

A National Priority:
**Americans
Speak on
Teacher Quality**

Public opinion research conducted by
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A National Priority: Overview

Summary of key findings

A new national survey of American adults, with additional surveys among primary and secondary school teachers, administrators, and state- and local-level education policymakers, finds education issues are still high on the public's agenda. A majority of Americans now say we need major changes or a complete overhaul of our education system in the K through 12 grades, an assertion that has increased in comparison to a poll taken at about the same time last year. Assessments of school quality remain largely unchanged from last year, with most of the public, educators, and education policymakers giving the nation's schools an average grade of "C," even while teachers and parents give the schools where they work or send their own children grades that average to a "B."

The differences in opinion on the progress the nation is making in reforming education are between many educators and education policymakers who believe, on the one hand, that good progress is being made, and parents and the public, on the other hand, who feel that education reform is something not of the past but of the hoped-for future. The reason for this is simple: only 12% of the public and just 36% of teachers know that a national education reform bill was negotiated, passed through both houses of Congress, and signed into law by President Bush last year.

The appetite for education reform is so great that the public is willing to endorse strongly almost any proposal to improve the educational experience for the nation's students. Indeed, nearly every reform proposal placed on a long list drew support from at least two in three adults. These included proposals representing three distinct classes of initiatives: those directed toward improving teaching quality, those designed to increase accountability in the system, and those to increase spending on education. The public does not pick and choose among these three broad approaches; rather, they opt to try all at the same time.

The basic values of greater parental involvement, more discipline in the classroom, and higher standards of accountability for students, teachers and administrators, are still central to the discussion, but so are proposals to increase the resources the nation commits to education, to build new schools, improve materials, and increase individual attention for students having difficulties. Importantly, this support remains strong even when respondents are reminded that taxes will increase to pay for these initiatives.

Teachers, principals, and school administrators tell us that parents are a large part of the problem with education in America, and perhaps surprisingly, parents agree. Each group in the survey places the lack of parental involvement at the top of a list of factors contributing to problems in the nation's schools.

The other major issue emerging in the surveys is teaching quality. The American public equates quality education with quality teaching. They have a clear sense of what defines quality teaching and what they believe is lacking in many classrooms. Quality teaching is defined as a teacher in every classroom who has a gift for designing learning experiences that engage young people and successfully communicate information and skills. In-depth knowledge of the subject matter is less important than this ability to design lesson plans and teach well.

The general public and educational professionals agree that the teacher quality problem is less one of recruitment and more one of retention. All segments in the study agree that good young people are attracted to teaching and adequately trained. The problem emerges when many choose to leave the profession due to low salaries and poor working conditions. As educators and administrators explain in discussion sessions, a long-term career in teaching often means turning down more lucrative and comfortable offers in the private sector.

While Americans do not view education reform entirely as a question of more money, they do see a need to increase the number of qualified teachers in the classrooms to lower class sizes and allow teachers to give students the individual attention they need. Educators and education policymakers say this is one of the most important measures the nation can take toward improving our schools, and the public makes it clear that it is willing to pay the taxes needed to make these changes.

