

What Polls Show About the American Public and High Schools: “IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT”

TIME/Oprah Winfrey

In April 2006, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* teamed up with *TIME Magazine* to conduct a poll on Americans' attitudes on the educational system and on high school dropouts. According to the poll's results, 55% of Americans are dissatisfied with the public schools in this country, with 61% saying that they think public schools are in a "crisis." When asked what they thought about the dropout problem, 89% of Americans said it was "serious."

Educational Testing Service's 6th Annual “Americans Speak” Poll

Nearly three quarters of Americans believe that America's public high schools are not adequately preparing students to compete for highly technical science and engineering jobs with their international peers, according to *Keeping Our Edge: Americans Speak on Education and Competitiveness*, the 6th annual poll by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). And nearly 60% feel that America's public schools fail to provide students with the training and skills they need to succeed in the workforce.

National Survey Conducted by the Alliance for Excellent Education

In August 2005, the Alliance for Excellent Education released the findings of a comprehensive national survey of public opinion on high schools. This poll, conducted by Lake Snell Perry Mermin/Decision Research, was the first focusing on secondary schools conducted after President Bush and many governors announced, earlier in the year, major initiatives to improve the educational experience of and outcomes for America's older students.

The findings were conclusive: the American public sees problems with high schools and overwhelmingly wants governors, members of Congress, and the President to pay more attention to them.

There is strong public consensus that it is critical for the nation to have good high schools. On question after question, respondents indicated that increasing the number of high school students who graduate prepared for college and good jobs is critical to maintaining a strong society and to assuring the competitive position of the U.S. in an increasingly global economy.

More Detail About the Alliance's Survey

High Schools Take Priority

- For the first time, the American public feels that **the need to improve high schools is greater** than the need to fix problems at the elementary level.
- Contrary to popular perception, most Americans do not believe older students are a “lost cause.” By a wide majority, they believe that **there is still time for those who start high school with weak skills to catch up with their grade-level classmates.**
- The **high dropout rate is viewed as having a significant impact on the nation's economy.** Americans are concerned that the country's ability to play a leading global role is adversely affected by how many of our students do not achieve a high school diploma.
- Most Americans are very willing or extremely **willing to pay more in taxes** to support effective reform efforts that boost academic performance.

Demographic Differences

The national poll, which surveyed 1,200 individuals from across the country, included a wide range of respondents. Survey participants included Republicans, Democrats, and Independents; ages ranged from 18 to over 75; educational attainment included high school dropouts, individuals with post-graduate degrees, and every level in between. Married and single people were included in the poll, as were parents, grandparents, and people without children. Occupations included professionals, service employees, unskilled laborers, homemakers, and those who were retired or unemployed.

The poll over-sampled African-American and Hispanic respondents to ensure balanced insight into differences of attitude and opinion. Additionally, some of the interviews were conducted in Spanish.

The survey uncovered important demographic distinctions. For example, **African-Americans and Hispanics were less positive about their local schools than were white respondents who generally rate their local schools more highly.**

African-Americans and Hispanics were particularly strong in the view that **elected officials have not made the plight of America's high schools enough of a priority.** Their disappointment with their elected officials stretches from the state house to the White House.

Asked to identify **the most important value of public schools to the community**, a plurality of whites selected creating “community pride and morale.” African-American and Hispanic respondents said that good schools' value was in bringing “lower crime rates” to the neighborhood.

The Value of a Diploma

While Americans feel strongly that more of our students need a high school diploma, they do not assume that mere receipt of a diploma indicates a student has been adequately prepared for future success.

Improving high schools means not only retaining students at-risk of dropping out, but raising the academic bar so that a diploma guarantees a level of skill required to meet the rigors of the work world as well as the demands of post-secondary education.

Literacy is a Key to Success

Nationally, over six million students entering ninth grade read significantly below grade level. These students are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school than are their highest achieving classmates. According to the survey, the American public feels that improving literacy skills is one of the most effective strategies to slow the dropout rate.

Major Concerns about High Schools and Their Students

- 87 percent of respondents were very or extremely concerned to learn that 70 percent of America's high school students read below grade level.
- 86 percent were very or extremely concerned that half of all students in the nation's 20 largest urban districts fail to complete the 12th grade.
- 78 percent found the fact that the high school dropout rate costs the nation \$80 billion in lost earnings was another major cause of concern.
- 76 percent were very or extremely concerned that two of out of every three state prisoners were high school dropouts.

Summary and Solutions

For the first time, the American public is on record in calling for high schools to become the nation's top educational priority. The strong sense is that our future depends on their improvement. With a staggering national dropout rate, inadequate literacy training, and under-prepared high school graduates, the nation is truly at risk.

Respondents to the survey feel the most effective solutions to help high school students succeed at college and in life are:

- **a serious academic support system to ensure that all kids can read, comprehend, and write;**
- **high school teachers who have at least a college degree in the subjects they teach and who are given opportunities for more training;**
- **a safe learning environment;**
- **strong educational leadership that includes a strong principal; and**
- **access to essential resources.**

