



**Standards, Accountability and Flexibility:
Americans Speak on
No Child Left Behind Reauthorization**

Conducted for
ETS

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&
The Winston Group

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From May 4-15, 2007, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. and The Winston Group conducted a national survey of 1,526 adults. They included 626 parents of K-12 students, 101 public school administrators (superintendents, school board members, principals and vice principals) and 251 public school teachers. Oversample interviews were conducted with 226 California residents (for a total of 470 California residents) and 200 adults who took the survey in Spanish (100 in California, 100 nationwide). The Spanish language samples were weighted to their proper proportion of the population in the main sample. At the 95% confidence level, the data's margin of error is ± 3.1 percentage points among all adults, and larger among the subsamples of K-12 parents (± 3.9), public school administrators (± 9.7), public school teachers (± 6.2), and California residents (± 4.5).

Prior to conducting the surveys, Hart Research and The Winston Group convened six focus groups: two in Indianapolis, Indiana; two in Fremont, California; and two in Alexandria, Virginia. One group's members were public school administrators. One included voters who are not parents. Two groups had public school teachers as members and two had parents of public school children. In addition, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with leading education experts.

Summary of Key Findings:

Strong Support for *No Child Left Behind* Reauthorization: Despite the American public's clear lack of knowledge about the federal *No Child Left Behind* Act (NCLB) and the strong misgivings of teachers and school administrators have about the legislation, the public and public school teachers and administrators strongly support reauthorization. Only 16% of the public and 13% of parents of school-age children oppose reauthorization. Given public school teachers' and administrators' strongly negative views of NCLB, it is somewhat surprising to see that a relatively small number — 25% of teachers and 22% of administrators — believe Congress should not reauthorize the law. The teachers and administrators are clear in calling for major changes in NCLB as it is reauthorized.

NCLB Supporters Will Need to Re-introduce and Explain The Law to The Public: The public lacks a clear understanding of NCLB. Unless it is better defined, public opinion of the law will be divided almost evenly among supporters and opponents. Fewer than half (45%) feel they know either a great deal or a fair amount about NCLB. About the same proportion (47%) are able to identify the law's principal components. In fact, only 41% support NCLB and 43% oppose it — before key provisions are explained to them. After hearing that brief description, however, support jumps to 56%. Opposition drops to 39%. That's because, throughout the survey, the American public expresses support for the law's key provisions, especially requirements for federal funding to be tied to increased accountability. By a 57% to 34% margin, the public rejects the suggestion that states should be

allowed to opt out of the law's provisions and still receive federal education dollars. In one departure from the law's provisions, by 59% to 35% the public would replace NCLB's state-based standards and testing with one set of national standards.

Flexibility and More Funding to Fix Struggling Schools: In supporting NCLB reauthorization, the public and parents differ over whether minor changes or major changes are needed in the law. Teachers and school administrators, on the other hand, fall squarely on the side of major changes. All groups support high standards of accountability. But, they are also looking for more flexibility in how NCLB is implemented, supporting policies that find solutions for poorly performing schools. A 57% majority of the public believes that funding should be increased in all or most cases for schools that perform poorly on state assessments. A 71% majority of teachers and 61% of administrators support additional funding for struggling schools. Only 25% of the public believes that new administrators should take over in cases where schools are testing poorly. Only 12% would replace the teachers in schools that perform poorly on NCLB tests.

Parental Support and Student Populations Make a Difference:

All groups agree that a lack of parental involvement is the biggest problem facing schools. Teachers (61% select it as one of their top two problems), administrators (53%), the public (39%) and even parents themselves (38%) say the lack of parental involvement is the central challenge to our nation's schools. Lack of discipline in the classroom was mentioned second by the public and parents (26%). Teachers (31%) and administrators (50%) point to inadequate funding as the second greatest challenge schools face. In focus groups, teachers and administrators strongly expressed the view that differences in student populations and parental support — not school quality — are most responsible for variations in student performance on state tests. That may be why large numbers of teachers and administrators (77% of both groups) would like to see more flexibility in NCLB when it comes to allowing English-language learners the time they need to learn the language before they're required to learn the core curriculum at grade level. Most teachers (66%) would give English-language learners up to two years before their scores get included in NCLB calculations. Even more administrators (77%) support that change. But, only 32% of the general public agrees, and only 28% of those who took the survey in Spanish would exempt English-language learners for as many as two years.

After Six Years of Reform, Schools Still Receive a 'C'

After years of debating, passing, and implementing *No Child Left Behind* reforms, public opinion of school quality remains unchanged. Grades given to schools by the public, parents, and teachers and administrators are virtually unchanged over the seven-year span of this survey.

