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THE INSIDERS: HOW PRINCIPALS AND SUPERINTENDENTS SEE PUBLIC EDUCATION TODAY

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A Public Agenda Initiative to Build Momentum for Improving American Schools

REALITY CHECK 2006



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This is the fourth in a series of reports from *Reality Check 2006*, an ongoing set of tracking surveys on education issues. *Reality Check* surveys attitudes among public school parents, students, teachers, principals and superintendents on a regular basis. The series also includes periodic surveys of employers and college professors.

Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi and Amber Ott prepared this report.

More information about the findings in this report, including full question wording and results, can be found at:

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INTRODUCTION

By Jean Johnson

It's probably natural for leaders of organizations to be upbeat about their institutions, and the nation's school children might not be well-served by superintendents and principals who see public schools as places of disappointment, failure and ineptitude. Even so, the positive, almost buoyant outlook of school leaders nationwide captured in this fourth installment of Reality Check 2006 may come as something of a surprise to reformers and critics, including regulators enforcing No Child Left Behind. In many respects, local school leaders seem to operate on a very different wavelength from many of those aiming to reform public schools. The two groups have different assumptions about how much change today's public schools really need. Even when they see the same problems, they often seem to strive for different solutions.

Not just good – “excellent”

To most public school superintendents – and principals to a lesser extent – local schools are already in pretty good shape. In fact, more than half of the nation's superintendents consider local schools to be “excellent.” Most superintendents (77%) and principals (79%) say low academic standards are not a serious problem where they work. Superintendents are substantially less likely than classroom teachers to believe that too many students get passed through the system without learning. While 62 percent of teachers say this is a

“very” or “somewhat serious” problem in local schools, just 27 percent of superintendents say the same.

We're okay on science and math

Business leaders have led a vigorous campaign calling for better math and science education, American students continue to receive disappointing scores on international math tests

and policymakers bemoan the shortage of qualified math and science teachers.¹ Even so, most superintendents (59%) and principals (66%) say kids not learning enough math and science is not a serious problem in their district.

In surveys on education, it's not uncommon for the public, parents and teachers to see serious problems in schools nationwide but still view local schools as

reasonably good. This may partly explain why local school leaders are so upbeat. Or perhaps some are reticent about criticizing their own districts when a research organization contacts them. Still, given the high-octane attention the math and science issue has attracted from

School leaders and reformers often have different assumptions about how much change today's public schools need. Even when they see the same problems, they seem to strive for different solutions.

¹ 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” on the website of the Center for Corporate Citizenship of the United States Chamber of Commerce, available on the website of the Business Education Network as of January 19, 2006.

everyone from Bill Gates to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, it's surprising so few principals and superintendents are concerned about how their districts measure up.

The relative contentment of local school leaders may also reflect a local versus national expectations gap – one that is attracting growing attention. As the “Washington Post’s” Jay Mathews reports, student scores on state proficiency exams are often significantly higher than scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which Mathews describes as “the most respected national measure.” According to Mathews, “the definition of proficiency – what it means for a student to perform at grade level – varies from coast to coast.”²

Not your dad’s public school principal

Like the students in their charge, local school leaders face new demands and challenges from many quarters. They hear calls to raise academic standards, pump up accountability, close achievement gaps, beef up the math and science curriculum, make sure their districts meet federal No Child Left Behind and special education requirements and more. These “Reality Check” surveys of 252 public school principals and 254 public school superintendents are intended to capture their priorities and concerns as they see

them. The surveys conducted in early 2006 were underwritten by The Wallace Foundation.

At one time, local school leaders mainly managed the budget, insured that schools obeyed government regulations, worked to keep the local school board happy and, of course, were the loudest cheerleaders at school sporting events.

Now they are expected to be academic leaders and change agents who should be held accountable for increasing student learning overall and especially for improving academic achievement among minority and at-risk students.

Relishing their academic role

In some very important ways, school leaders seem to relish their more academic role. The vast

majority say the most essential aspects of their jobs are: ensuring that teachers use effective teaching methods (92% of principals, 87% of superintendents); recruiting the best teachers to their schools (91% of principals, 90% of superintendents); offering sound professional development (89% of principals, 91% of superintendents); and knowing how to use student data to improve teaching (84% of principals, 90% of superintendents).

Given teachers’ broader concerns about whether all students are learning at appropriate levels, it is noteworthy that most superintendents put directly “involving teachers in developing policies and priorities” at the bottom of their list ways to improve educational leadership. Most principals (65%) see this as essential, but less than half of

The relative contentment we see among local school leaders may reflect a local vs. national expectations gap – one that is attracting growing attention.

² Jay Mathews, “National School Testing Urged,” The Washington Post, September 3, 2006.

superintendents (46%) say involving teachers in policymaking is a crucial element.

School leaders are generally satisfied with their current teaching corps. Six in 10 principals say they are “very satisfied” with teachers in their school, although superintendents are somewhat less enthusiastic – 43 percent of superintendents say they are “very satisfied” with their teachers while another 55 percent say they are “somewhat satisfied.” Healthy numbers of both groups (56% of superintendents and half of principals) say the quality of new teachers coming into the profession has improved in recent years.

Principals optimistic, feds not very happy

Compared to a few years ago, principals are more optimistic that their districts can meet federal NCLB requirements on improving teacher quality. Their hopefulness seems ironic in light of the dismal verdict recently rendered by federal officials. According to the Department of Education in summer 2006, not a single state had met a key NCLB benchmark on improving teacher quality.³

The rich and the poor

As might be expected, school leaders in poorer, mainly minority districts tend to have a different perspective from those in more affluent, mainly white schools. Superintendents (67%) and principals (78%) in mainly-minority schools are more likely to say their dropout problem is serious compared to

superintendents and principals in mainly-white districts (36% of both). Superintendents and principals in mainly minority and low-income schools are also more likely to worry about the state of math and science education locally.

Yet despite their generally positive outlook, it would be misleading to paint local school leaders as smugly satisfied with the status quo. The vast majority believe schools need more money, but money is not the only item on their “this would help” list.⁴ As a group, they have an ambitious list of proposals, but many of their goals seem to be on the policymaking backburner.

Would more alternative certification help?

Meanwhile, some reform ideas that often make the headlines (at least in the education world) attract tepid support from local school leaders. Some education reformers, for example, are urging districts to tie teacher pay to student improvement and other performance measures rather than to years of education and experience. Many also suggest giving people without traditional teacher training other ways to enter the field through alternative certification. Advocates believe these changes would attract fresh

talent to teaching and keep more gifted teachers in the field. But most principals and superintendents don’t voice much interest in either of these ideas. Only one in five superintendents and 17 percent of

Many reformers who want to improve teaching are calling for more merit pay and alternative certification, but most local school leaders don’t put much stock in these approaches.