The Survey In Brief

- **Improving education is still high on the national agenda.** More than half of adults (52%) believe that the nation’s education system needs major changes or a complete overhaul. On the other side, 45% believe that education in America works pretty well now or only needs minor changes. Only two in ten (20%) adults express optimism that education will be better in five years, while one-third (32%) think that it will get worse.
- **“My school” still stands above schools nationwide.** Americans continue to speak more positively about the school in their neighborhood than about schools in neighborhoods across the country. While policymakers, teachers, and adults give the nation’s schools only a “C” average, they award their local school, the school in which they teach, and the school their children attend a “B” average.
- **Few Americans know about national reform efforts.** Only 12% of adults know that landmark education reform legislation was signed into law last year. Even among educators, only 36% are aware of the legislation.
- **The public strongly supports standards and accountability.** Although Americans support measures to raise teacher quality, they continue to insist on reforms that raise standards and accountability for both students and teachers: 73% of adults favor testing student achievement and holding teachers and school administrators responsible for student learning; 70% of adults strongly favor testing teachers on their knowledge of subject areas and teaching skills.
- **All groups recognize that the quality of teaching determines the quality of education.** Americans want more and better teachers in the nation’s schools. By 75% to 22%, adults support hiring more teachers to reduce class size—even if it means raising taxes. Nine in ten (91%) adults support offering more training programs so teachers can continue to learn and become better teachers. Americans believe that when defining good teachers, teaching skills are much more important than specific subject knowledge.
- **Salaries, working conditions, and ongoing professional development are keys to attracting and retaining teachers, even at the cost of higher public funding.** Americans understand that increasing teacher quality will cost substantial money—and they are willing to pay. The public overwhelmingly supports increasing taxpayer funds to raise teacher salaries (80%), to provide more computers, newer books and other materials (73%), and to build new schools and repair old ones (71%).
- **Americans want greater parental involvement and discipline.** Teachers say that parents are a key part of the education problem—and parents agree. Nearly six in ten (58%) teachers say that parents’ lack of involvement in their children’s classrooms is the most significant element of the education problem in America. Four in ten (39%) parents also list parents’ lack of involvement as the top problem. Additionally, 27% of adults and 18% of educators cite a lack of discipline in the classroom as education’s greatest problem.

A National Priority: Americans Speak on Teacher Quality

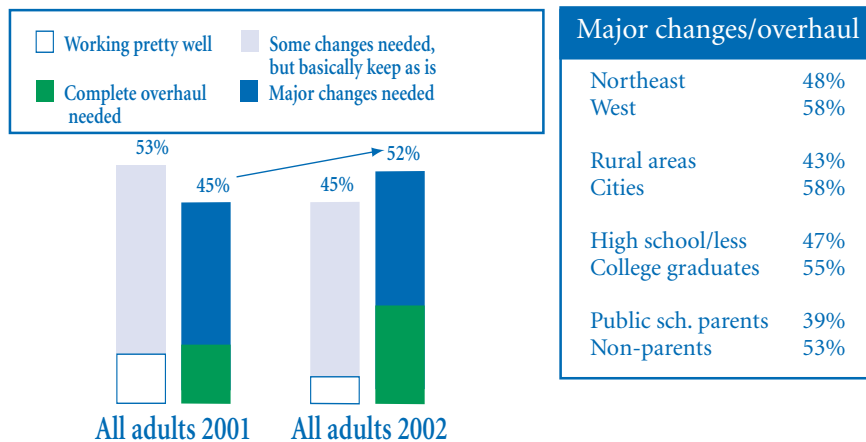
From May 17 to May 21, 2002, Peter D. Hart Research and Bob Teeter's Coldwater Corporation conducted a survey among 1,003 adults, with oversamples to ensure that a total of 407 parents of school-age children were included in the study. In addition, the survey included interviews among 409 educators (half among primary- and secondary-school teachers and half among school administrators) and 203 education policymakers, including school superintendents, elected officials, and state legislative- and executive-branch staff members. The statistical margin of error is $\pm 3.2\%$ for the base sample of adults; it is larger for the subsamples: parents ($\pm 5.0\%$), educators ($\pm 5.0\%$), and education policymakers ($\pm 7.0\%$). The statistical margin of sampling error is just one form of error or bias that can affect survey results. Before conducting the surveys, Hart Research held a total of four focus group discussions: two among teachers and administrators, and two among parents. One group of each type was held in Raleigh, NC, and Baltimore, MD. Additionally, Hart Research conducted twelve one-on-one interviews among education policymakers.

Improving education is still high on the national agenda

Improving education remains the most important issue for nearly three in ten (27%) Americans. Only family values (35%) and fighting terrorism (29%) rank as higher priorities among the public. Now more than ever, Americans want major reforms of the nation's schools. They express increasing dissatisfaction with how schools are working. When asked last year, a 53% majority of adults believed that schools were working pretty well, or that only some changes were needed. Fewer than half (45%) were looking for major changes or a complete overhaul. In 2002, almost the reverse is true. Just 45% feel basically satisfied with the nation's schools, and a 52% majority see a need for major changes or a complete overhaul.

