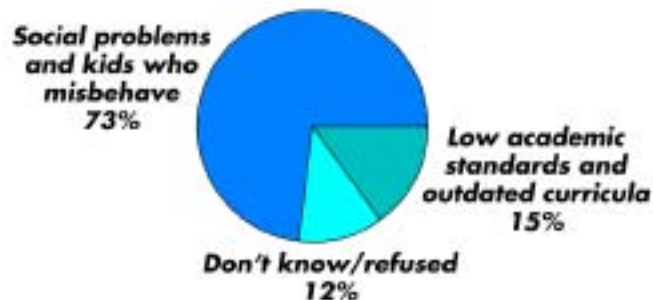
Parents, students, and teachers see lack of money and disrespect for teachers as more serious problems than low standards.

Percentage of parents, students, and teachers who say it's a "very serious" problem that:



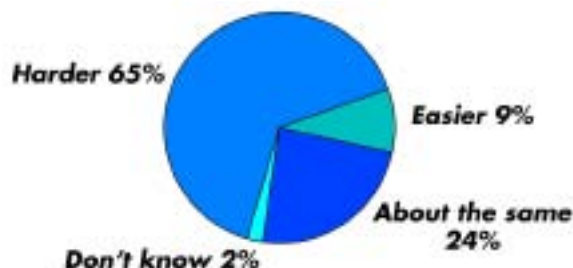
Large majorities of parents say social problems and misbehaving students are more pressing problems for high schools than low standards.

Do you think that the most pressing problems facing the high schools in your local community come from:



Most parents say schools are better and harder than when they went to school.

In general, do you think the material they [your children] are learning [at school] is harder, easier, or about the same as when you were in school?



Methodology

The findings presented in this article and in the sidebar (page 24) are based on two focus groups each with parents and teachers and telephone interviews with a national random sample of:

- 1,379 parents of children now in public school;
- 1,342 public school students in grades 6 through 12;
- 721 public school teachers;
- 254 school district superintendents and 252 school principals.

Interviews with parents were conducted between October 30 and December 18, 2005, interviews with students were conducted between October 30 and December 29, 2005, and interviews with teachers, principals and superintendents were conducted between November 19, 2005 and March 7, 2006. The margin of error for the sample of parents is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points; the margin of error for the sample of students is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points; the margin of error for the sample of teachers is plus or minus 4 percentage points; and the margin of error for principals and superintendents is plus or minus 6 percentage points. It is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups. Selected survey results can be found at publicagenda.org.

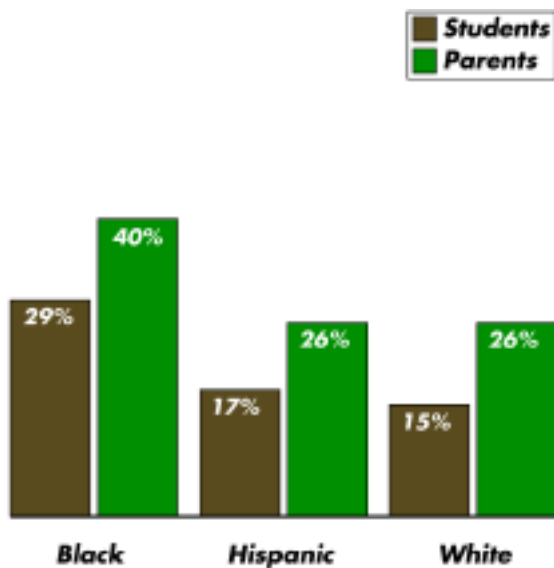
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Minority Students and Parents See More

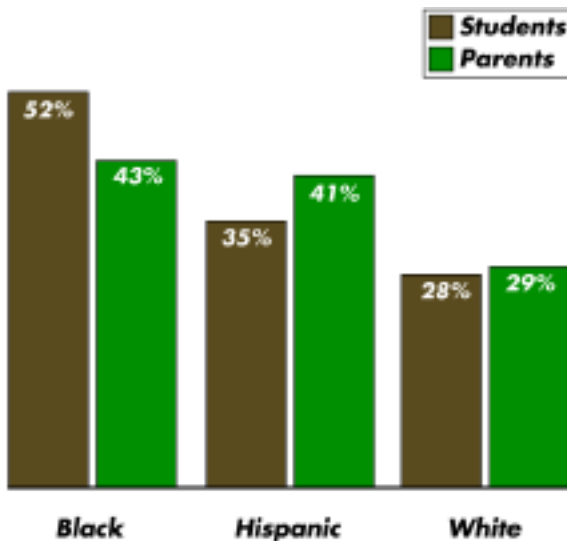
Reality Check's surveys of students show repeated and troubling differences between the way minority youngsters and their parents describe their experiences in schools compared to what white students and parents report. Asked to rate their schools on a range of key academic and social dimensions, black and Hispanic students are more likely to report "very serious" problems in nearly every category.

Minority students and parents are more likely to report widespread academic shortfalls, insufficient funding, and serious social and behavioral problems.