³ Sam Dillon, “Most States Fail Demands in Education Law” The New York Times, July 25, 2006.

⁴ “Reality Check 2006: Is support for standards and testing fading?” Public Agenda 2006.

principals say tying teacher rewards and sanctions to student performance would be very effective in improving teaching. Just 4 percent of both groups say relying more heavily on alternative certification would be very helpful.

Let us remove ineffective teachers more easily

In contrast, local school leaders have their sights set on other targets like making it easier to fire tenured teachers and reducing federal bureaucracy and red tape.

More than 7 in 10 principals (72%) and nearly 8 in 10 superintendents (77%) say making it easier “to remove bad teachers – even those who have tenure” would be a very effective reform. Large majorities also want student testing data available in more timely and useful forms (71% of principals and 73% of superintendents).

Reducing the number of mandates on schools and the bureaucracy and paperwork associated with them is also a comparatively big winner: 67 percent of principals and 64 percent of superintendents consider this potentially “very effective.” These numbers are massive compared to the handful (just 4%) of principals and superintendents who think relying more heavily on alternative certification for teachers is the way to go.

It would be naïve to expect the various players in public education – federal officials, reform groups, education experts, foundations, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and students – to see

eye-to-eye on all the issues facing them. In a human enterprise like education, that’s just not in the cards. That kind of group-think might even produce worse results for the nation’s students than the jarringly different assumptions and priorities we see operating here. Even so, it does seem that the level of crosstalk shown in these results has to be counterproductive.

Shouldn’t these people be talking to each other?

The majority of superintendents don’t believe kids are slipping through the system without learning, but a majority of teachers say they are. Federal officials are frustrated by lack of progress on No Child Left Behind; meanwhile local educators say reducing red tape and bureaucracy is one of the most effective reforms they can think of. Reformers who want to improve teaching are pursuing proposals for merit pay and more alternative certification, but most superintendents and principals don’t put much stock in these approaches.

The majority of superintendents don’t believe kids are slipping through the system without learning, but a majority of teachers say they are.

Shouldn’t these people be talking to each other more? And shouldn’t they consider doing it with the idea that “the other side” might have a perspective worth considering?

In some cases, one wonders whether the big picture, ideological, one-size-fits-all debate on reforming schools isn’t crowding out options that might be useful. Overall, superintendents and principals don’t have a lot of faith that tying teacher pay to student performance would

improve teaching, and the concept of merit pay remains extremely divisive. But very large majorities of local school leaders want to reward teachers who work in struggling schools with at-risk learners. In fact, 79 percent of superintendents and 82 percent of principals say this would be a good idea. With that level of support, surely rewarding this kind of merit warrants some serious discussion.

Methodology

The findings in “Reality Check 2006: The Insiders” are based on telephone interviews with a national random sample of:

- 254 school district superintendents and 252 school principals;
- 721 public school teachers;
- 1,379 parents of children now in public school.

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

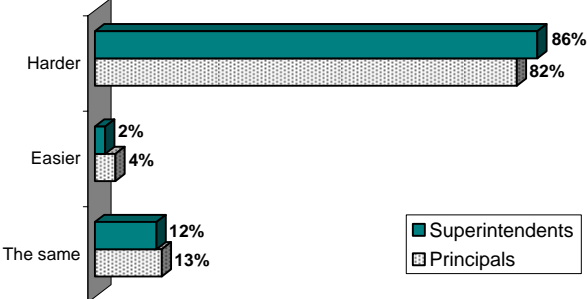
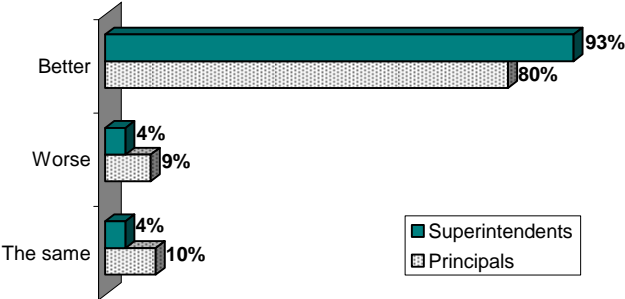
FINDING ONE: A BUOYANT, UPBEAT OUTLOOK

Most local school leaders believe public schools are doing a good job in the most important areas, with half of superintendents saying schools in their district are “excellent.” Despite forceful calls from business leaders and policymakers to upgrade math and science education, most superintendents (59%) and principals (66%) say this is not a serious problem in their local schools. Superintendents are fairly confident about the level of student learning in local schools, more so than teachers. They are less likely than teachers to believe that kids can slip through local schools without learning – only 27 percent of superintendents say this is a problem locally compared to 62 percent of teachers. Superintendents are also more confident that local middle school students are ready for high school (76% versus 54%) and that a local high school diploma means a student has mastered basics (78% versus 63%).

The vast majority of superintendents and principals say public schools offer a good education, better than in the past

Thinking about the education children are getting, do you think it’s better, worse or about the same as the education you got at their age?⁵

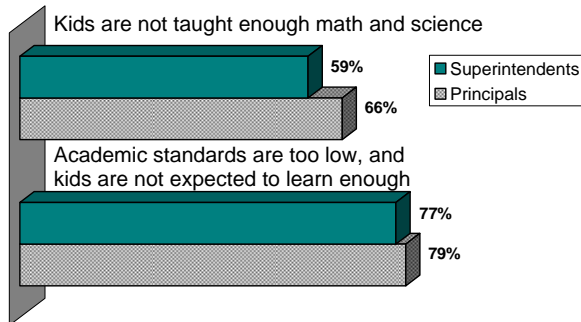
Do you think the material children are learning is harder, easier or about the same as when you were in school?



⁵ Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

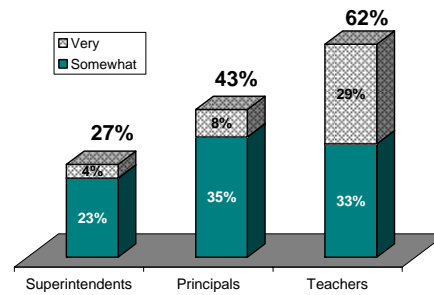
Despite calls from business leaders, most superintendents and principals don't think math and science education or low standards are serious problems locally

% who say the following is *not* a serious problem in their own community's public schools:



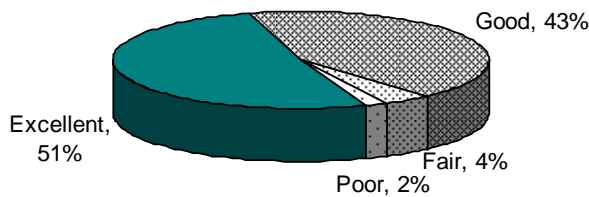
Superintendents are much less likely than teachers to believe kids slip through local schools without learning

% who say it's a serious problem that too many students get passed through the system without learning:



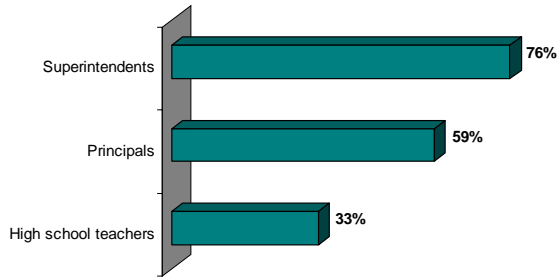
Half of superintendents say local schools are "excellent"

Overall, would you say the public schools in your community are doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job?