Growing Dissatisfaction With Nation's Schools

How well is education working in our K-12 schools?



The push for reform is particularly strong among residents in the West, urban and suburban dwellers, and college graduates. Additionally, political independents call for big changes (55% to 40%) in greater numbers than either Democrats or Republicans (50% to 47% and 51% to 48%, respectively). The fact that non-parents see a greater need for reform than parents suggests that, to a degree, the impetus for reform is based more on news reports of problems in schools than on first-hand experiences with difficulties in schools.

Americans see education’s future prospects in the same way they see its current conditions. A growing pessimism is evident among adults, and even among educators. In 2001, a third (33%) of adults said that education would be better off in five years. In this year’s survey, only 20% offer the same confidence. Instead, 32% say that they expect education to be worse in five years, and 44% expect no change at all. Educators speak with slightly more optimism, but fully one-quarter (25%) say that they expect American education to get worse in the next five years, up seven points from last year.

“My school” still stands above schools nationwide

When most Americans talk about problems in schools, they are not necessarily talking about problems in their own school. Adults, parents, and educators consistently award higher grades to the schools in their neighborhood, where their children attend, or where they work. When parents are asked about the grade they would give their children’s school, nearly one in three (31%) say an “A,” and nearly two in five (39%) say a “B.” Combined, that means that seven in ten parents believe their children attend an above average school. Twenty-one percent of parents give their children’s school a “C” and 8% a “D” or an “F.” These figures produce a 2.9 grade point average that is little changed from last year, when parents gave their children’s schools a 2.8 average.

Educators, too, are content with their own schools. Twenty-nine percent give their own school an “A,” and nearly half (48%) give it a “B,” meaning that almost four in five educators say that their school is above average. The resulting 3.0 grade point average is a solid “B,” and again is little different from the 3.1 GPA that educators gave the schools they worked in last year.

“I think that we have to realize that we’re living in a changing society, and schools pretty much reflect what goes on in the community and our homes. Things that once upon a time we didn’t allow, [now] we seem to have come into a permissive-type society. Things have changed. We have to realize that we have to change along with it.”
– Baltimore educator

“Reform needs to be taken seriously, and not just in terms of new peripherals, new books, new things . . . but in terms of rethinking how we reach children.”
– Baltimore educator

“We have not challenged our young people. We have truly lowered our standards.”
– Policymaker

Gap Between Schools and “My” School

<i>Spring 2002</i>					
Report Card					
	<i>My Child’s School</i>		<i>Nation’s Schools</i>		
	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Educators</u>	<u>All adults</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Educators</u>
A	31%	29%	2%	2%	1%
B	39%	48%	14%	17%	31%
C	21%	16%	50%	48%	52%
D	5%	3%	21%	21%	7%
F	3%	2%	4%	4%	1%
GPA	2.9	3.0	1.9	1.9	2.3

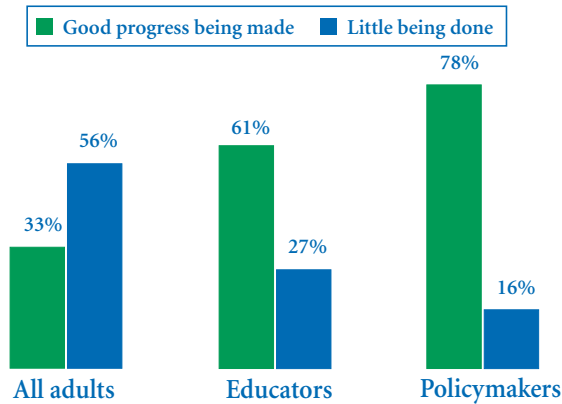
These figures for “my” school stand in stark contrast to the marks that adults, parents, and educators give the nation’s schools in general. Only 2% of adults give U.S. schools an “A,” and fully half give them a “C.” Among adults, America’s schools end up with a 1.9 average, or a “C–.” Parents’ marks for schools in the nation as a whole are similar to those of other adults. Just 2% award an “A,” while nearly half (48%) say a “C,” so that parents, too, assign the nation’s schools a 1.9 GPA. Educators feel more positively about the nation’s schools, but still only assign them a 2.3 GPA. Just 1% give schools an “A,” but nearly a third offer a “B,” and more than half offer a “C,” for a C+ average.