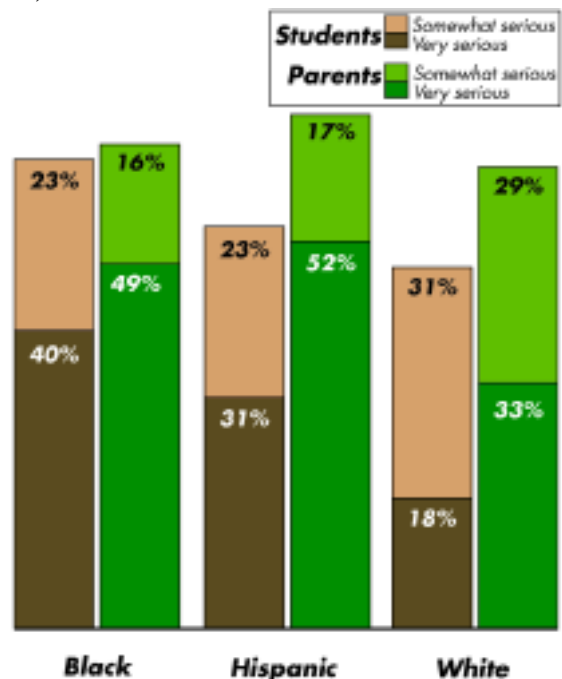
Percentage of students and parents who say that a high school diploma is no guarantee that a student has learned the basics of reading, writing, and math:



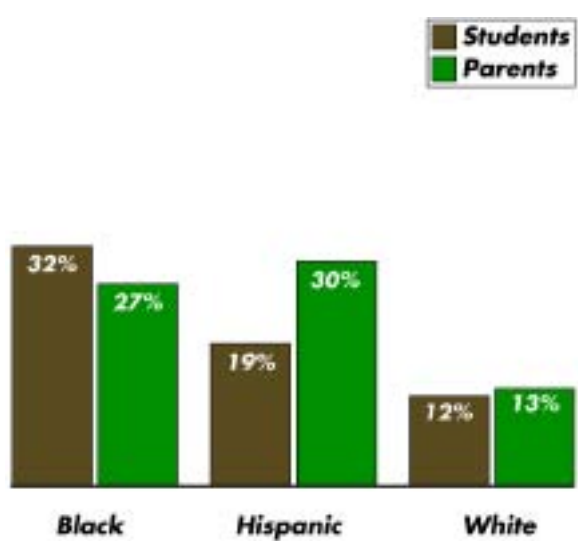
Percentage of students and parents who say it is a very serious problem that too many kids lack respect for teachers and use bad language:



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



Percentage of students and parents who say it is a very serious problem that there's too much fighting, too many weapons on school grounds:

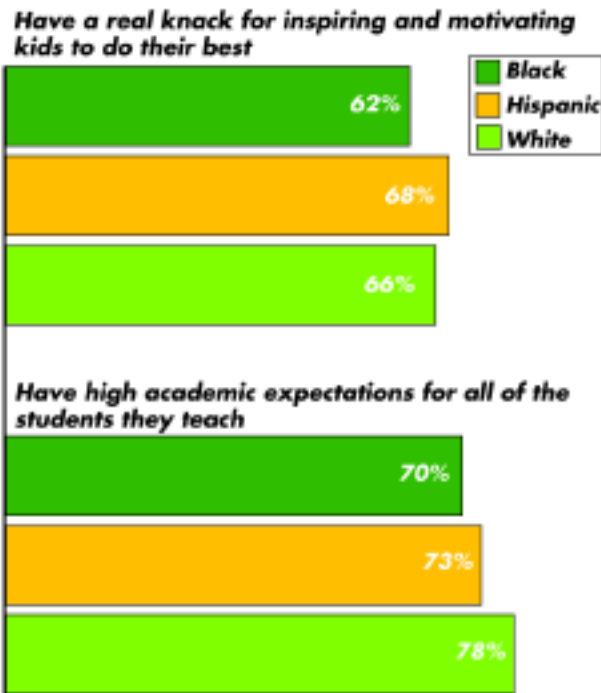


Problems

Good Marks for Teachers, but Too Little Extra Help

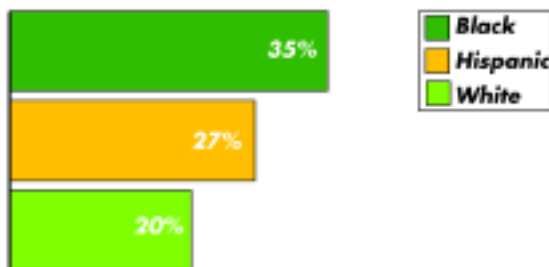
Overall, black, white, and Hispanic students give their teachers strong ratings. But minority students are significantly more likely to report that “only some” or “a few” of their teachers give students extra help when they are falling behind.