- The nation's schools receive a C grade from large pluralities of parents (43%) and the general public (44%). Only slightly more give them an A or B (27%) than a D or an F (21%).
- The "GPA" for the nation's schools is a 2.0 (a C average) just as it was in 2001 when NCLB was being considered. It has remained almost constant over that period, fluctuating between a low of 1.9 and a high of 2.2.
- Hispanics (2.4), especially those who took the survey in Spanish (2.7), give schools much higher ratings.
- Public school teachers and administrators give schools only a slightly better grade (2.3). This also has remained remarkably constant during the survey period.
- Parents of school-age children rate their own child's school (2.8) higher than the nation's schools as a whole. As expected, teachers (3.0) and administrators (3.2) also give their own schools higher grades.

Where Are the Parents? Schools May Be Taking On Too Many Societal Responsibilities

There is broad agreement that the biggest problems facing our schools defy legislative solutions. Parents, teachers and administrators participating in the focus groups described schools as struggling with the increasing societal burdens they are asked to shoulder. In the survey, teachers, administrators, the public, and even parents themselves said a lack of parental involvement is the biggest challenge facing schools. The public and parents say the lack of discipline in the classroom comes next.

- Asked to select the top one or two problems facing schools, 39% of the public said lack of parental involvement, as did 38% of K-12 parents. The numbers are dramatically higher among teachers (61%) and administrators (53%).

"I think rather than grading the school system, we should be grading what's going on at home. I think we would have fabulous students and scores and everything if all the parents were backing us and making sure the kids had supplies and their homework done."

— California middle-school teacher

- The public (26%) and K-12 parents (26%) cite lack of discipline in the classroom as the second-greatest problem facing schools. Teachers (19%) and administrators (6%) are much less likely to cite classroom discipline as a serious concern.
- The second-most-mentioned problem identified by teachers (31%) and administrators (50%) is a lack of adequate funding.

The Public Is Largely Uninformed About NCLB

A majority of the public (54%) remains unaware that Congress passed and the President signed into law a major education bill. Of the 46% who do know it, only 14% believe that major changes are under way as a result. This is critical to understanding how the public approaches education reform.

- Only 12% of the public claim to know a great deal about NCLB. An additional 33% say they know a fair amount. That means about half of the American public admits to knowing little (38%) or nothing at all (16%) about this major legislative initiative.
- Even when presented with four possible NCLB descriptions, less than half (47%) of the public correctly associated NCLB with standards and testing. It was almost exactly the same for parents of children in K-12 schools (49%). Significant segments of the public associate NCLB with national testing for high school graduation (12%) or school vouchers (8%).
- A large segment (26%) associates NCLB with not leaving students behind as they move from grade to grade at the end of the school year. They think of “social promotion” when they hear the phrase “no child left behind.”

Public Supports NCLB When It Is Defined

Asked about NCLB before the term is defined, public support is divided nearly evenly between supporters and opponents. But when key NCLB provisions are summarized, support increases considerably.

- Before hearing a description of the law, 41% have a favorable view, 43% an unfavorable view and 16% say they are neutral or without an opinion.
- After hearing a description of NCLB provisions, however, public support rises considerably. A 56% majority say they favor it and only 39% still have an unfavorable view.

Initial Support For "No Child Left Behind" Undefined					
	<u>General Public</u> %	<u>Republicans</u> %	<u>Independents</u> %	<u>Democrats</u> %	<u>Teachers</u> %
Support	41	52	35	35	20
Oppose	43	34	48	51	77

- Even though many people are uninformed about NCLB, enough associate the law with President Bush for meaningful, partisan differences to emerge. Republicans support NCLB by a 52% to 34% margin. Democrats oppose it, with 35% in favor and 51% opposed. Independents look more like Democrats, with 35% supporting NCLB and 48% opposing it.
- Hispanics (55% favorable, 24% unfavorable), especially Spanish speakers who took the survey in Spanish (67% favorable, 14% unfavorable), are highly favorable toward NCLB.
- Teachers and administrators hold a staunchly negative view of NCLB, with 77% of teachers and 63% of administrators considering the law unfavorable. Despite this negative view, many educators interviewed in the focus groups seemed more comfortable with a "devil they know" than leaving the door open to new reforms.

All this points to the need for legislators and policymakers to reintroduce and re-explain the rationale for *No Child Left Behind* if they hope to gain widespread and consistent public approval.