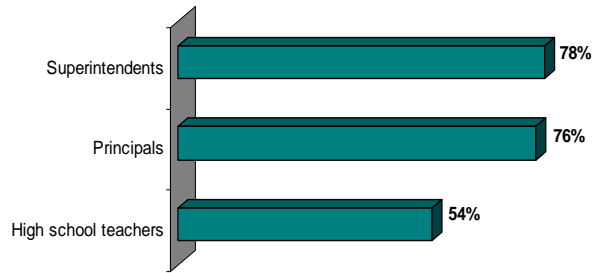
Superintendents are much more confident than high school teachers that students leaving middle school are ready for high school

% who say students graduating from middle school have learned the reading, writing and math skills they will need to succeed in high school:



Superintendents are also more confident than high school teachers that students leaving high school have learned the basics

% who say a high school diploma means a student has learned the basic academic skills of reading, writing and math:



FINDING TWO: APPLAUSE FOR THE TEACHING CORPS

Although federal officials enforcing No Child Left Behind recently reported that not a single state had met a major Department of Education benchmark for improving teacher quality, superintendents and principals nationwide voice broad confidence about the quality of their current teaching staffs. Large majorities of both groups say “all” or “almost all” of their teachers have high academic expectations for all the students they teach, give students extra help when they fall behind, know a lot about the subjects they teach and have a knack for inspiring students and motivating them to do their best. Principals especially are positive about the teachers in their schools. The majority of superintendents say the quality of new teachers is actually improving, although principals are divided on this question. Compared to when they were asked in 2003, principals are now more optimistic that their schools will be able to meet No Child Left Behind standards designed to raise teacher quality.

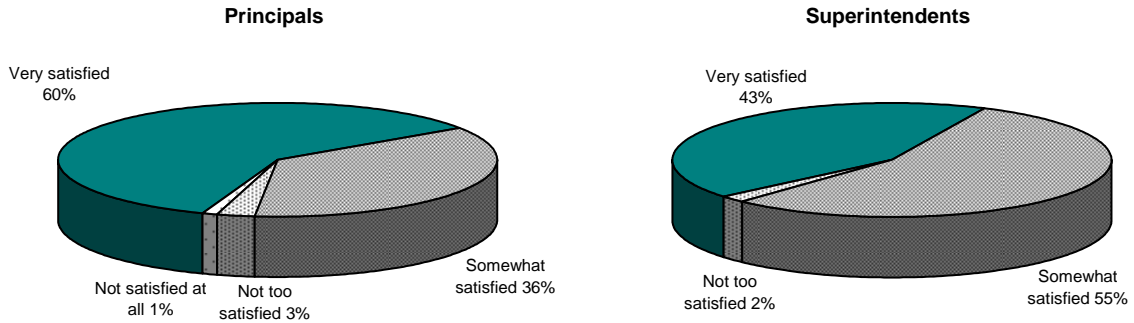
Superintendents and principals are confident that most of their teachers know their subjects and do a good job handling both academics and discipline

How many of your teachers do each of the following?

	All %	Almost All %	All & Almost All %
Know a lot about the subject they teach			
Superintendents	26	69	95
Principals	45	49	94
Treat students with respect			
Superintendents	16	78	94
Principals	37	56	93
Handle discipline problems quickly and fairly			
Superintendents	6	87	93
Principals	23	67	90
Make sure disruptive students don't take over the class			
Superintendents	24	68	92
Principals	37	58	95
Give students extra help when they are falling behind			
Superintendents	15	70	85
Principals	37	50	87
Take a personal interest in students and really get to know them			
Superintendents	10	75	85
Principals	29	58	87
Have high academic expectations for all of the students they teach			
Superintendents	13	70	83
Principals	36	53	89
Have a real knack for inspiring and motivating kids to do their best			
Superintendents	4	62	66
Principals	12	64	76

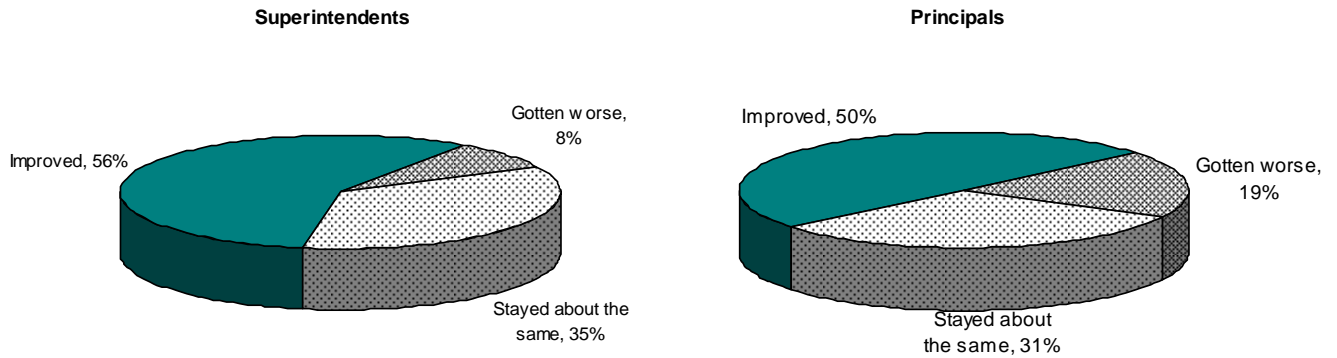
Principals especially give their teaching staffs very good marks, although superintendents are a little less enthusiastic

How satisfied are you with the overall quality of your current teaching staff?



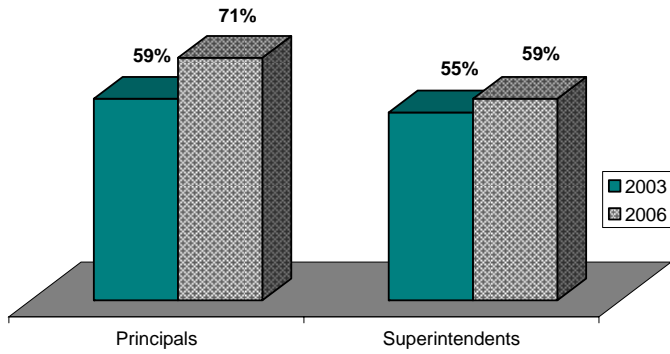
Most superintendents and half of principals say the quality of new teachers is improving

Based upon your experience, has the quality of new teachers coming into the profession in recent years improved, gotten worse or stayed about the same?