Differing assessments of progress

When it comes to improving education, most policymakers feel that good progress is being made, and most educators agree. Nearly four in five policymakers and six in ten educators believe in the direction education reform is heading. However, if policymakers and educators see the glass half full, the rest of America sees it half empty. More than half of adults (56%) and more than half of parents (54%) say that little is being done on education reform, and that work needs to get started now. Even among seniors, who are generally optimistic compared to other adults, just 40% say that good progress is being made, while almost half (49%) think little is being done. The message from the public is clear: there is a long road ahead, and much work to be done.

Differing Assessments Of Progress

Assessment of education reform/improving education in my area

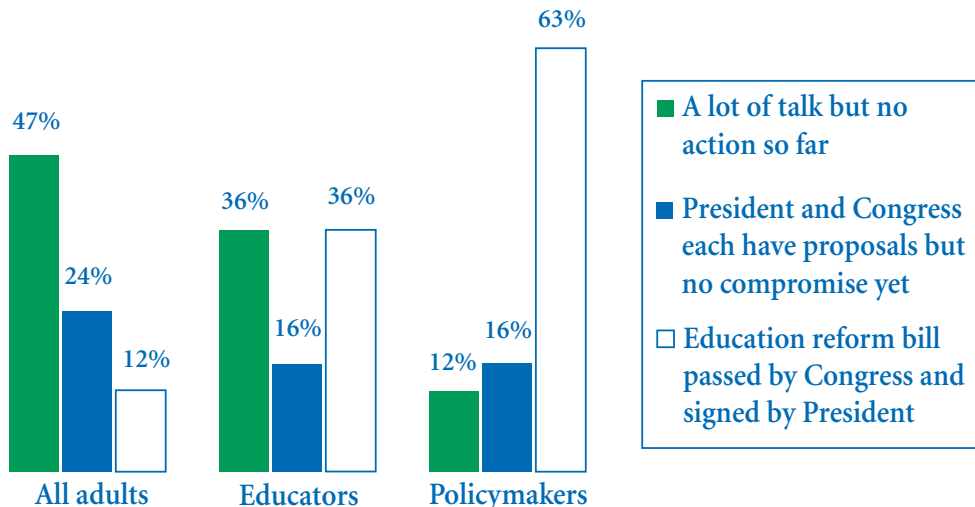


Few Americans know about national reform efforts

Education reform had been at the top of the American agenda for years. In response to the public's persistent concerns about U.S. education, President Bush and Congress passed a landmark education reform bill, which increased federal education funds and placed new performance requirements on schools receiving the money. The Leave No Child Behind Act, signed into law in 2001, is already having an impact on American schools, but few Americans have noticed.

Remarkably Low Awareness Of National Education Reform

Where do things stand in education reform at the national level?