Percentage of students who say “all” or “almost all” of



their teachers:

Percentage of minority students who say only some or very few of their teachers give students extra help when they are falling behind:

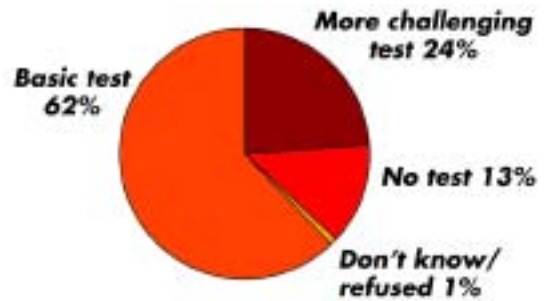


Finding Three: Teachers Believe in Standards and Standardized Testing, but ...

Among all the groups Public Agenda surveyed, teachers have historically had more concerns than parents, students, or administrators about the emphasis on testing that has been the focal point of the standards movement. Even so, most teachers do not question the intrinsic value of standards and testing.

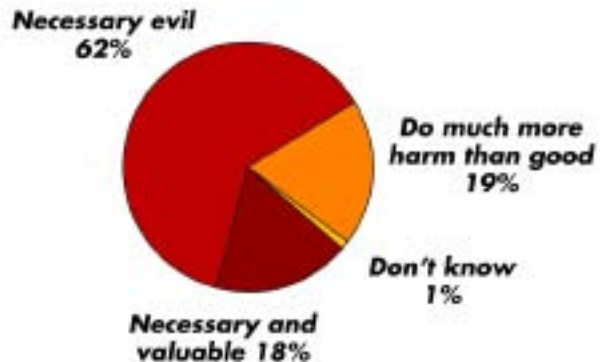
Most teachers back a high school exit exam.

Before students are awarded a high school diploma, would you want your school district to require students to: 1) pass a basic skills test in reading, writing, and math; 2) pass a more challenging test showing they have learned at higher levels; or 3) kids should not be required to pass a skills test?



Relatively few teachers reject standardized testing outright.

Please tell me which comes closest to your view? Standardized tests: 1) are necessary and valuable—they are a reliable yardstick for measuring student performance; 2) are a necessary evil—ultimately, the schools need some kind of standardized assessment; or 3) do much more harm than good—the schools would be better off if they were completely abandoned.



The majority of teachers are troubled and frustrated by testing, but even here, the concern is the amount of testing and how the tests are used—not whether testing can be useful in and of itself.

Few teachers want to return to policies of the past.

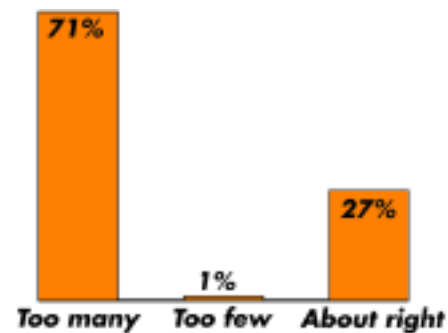
When it comes to this effort toward higher academic standards, do you think your school district should:

Based on the 93% of teachers who say that their public schools are making an effort to raise standards.



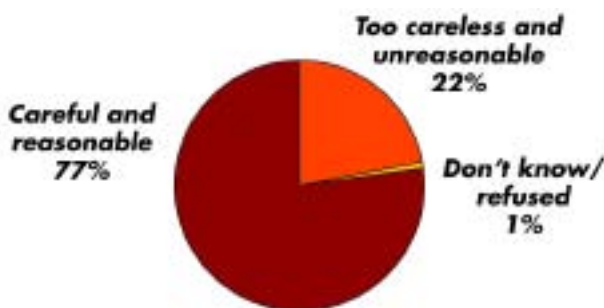
But large majorities of teachers say there is too much testing.

Would you say that students in your school are required to take too many standardized tests, too few, are things about right, or don't you know?



Most teachers say the district has been careful and reasonable in raising standards.

Overall, would you say that the schools are careful and reasonable in putting in place the higher academic standards, or are they being too careless and unreasonable?



Endnotes

- ¹ "Where We Are Now," Public Agenda, 2003. Online at publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=11.
- ² "Teaching Interrupted," Public Agenda, 2003.
- ³ "Reality Check 2006: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools," Public Agenda, 2006.
- ⁴ Examples include: Business Roundtable press release, "Business Roundtable Encourages Focus on Math and Science in Initiative for Teacher Excellence," June 6, 2005. Also, the official statement on "Math, Science, and Technology" on the Web site of the Center for Corporate Citizenship of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, available on the Web site of the Business Education Network, www.businesseducationnetwork.com/bcl/ben/topics/math_science_tech.
- ⁵ Seventy-six percent of teachers say they are often made the scapegoats for all the problems facing education ("Stand By Me," Public Agenda, 2003). A large majority (70%) also say they feel "left out of the loop" when it comes to district decision-making ("Just Waiting to be Asked," Public Agenda, 2001).
- ⁶ "Reality Check 2002," Public Agenda, 2002. Question wording in 2002 was: "The schools should use standardized test scores along with teacher evaluations to decide if students should be promoted or graduate."
- ⁷ "Reality Check 2002," Public Agenda, 2002.
- ⁸ "Reality Check 2002," Public Agenda, 2002.
- ⁹ "First Things First," Public Agenda, 1994.