Principals especially are increasingly optimistic that their schools can meet NCLB teacher quality requirements

% who say it is realistic for their district to meet NCLB's teacher quality requirement:



FINDING THREE: THE HAVES AND THE HAVE NOTS

Although school leaders nationwide give local schools good marks, those in districts with mainly-minority and low-income students – especially the principals – tell a different story.⁶ A majority of principals in mainly-minority schools say their schools have serious problems with too many kids dropping out, acting disrespectfully and slipping through the system without learning. Overall, principals in mainly minority schools are less satisfied with their teaching staffs than principals in mainly-white schools. They are also less likely to say that they have enough authority to do their jobs. Reality Check surveys of teachers tend to confirm this picture. Teachers in low-income and/or mainly-minority schools are more likely to report serious problems with kids slipping through the system without learning. They are also less likely to think their students learn to speak and write English well or will have learned the expected material by the end of the school year.

Superintendents and principals of mainly-minority schools acknowledge serious problems with dropouts, school climate and low standards

% who say the following is a serious problem in their community's public schools:	Superintendents		Principals	
	Mainly-White Schools	Mainly-Minority Schools	Mainly-White Schools	Mainly-Minority Schools
Too many kids lack respect for teachers and use bad language	46	78	47	67
Too many students drop out	36	67	36	78
Too many students get passed through the system without learning	25	44	34	62
Kids are not taught enough math and science	37	72	26	47
The schools are too large and impersonal	10	39	23	49

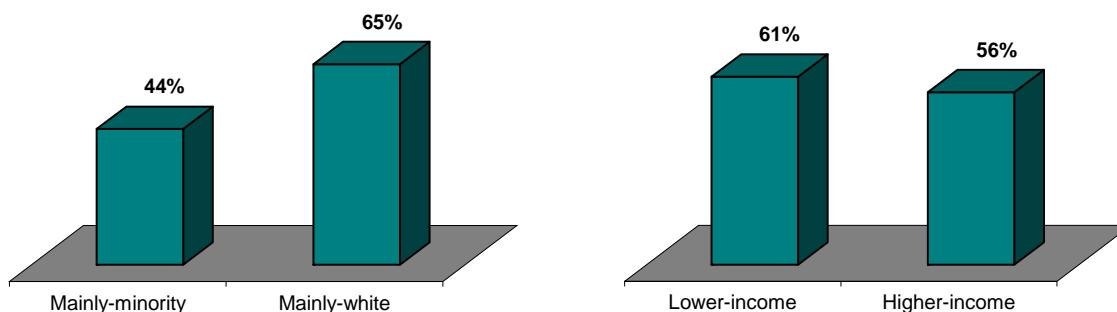
⁶ Lower-income schools are defined as those who have 16% or more of their students enrolled who fall below the poverty line. Higher-income schools are those who have fewer than 6% of students from poor backgrounds.

Superintendents and principals in lower-income schools are also more concerned about a number of important areas

% who say the following is a serious problem in their community's public schools:	Superintendents		Principals	
	Higher-Income Schools	Lower-Income Schools	Higher-Income Schools	Lower-Income Schools
Too many kids lack respect for teachers and use bad language	44	51	25	56
Too many students drop out	15	49	19	45
Too many students get passed through the system without learning	10	31	31	47
Kids are not taught enough math and science	21	46	19	30
The schools are too large and impersonal	8	13	13	35

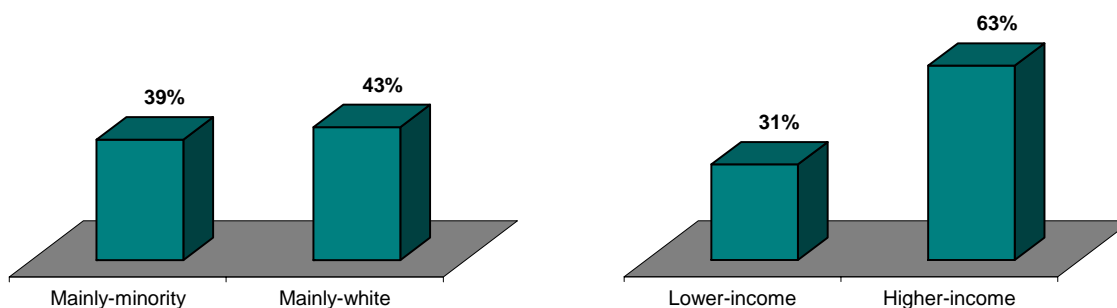
Principals in mainly-minority schools are significantly less enthusiastic about their teachers

% of principals who say they are "very satisfied" with the overall quality of their teaching staff:⁷



Superintendents in lower-income schools are significantly less satisfied with their teaching staffs

% of superintendents who say they are "very satisfied" with the overall quality of their teaching staff:⁷

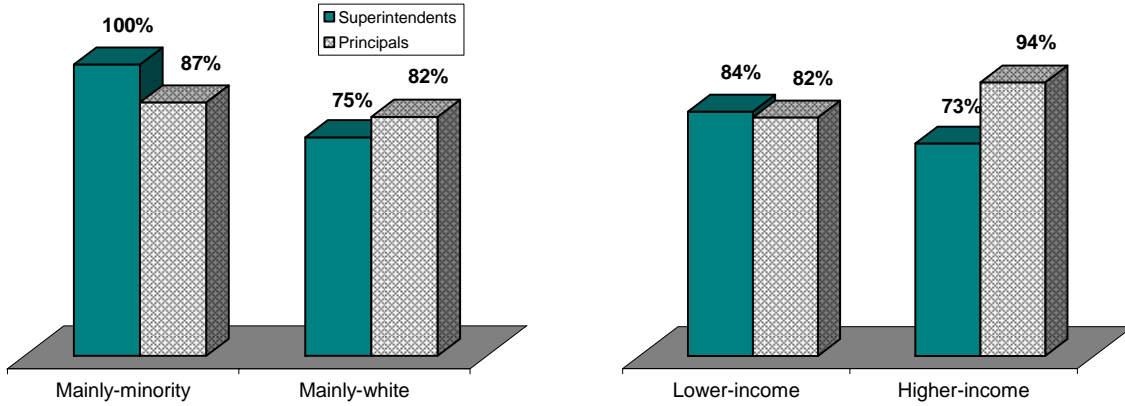


⁷ The differences in principals based upon income and for superintendents based upon ethnicity are not statistically significant.