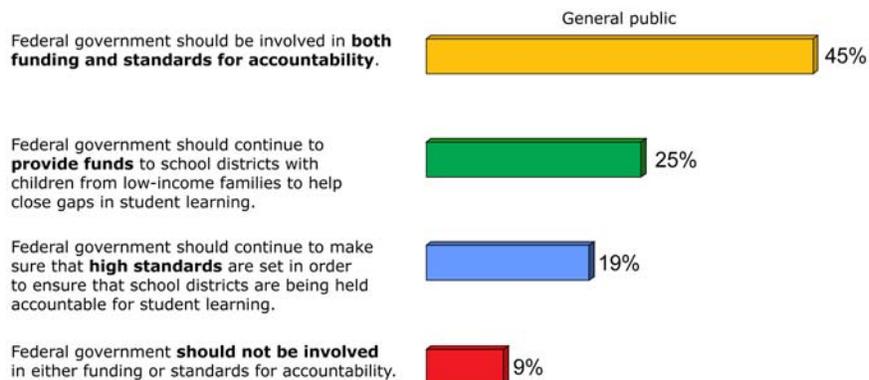
Strong Support for Basic Provisions of NCLB

The fundamental principles behind NCLB continue to receive strong public support. Americans do not believe the federal government should stay out of education policy. In fact, most parents, teachers, administrators and the public say the federal government has an important role to play in improving the nation's schools.

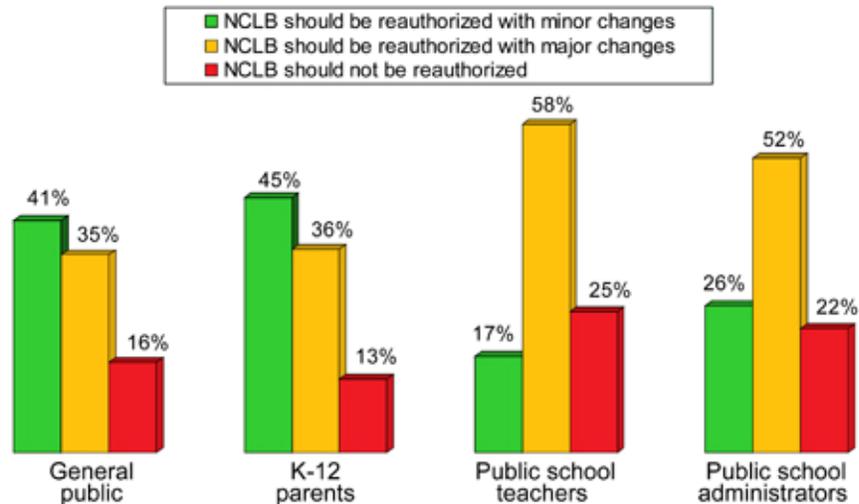
- Asked whether the federal role in education should include funding for schools in low-income areas, setting accountability standards, neither or both, the largest segment of respondents (45%) say that the federal government should have a role in both funding and accountability.
- Support for federal funding (including those who answered "both" funding and accountability standards) is strong among all groups: 70% of the general public, 67% of K-12 parents, 79% of teachers and 84% of administrators. All groups clearly value the role the federal government can play in closing the achievement gap by helping school districts with students from low-income families.

- Accountability and federal standard setting score almost as high (including among those who answered “both”), with 64% of the public, 68% of K-12 parents, 49% of teachers and 49% of administrators in favor. The lower numbers among public school faculty are notable. They may reflect the sometimes difficult time schools have complying with standards and testing requirements.
- The public clearly opposes allowing states to opt out of the accountability requirements outlined in NCLB. A 57% majority believes states should be required to have accountability standards to receive federal funding. Only 34% would allow them to opt out and still receive federal funding. Teachers are the notable exception. By a narrow 49%-to-43% plurality, they support allowing states to opt out and still receive federal funds.
- The public would, however, modify NCLB in one major respect. Nearly three in five people (59%) say they would prefer a single set of national standards and tests to the status quo, where each state sets its own standards and creates its own tests (35%). By contrast, more teachers and administrators favor state standards and tests over a national model.

Support for Basic NCLB Provisions of Accountability and Funding



Public, Administrators and Teachers Want Reauthorization



Public, Teachers and Administrators Support NCLB Reauthorization

Despite the mixed views of parents and the public, and teachers' and administrators' strongly negative opinions of NCLB, both groups firmly support reauthorization.