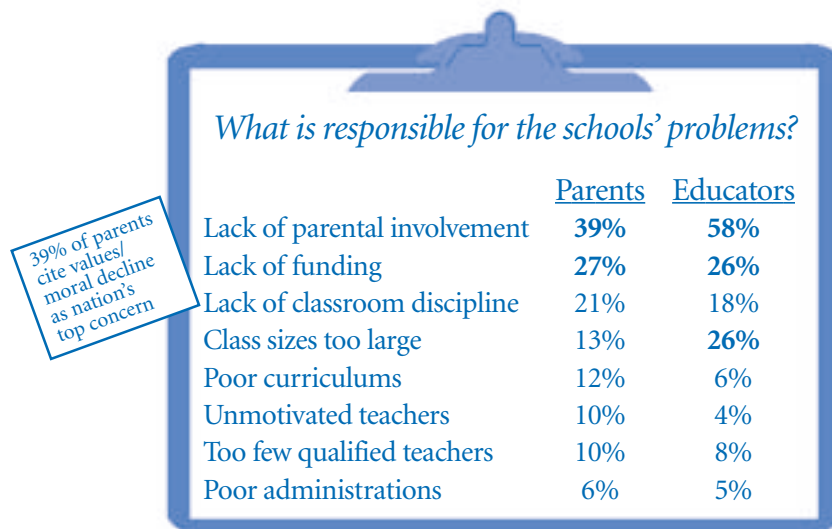
When asked how they would best describe “where things stand today in terms of education reform at the national level in Washington, DC,” only 12% of adults correctly recognize that “an education reform bill has been passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush.” Nearly half (47%) believe that there has been a lot of talk, but no action, and a quarter (24%) say that “the president and Congress each have put together proposals, but so far no compromise has been reached.” Indeed, awareness of last year’s bill is uniformly low among the major demographic groups, cresting in rural areas at just 18%, and diving among parents (9%), union households (9%), women (8%), and blacks (7%). Even among those who say they know “a great deal” or “a fair amount” about the Bush administration’s education policies, only 21% recognize that last year’s education bill was enacted into law.

Awareness is notably higher, but still remarkably low, among educators. Thirty-six percent (36%) of teachers know of the education bill’s passage. Despite being more than triple the public’s awareness, this still means that nearly two in three teachers do not know that a new education bill has become law. A strong argument could be made that the education reform passed in 2001 affects no one more than teachers, yet the teachers are unaware. The only group that generally seems aware of the state of education affairs in Washington, DC, is education policymakers, 63% of whom recognize that the bill was passed by Congress and signed into law by the President.

Teachers blame lack of parental involvement—and parents agree

If there is a consensus among adults, parents, and educators that U.S. schools need improvement, there is consensus, too, that a lack of parental involvement is a major source of the problem. When presented with a list of frequently cited educational woes, 58% of educators choose “a lack of parental involvement” as the first or second most significant cause of schools’ shortcomings. This is by far educators’ most common choice. Fewer than half as many choose “lack of funding” (26%) or “class sizes that are too large” (26%).

Teachers Blame Lack Of Parental Involvement—And Parents Agree



Educators are not just finger-pointing. When presented with the same list, 39% of *parents* also blame a lack of parental involvement for many of education's troubles. As with educators, it is the problem parents point to most frequently. Americans as a whole think similarly, with the lack of parental involvement also leading their list, being cited by 44% of adults.

This emphasis on a cultural problem, as opposed to a "money" problem, is consistent with views expressed elsewhere in the survey. The issue of "family values and moral decline" is picked as the nation's biggest problem by 39% of parents and 35% of adults, putting it at the top of the list of the nation's problems. Interestingly, the item Americans cite second most frequently as a major problem in the schools is also more a cultural than a money issue: "lack of discipline in the classroom," chosen by 27%.

"Teaching is easy. We're being asked to do something besides teach. I think that's where it's tough. If kids come with involved parents, I'd say the percentage of problems with those children is so microscopic. It would change the face of education if it was that easy everywhere."

– Baltimore educator

"[The school system] works. It's worked for a long time. What's broken down are some of the family support structures."

– Raleigh parent

Teacher quality is a major issue

This year's survey tested a broad range of potential education reforms. While some ideas rated stronger than others, a remarkable two in three Americans supported every reform offered. Those reforms that rated particularly high generally related to increased funding for schools, increased accountability, and increased teacher quality.

Strong Support For Many Approaches To Reform *Teacher Quality, Accountability, Funding*



More than two in three adults support nearly every proposal tested.



Teacher quality: hire more teachers, give them better conditions/supplies/training and higher salaries.