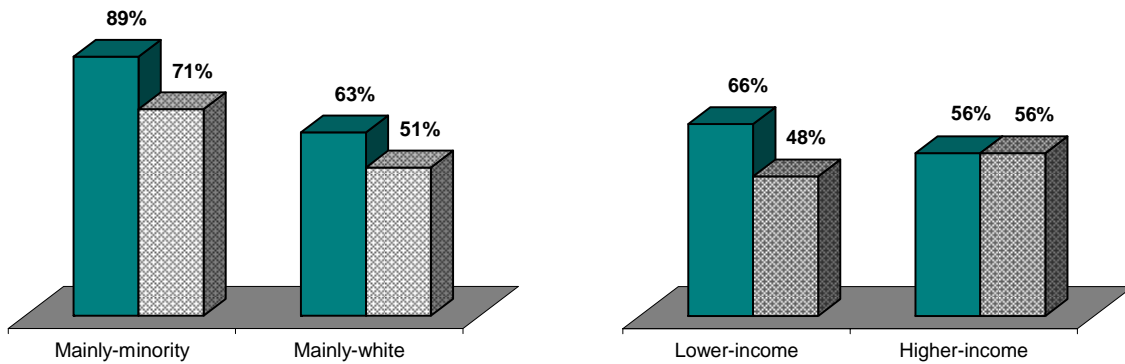
Superintendents in mainly-minority schools are especially interested in paying more to teachers who work in challenging schools and have needed skills

% of superintendents and principals who think it's a good idea to pay higher salaries to teachers:

Who agree to work in difficult schools that have low achievement-levels⁸



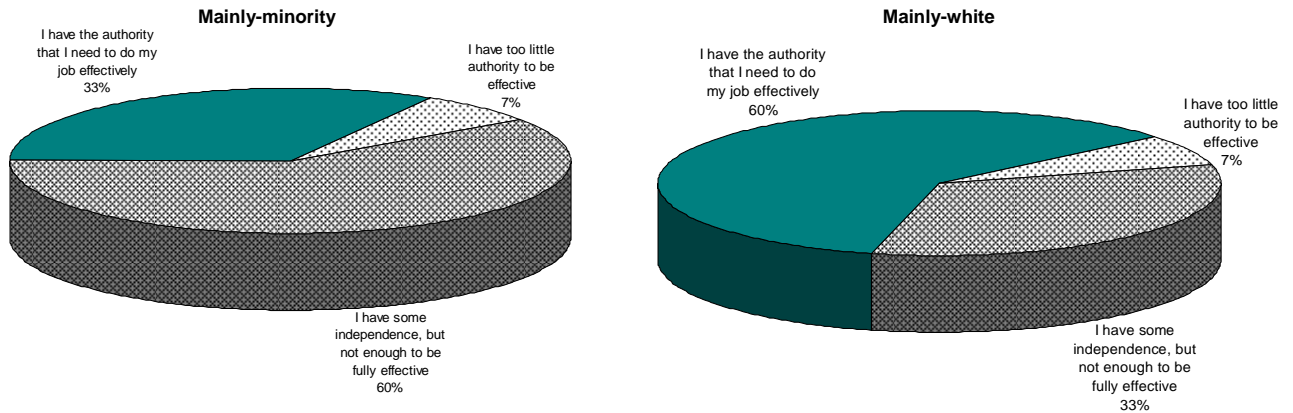
In subjects like math or science, where there are severe shortages



⁸ The difference in principal responses based upon ethnicity is not statistically significant.

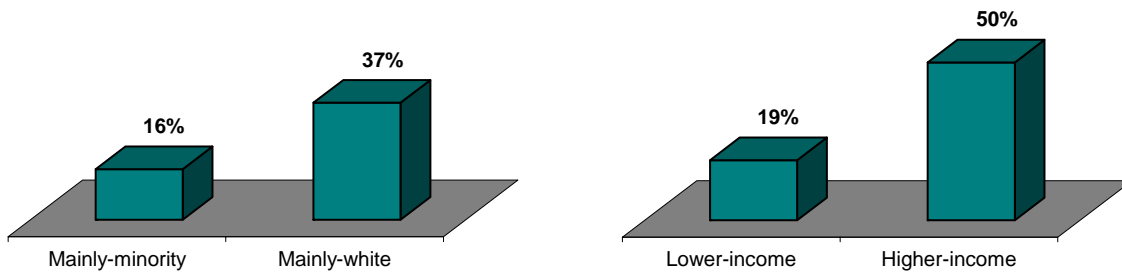
Principals in mainly-minority schools are less likely to say they have the authority they need

% who say they have the authority they need to do their job effectively:

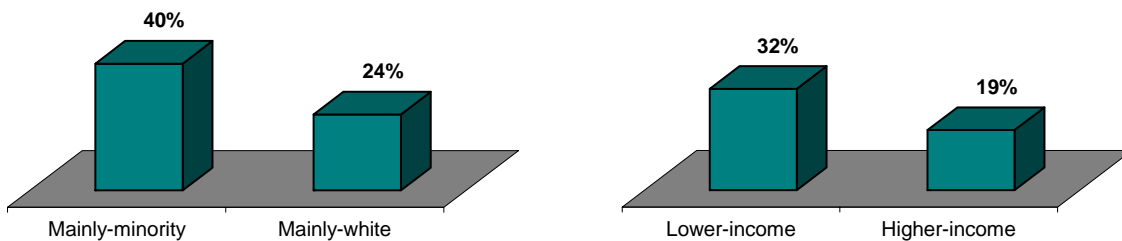


Teachers in low-income and mainly-minority schools also identify serious academic problems in their communities

% who say the public schools in their community are doing an excellent job:

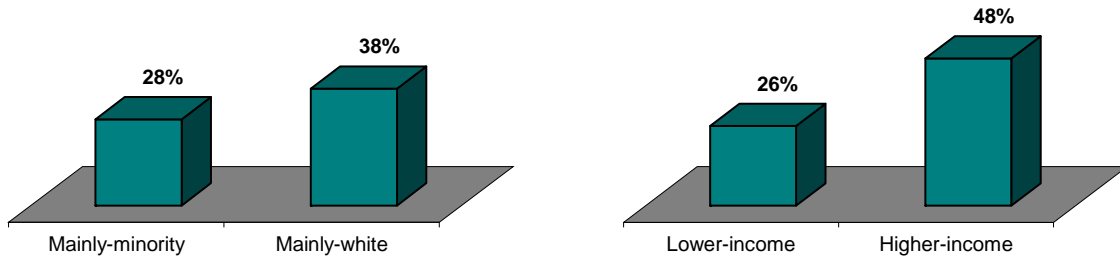


% who say it's a "very serious" problem that too many students get passed through the system without learning:

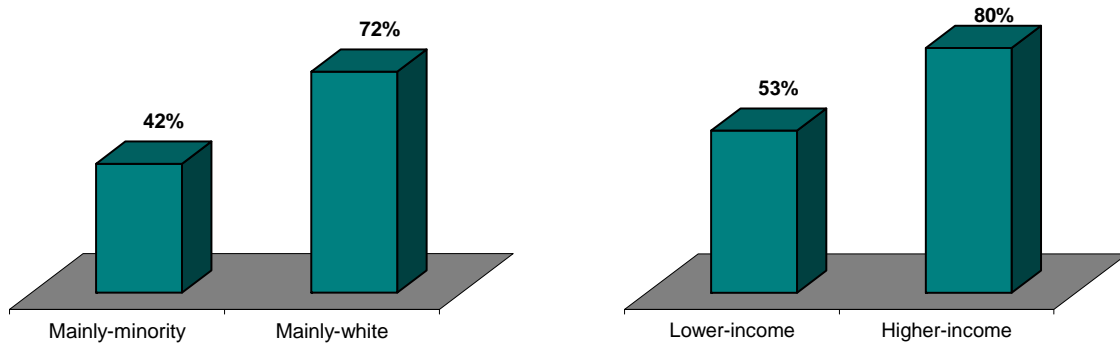


Teachers in mainly-minority or low-income schools are also less confident that their own students will learn the skills they need

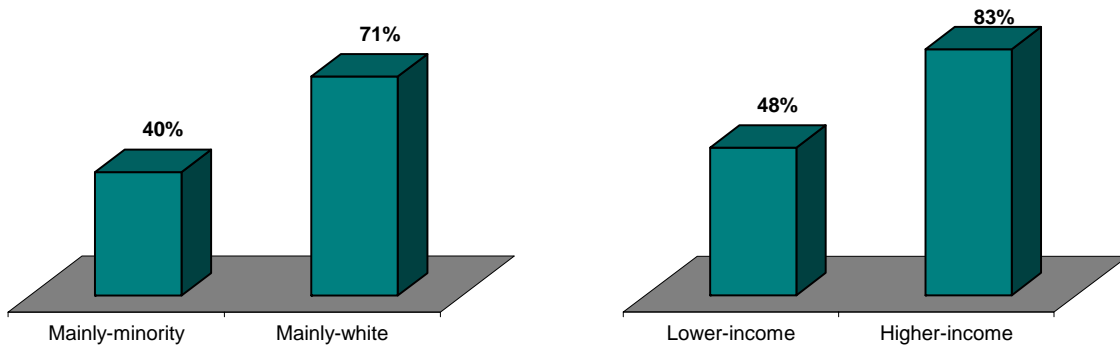
% who are “very confident” that most of their students will learn the skills and knowledge they are supposed to by the end of the year:



% who say it would be accurate to describe their schools as places where students learn to speak and write well with proper pronunciation and grammar:



% who say that after graduation, their students will have the skills needed to succeed in college:

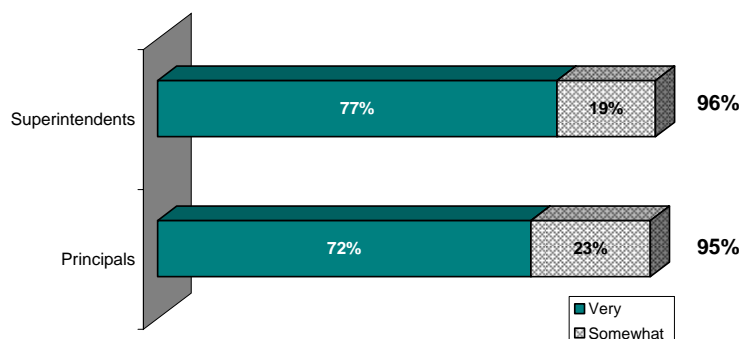


FINDING FOUR: WHAT WOULD IMPROVE TEACHING?

For school leaders, one idea for improving the quality of teaching tops the rest. More than 7 in 10 superintendents and principals say that making it easier for them to fire bad teachers, even those with tenure, would be “very effective.” Beyond that, the most popular strategies include more professional development and mentoring for new teachers. Most superintendents and principals are critical of the current system for training and certifying new teachers. Most – 86 percent of superintendents and 81 percent of principals – say traditional certification guarantees only “minimal skills” or “very little;” most (62% of superintendents and 58% of principals) also say traditional teacher education is out of touch with the realities of the classroom. Even so, relatively few leap to support newer approaches such as merit pay (paying teacher based on student improvement or other performance measures) or alternative certification. Twenty percent of superintendents and 17 percent of principals say merit pay could be very effective in improving teaching. Just 4 percent of both groups think more reliance on alternative certification would be “very effective” at improving teacher quality. Surprisingly perhaps, interest in these two strategies has not changed much since 2000 despite broader discussion and more experimentation with them. Eliminating teacher tenure draws more support among superintendents than principals, but still does not attract majority support among either group.

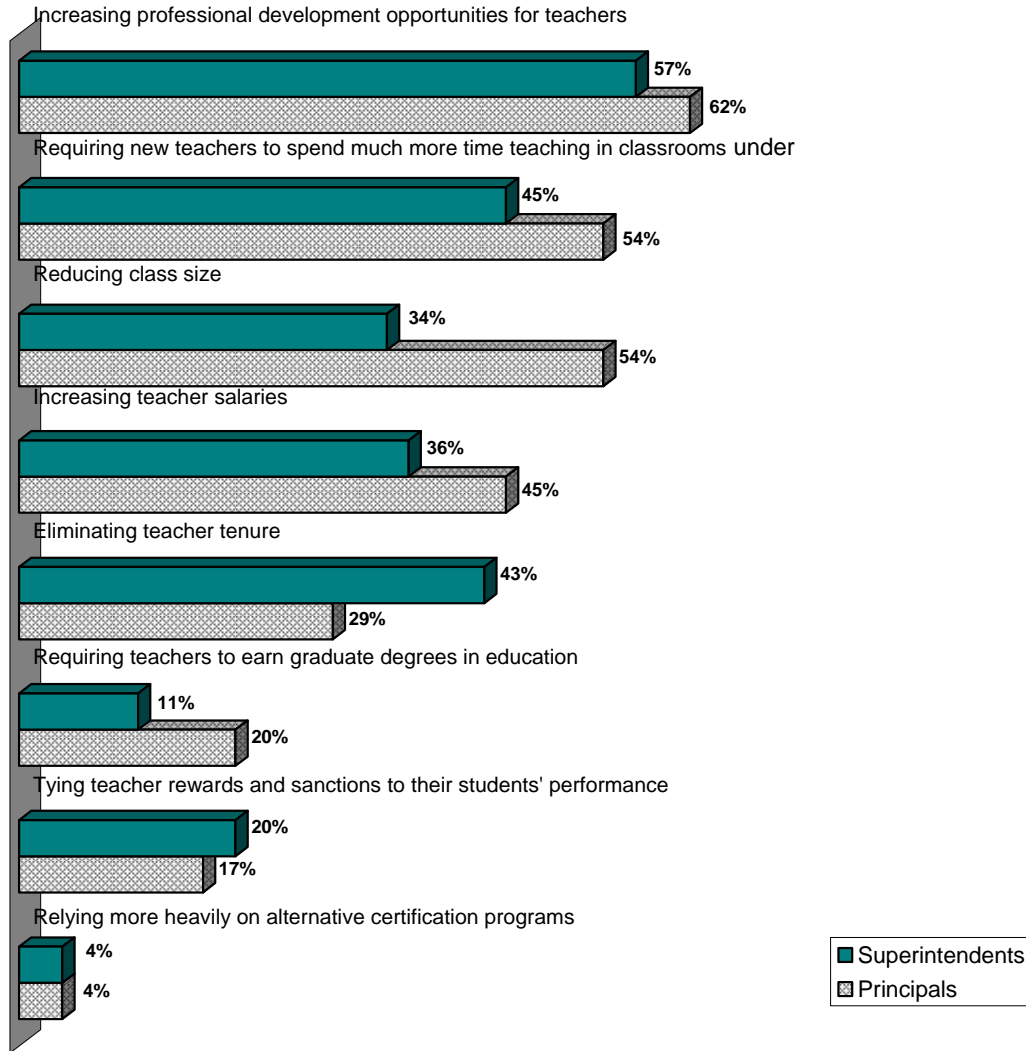
Strong majorities of superintendents and principals want more power to fire bad teachers – even those with tenure