- The general public supports reauthorization (76%), but many (35%) would like to see major changes during reauthorization (41% would reauthorize with minor changes). A small minority (16%) do not want NCLB reauthorized at all.
- Among parents of school-age children (K-12), support for reauthorization stands at 81%, with 45% calling for minor changes, and 36% wanting major changes to the law. Only 13% of K-12 parents do not think Congress should reauthorize NCLB.
- Surprisingly, perhaps, given their negative views of the law, public school teachers and administrators also support reauthorization (75% of teachers, 78% of administrators). Only 25% of teachers and 22% of administrators do not think Congress should reauthorize the law. While educators have misgivings about the law, they appear to support a "devil they know" over some unknown alternative. Not surprisingly, however, they are much more likely to support major changes (58% of teachers, 52% of administrators).

Flexibility and Funding: Fix Poorly Performing Schools

When it comes to changing NCLB, the public, parents, teachers and administrators say they favor maintaining high standards while allowing greater flexibility to assist those students and schools that are struggling to attain them. They express support for new approaches and measures that will provide additional help and resources for schools that are identified through assessment as struggling to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

- The public overwhelmingly rejects blanket solutions for schools that perform poorly on state tests in favor of solutions tailored to individual schools. From a list of possible consequences for schools that perform poorly for several years, the most popular solution is the most flexible — requiring administrators to develop a comprehensive school improvement plan that offers a sharp departure from the school's current approach. Continuing the status quo receives support from only 37% of those surveyed, while the improvement plan garners 64% support in all or most cases.
- The public believes funding should be increased for schools that fall short of their AYP objectives on state tests. The second most popular consequence for poorly performing schools, gaining support from 57% of the public in all or most cases, is increased funding so struggling schools can hire more teachers, reduce class sizes and improve classroom conditions. Naturally, this is most popular among teachers (71%).
- Other proposals receive far less support. A school takeover, in which school administrators are replaced, is viewed as the right move in all cases of poor performance by just 13% of the public and, in most cases, by only 12%. While 48% say it's the answer in some cases, 24% believe that it should never happen. Not surprisingly, school administrators line up firmly against this idea (56% never, 40% some cases and only 4% in all or most cases).
- The proposal that earned the least support in "all or most cases" is firing teachers and replacing them with new ones. Only 12% of the public believe this should be the consequence in all or most cases (46% some cases, 40% never). Teachers join them, of course (4% all or most, 33% some, 62% never).

Flexibility Toward English-Language Learners

The public, K-12 parents, teachers and administrators believe schools should be flexible in how they teach and measure English-language learners. Teachers and administrators feel very strongly about this issue and are more united in their views.

- By a 58%-to-36% majority, the public (and parents by 56% to 37%) support giving English-language learners the time and flexibility to learn English before they're expected to complete core courses at grade level. Teachers and administrators (77% of both groups) strongly agree.
- The public and K-12 parents are split over whether English-language learners' test scores should be included with those of other students. A 48% majority of the public and a 55% majority of Hispanics support immediate inclusion of test scores. Teachers (77%) and administrators (85%) overwhelmingly believe English-language learners' scores should be excluded.

A majority of the public agrees that America's future success in the global economy relies on an improved public education system that prepares America's youth to compete with students from around the world. While many have lost or never really had a clear understanding of what *No Child Left Behind* really means, most support its underlying provisions. Education policymakers express strong support for NCLB reauthorization even though they consider it a necessary next step and not the catalyst for dramatic increases in standards and student achievement many suggest the nation really needs.

"I work in an area with mostly English learners, and I'm working at a low age level. I think one thing our students really need is more time because we're expecting six-year-olds who have gone to preschool and spoken English all their lives to perform at exactly the same level as a child who starts kindergarten with no English whatsoever. They're supposed to read at the same level, write at the same level, and we're just pushing them along. And many of those kids are not ready. I think we have this misconception in the United States that the earlier they do it, the better. But actually sometimes it's better to wait and give them more time so they're actually ready for the task."

—California first grade teacher

"I don't think that NCLB is going to solve it because NCLB is a national framework, but ultimately, at least in my view, you've got to take this issue state by state. Go to the leaders of the states, the business leaders, the education leaders, and the political leaders in the state and say that we've got to look at what really are the rigors of the courses, how well are our students doing, and what's the achievement level of our students that are measured by a national test with some really good state tests. ... Let's align what kids learn with what's needed in higher education and what's needed in the work force, which is not happening now."

— National Education Policy Leader

NCLB may not be the only measure needed to put American education on the right path, but most policymakers, the public, parents, teachers and school administrators want to see it reauthorized.