

The American Public—More Informed About NCLB and More Skeptical of Its Strategies.

A nationwide survey released today reports that an increasing number of Americans say they know a fair amount about the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. But the more they know about it, the less they like it. According to the 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, the public likes NCLB's goals but rejects the strategies used to implement those goals. The concern rises to the level where, if a large number of schools fail to make the mandated adequate yearly progress, the public is at least as likely to blame the law as it is to blame the school. "These results tell us that the public hasn't turned its back on NCLB but is likely to do so if the law's strategies are not tailored to commonsense approaches," reports Lowell Rose, the former executive director of PDK International and co-author of the poll. "Policy makers would be well advised to listen."

When asked about NCLB's strategies, 68% of the public do not think that a single test provides a fair picture of how well a school is doing, and 80% do not think testing students on only English and math provides a fair picture of whether a school needs improvement. And when it comes to the option of transferring a child from a school identified as "in need of improvement," 79% say that they would rather see additional efforts made in their child's present school.

The American public is of a single mind about the importance of closing the "achievement gap" between white and Asian students and black and Latino students. While it blames the gap on factors other than schooling, the public holds the public schools responsible for closing it. This seemingly contradictory conclusion is consistent with the high marks the public assigns its local schools and its reliance on the public schools to bring about change. When asked about ways to improve the public schools, the public consistently prefers change that comes through the existing school system as compared to seeking an alternative system. The public continues to oppose attendance at private schools at public expense and, while about half support the concept of charter schools, 65% stipulate that they not be created at the expense of the regular public schools, and 80% think that they should be held accountable in the same way as other schools. The poll also finds that the public supports the use of growth assessments, believing that schools should be judged on how much students improve in a given year, not on the percentage of students passing the state mandated test. Another message for policy makers to heed is that the public makes a distinction between the "nation's schools" and "schools in the community," giving low grades to the former and higher grades to the latter. The strongest support comes

from the 69% of parents who give an A or a B to the schools their own children attend.

A full report appears in the September 2005 issue of the Phi Delta Kappan and is also available at: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kpollpdf.htm>
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