% who think that making it much easier for principals to remove bad teachers – even those who have tenure – would be an effective way to improve educational leadership in the public schools:



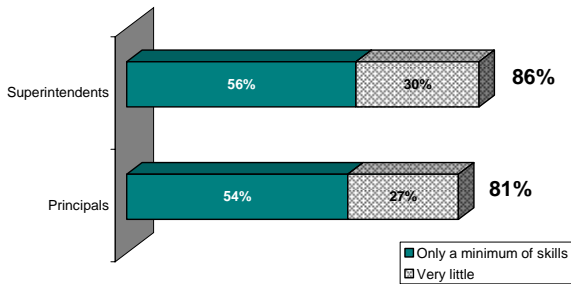
Most say additional professional development and mentoring would improve teaching more than merit pay or alternative certification

% who say the following would be “very effective” at improving teacher quality:

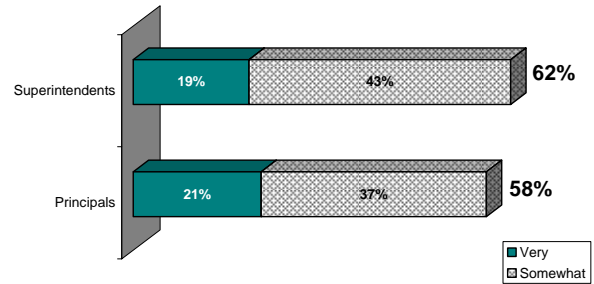


Most school leaders don't put much stock in traditional teacher certification or teacher education

% who say that certification guarantees a minimum of skills or very little:

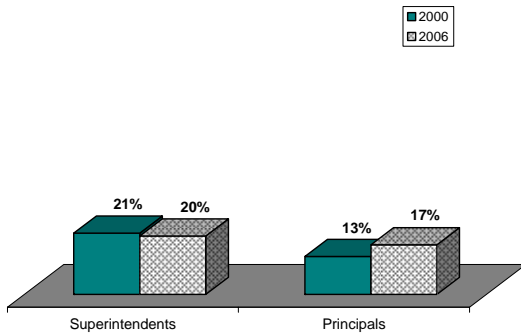


% who say that typical teacher education programs are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to be an effective teacher:

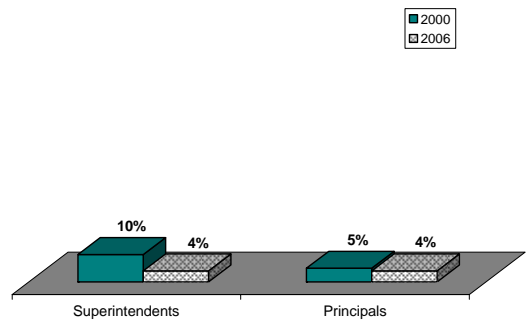


Interest in merit pay and alternative certification has not changed much since 2000

% who say that tying teacher rewards and sanctions to their students' performance would be "very effective" in terms of improving teacher quality:⁹



% who say that relying more heavily on alternative certification programs would be "very effective" in terms of improving teacher quality:⁹

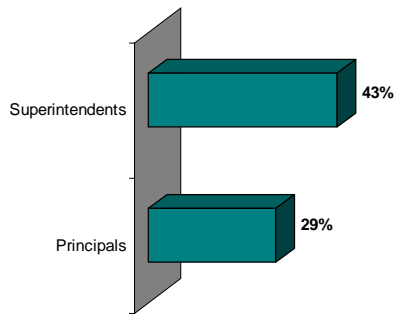


^TThese differences are not statistically significant.

Trend figures from 2000 come from "A Sense of Calling," Public Agenda 2000.

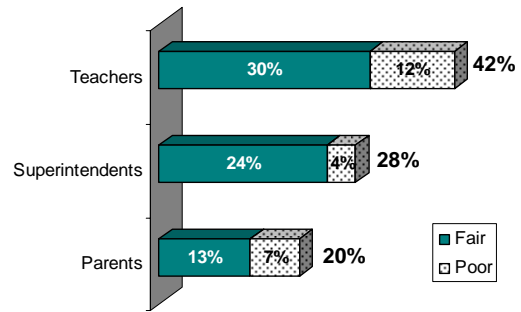
Superintendents voice more support for eliminating teacher tenure than principals

% who say that eliminating teacher tenure would be "very effective" at improving teacher quality:



Teachers are more likely to criticize principals for tolerating bad teachers than either superintendents or parents

% who give principals "fair" or "poor" ratings for getting rid of the worst teachers:

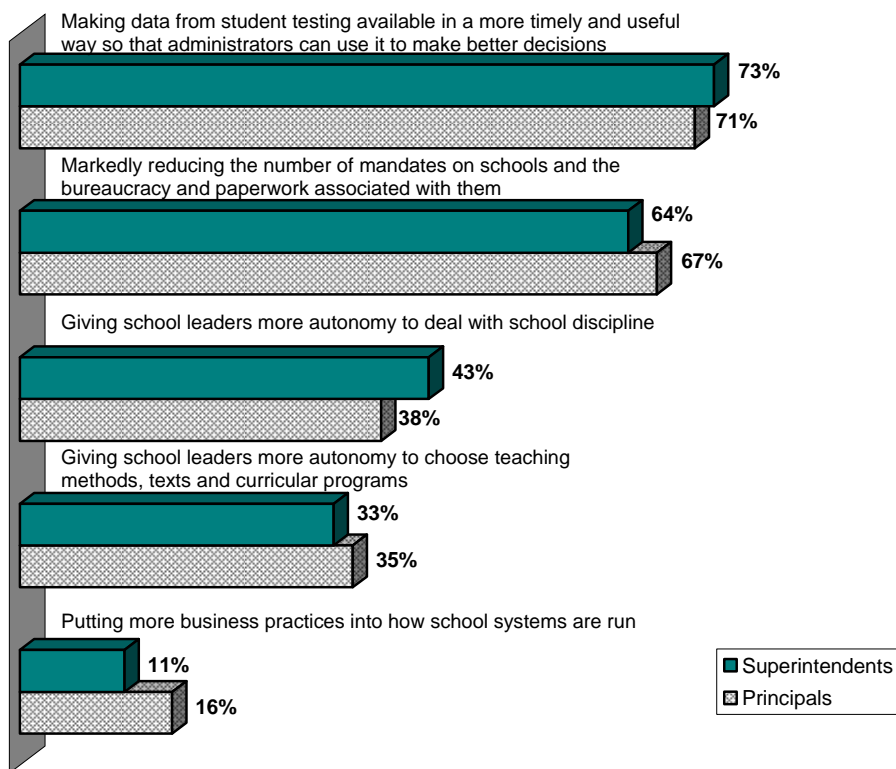


FINDING FIVE: SCHOOL LEADERS WANT BETTER DATA AND FEWER MANDATES

It would be hard to deny that school leaders face enormous challenges. They are charged with raising academic standards, closing achievement gaps between minority and white students, improving teaching, and making sure American students are prepared for a rapidly changing world. Asked what would help them, 7 in 10 superintendents and principals want to get student testing data in more useful and timely ways, and over two-thirds say they want fewer mandates and the bureaucracy and red tape associated with them. Relatively few (11% of superintendents and 16% of principals) say greater use of business practices would be “very effective” at improving school leadership. Most superintendents (61%) and principals (66%) also say their own training is out-of-date. Interestingly, principals are more likely to think they should be held accountable for increasing student achievement than they were several years ago. In 2001, only a third of principals (34%) considered this a good idea. Today, over half (55%) do. However, significant numbers of principals (44%) say they either don’t have enough authority to do a good job (6%) or don’t have enough to be fully effective (38%).

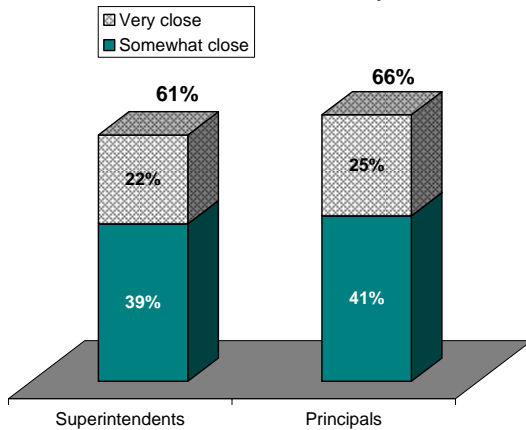
Most school leaders say better data and less red tape would help them lead, but few think more business practices would be useful

% who say the following would be “very effective” at improving school leadership:



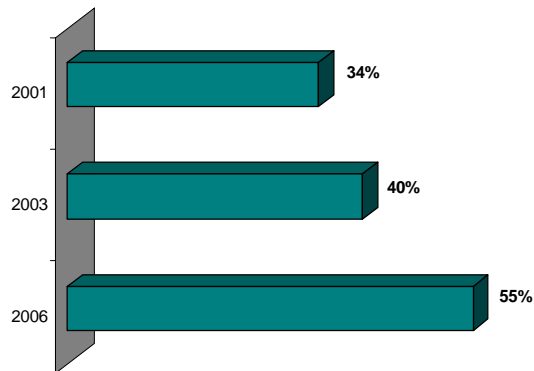
Their own training could be better too

% who say that “typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today’s school district” is very close to describing their experiences:



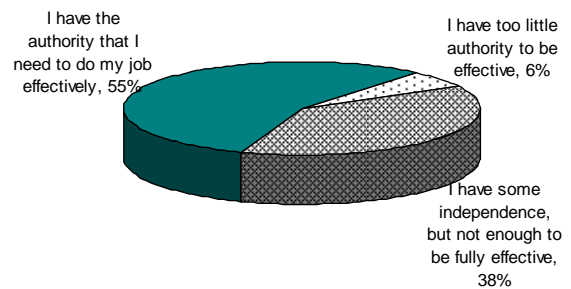
More and more principals say it’s a good idea to hold them accountable for student performance

% of principals who think it is a good idea to hold administrators accountable for student standardized test scores at the building level:



But nearly 4 in 10 principals feel they don’t have enough authority to do the job

Given the responsibilities you have to improve student achievement and the restrictions you have to deal with, how would you assess the level of decision-making authority you hold?¹⁰



¹⁰ In 2003 and 2001, both principals and superintendents were asked only about holding “principals accountable.”

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Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich, and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning web site publicagenda.org offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Recently recognized by Library Journal as one of the Web's best resources, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

About Education Insights

Education Insights is a multi-year initiative launched by Public Agenda to expand community and parent engagement in public education. Building on our extensive opinion research in education and seminal work in developing practical public engagement projects, Education Insights addresses the miscommunication and lack of consensus that sometimes hampers reform. The initiative reflects our belief that the drive to transform American education is at a critical juncture. With astute leadership and genuine community engagement, we believe public education reform can attract broad and sustained support. But without a genuine effort to bring a broader group of Americans into the movement, we fear that the momentum for change could weaken, leaving the country with too many school systems beset with weaknesses and inequities.

About Reality Check

Reality Check is a set of public opinion tracking surveys on important issues in public education. From 1998 through 2002, Public Agenda conducted annual surveys of parents, teachers, students, employers and college professors covering primarily standards, testing, and accountability issues. In 2005 and 2006, Public Agenda revised and updated these Reality Check surveys to cover a broader range of questions, including high school reform, school leadership, teacher preparation and quality, school funding and other key issues. The new Reality Check surveys also include responses from public school principals and superintendents. The tracking surveys will be repeated periodically as a service of Education Insights. The 2005-2006 Reality Check research is supported by the GE Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The Wallace Foundation.

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