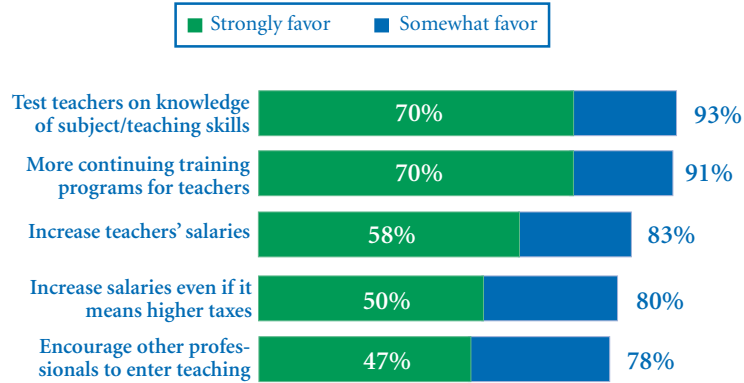
Accountability: support for student testing grows stronger.



Funding: overwhelming support for more funding holds up when higher taxes are explicit.

Americans view improving the nation's schools and improving teacher quality as synonymous concepts. Indeed, raising the quality of teaching in American schools stands above all other issues, and is unmistakably the public's top priority in education reform. Ironically, teacher quality also registers as the federal government's biggest challenge in reforming education. Four in ten Americans choose improving the quality of teachers as the government's biggest challenge, over other significant challenges such as providing more funding (33%) and measuring progress (22%).

Teacher Quality Is A Major Issue



- But not if it means lowering standards By 64% to 32%, adults reject lowering standards to hire more teachers/reduce class size.

Americans clearly associate quality teaching with quality education. They show remarkable willingness to do whatever is necessary to improve the quality of teaching in American schools, believing that an increase in overall education quality will logically follow. There is one step, however, that Americans are not willing to take to improve the quality of teaching. By a 64% to 32% margin, adults reject lowering hiring standards to hire more teachers or reduce class size. The public rejects simply hiring more teachers as a solution to the teacher quality problem. Instead, they suggest that the quality of teachers is more important than the quantity, and that increasing the supply of teachers without maintaining standards will not resolve this crisis.

Defining quality teaching

To a significant degree, an individual's definition of quality teaching takes its shape from the memory of a favorite teacher from elementary or high school. The definition varies from person to person, but one consistent theme emerges from this research. Overwhelmingly, Americans believe that knowing *how* to teach is more important than knowing *what* to teach. Teaching quality is not about formal academic degrees, but rather about the degree to which a teacher can engage his or her class. When it comes to quality teaching, it is not about what you know, but how well you convey what you know to students.

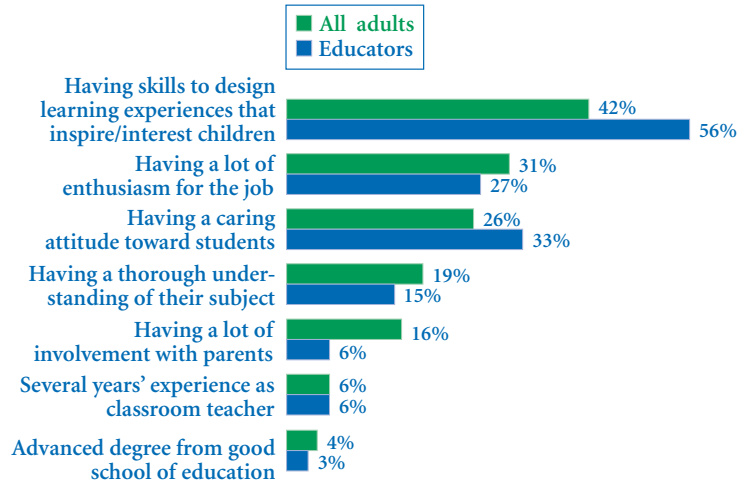
"You could also raise the standards by which teachers are hired. Being a teacher should be one of the toughest jobs to get in this country. You're teaching the future leaders of our nation."

– Raleigh parent

"Oh, our teacher standards are definitely too low. I think they're way too low. I mean it's supply and demand, plain and simple. We don't have the luxury of being more selective. I think we should, absolutely, but it's a very simple case of supply and demand. We don't have enough teachers; therefore we have to take who we can get. A lot of times we're compromising what I think is good common sense in doing that."

– Policymaker

What Is Quality Teaching?



When asked to identify the greatest problem in training teachers, 67% of adults say that developing the proper skills to make information interesting and understandable is a greater difficulty than developing adequate knowledge about subject matter (14%). Just 19% of adults and 15% of educators say that having a thorough understanding of subject matter is the most important attribute of a good teacher. Both adults and teachers cite having the skills to design learning experiences that inspire and enrich children as the most important quality for good teachers (42% and 56%, respectively). Having a lot of interest in the job (31% of adults) and having a caring attitude toward students (26% of adults) also register highly as important characteristics of quality teachers. In comparison, only 4% of adults and 3% of educators consider an advanced degree to be a significant measurement of good teaching.

Keys to improving teacher quality

In the eyes of most Americans, the steps to improve teacher quality relate more to retention than to recruitment. Creating a quality teaching corps requires quality working conditions for teachers. Salaries, facilities, supplies, professional development opportunities, and support from the administration all surface as crucial elements of quality education. Americans believe that teachers deserve to be well-compensated and well-equipped to do their jobs.

Most Americans agree that the shortage of quality teachers can be traced back to the situations in which teachers work. When asked to identify the biggest challenges in creating a better teaching work force, fully 50% of adults say that teacher retention represents one of the top two challenges. Americans believe that colleges turn out good young teachers, but these teachers leave the field after only a few years because salaries are too low and working conditions are poor. Logically then, it follows that the keys to creating a quality teaching corps relate to improving salaries and working conditions.

“Teacher quality would mean somebody that can relate to everyone in the classroom. They can understand each student, where they came from. If one is far behind or has a problem, they can take them to the side and deal with it instead of pushing them to the side whenever they just didn’t make it, or give them a bad grade.”

– Raleigh parent

“You’ve got to love [teaching], too. If you’re not enthusiastic and you’re dealing with a bunch of kids who inherently have more energy than you do anyway, they’re just going to plow right over you.”

– Raleigh parent

“A good teacher is one who is academically prepared, who is pretty confident and set with themselves, and able to manage people. To be humane. Teaching is not just subject matter. It’s also empathy and concern, love, and those kinds of things, too.”

– Policymaker

Keys To Improving Teacher Quality: Salaries, Working Conditions, Retention

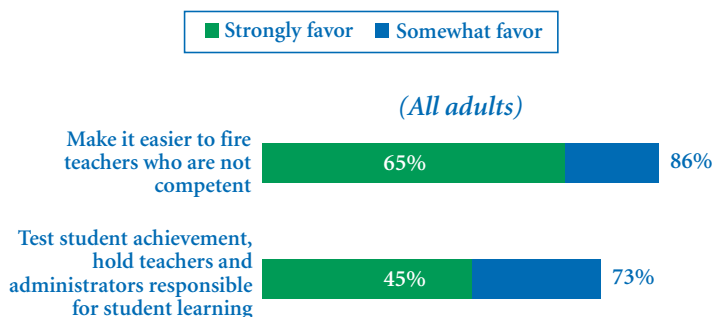
	All adults	Educators	Policy-makers
Colleges turn out good teachers who leave—salaries, working conditions	50%	60%	56%
Unresponsive administration not supporting good teachers who have not left	37%	40%	21%
Good teachers lose their edge over the years: not challenged to stay up-to-date	21%	10%	14%
Teacher-education courses don't relate to what teachers need to know in classroom	20%	29%	32%
Good students not attracted to teaching	14%	19%	30%
Low entry standards for teacher education	14%	7%	7%
Good students, but poorly trained in college	13%	16%	17%

To that end, Americans overwhelmingly support a broad range of reforms to improve teachers' working conditions. Offering more training programs so teachers can continue to learn and be better teachers garners the most support, with 91% of the public saying they support the idea. Strong numbers also support providing computers, books, and other materials (87%), increasing funds dedicated to building new schools or repairing old schools (86%), and increasing teachers' salaries to hire and retain more well-qualified teachers (83%).

The public strongly supports standards and accountability

In the midst of the consensus on the need for reform, there is consensus too on the need for accountability. Americans give wide berth to what they will try in the name of improving education, and show willingness to increase resources and funds. However, they are not willing to write blank checks or to turn their backs once reforms take effect. The public wants teachers, students, and schools held accountable for performance.

Support For Greater Accountability

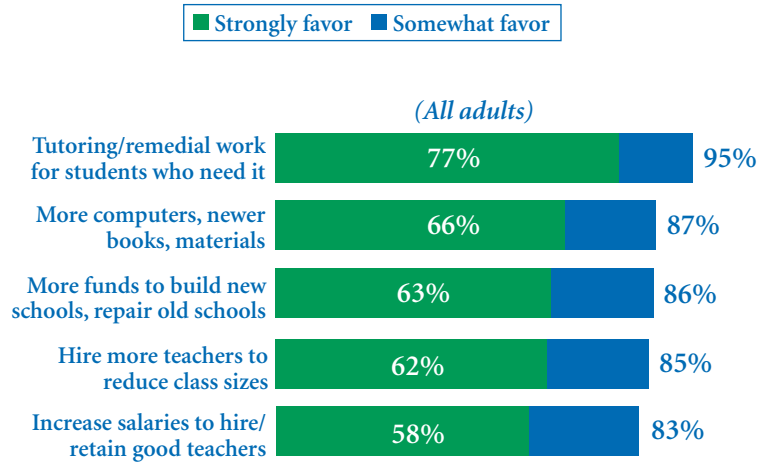


A remarkable 93% of adults favor testing teachers on their knowledge of subject areas and teaching skills. Fully seven in ten adults strongly support such a measure. Similarly, 73% of adults support testing student achievement and holding teachers and school administrators responsible for student learning. Bringing the discussion back full circle to teacher quality, 86% of adults favor making it easier to fire teachers who are not competent.

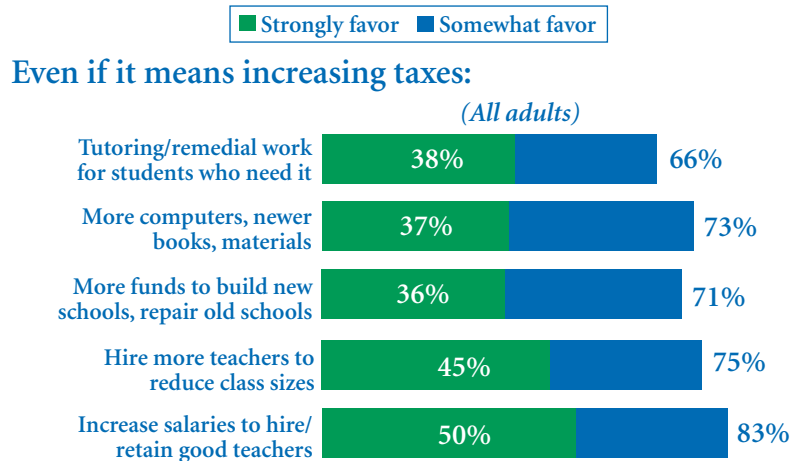
Spend money to reform education

It is easy to support education reform measures in the abstract. It is another thing altogether to support education reforms when a price tag is explicitly attached. A major goal of this year's survey was to measure support for reforms both as matters of policy and practice. The public's support for reform as policy is clear. However, they also support a wide range of reforms in practice, even when told that the reforms will require an increase in taxes.

Spend Money To Fix Education



Spend Money To Fix Education



The two tables above illustrate the public's belief in the importance of education reform. The first table shows initial support for reforms. The second shows support after a reminder that reforms cost money. Although the strength of support slips, in every case overall support remains substantially above a majority. The clear implication of these results is that Americans put a priority on increasing the quality of education, and they are willing to put their pocketbooks on the line.

