

**EMBARGOED**  
**until 12:01 am**  
**Wed., Aug 21, 2013**

**The 45th annual  
PDK/Gallup Poll  
of the Public's Attitudes  
Toward the Public Schools**

# Which way do we go?



American policy makers are forging ahead with education initiatives, but they may be leaving Americans behind and out of the loop.

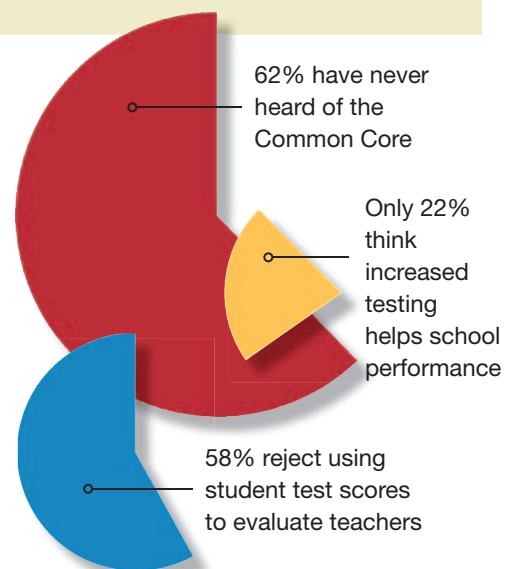
**By William J. Bushaw and Shane J. Lopez**

As 45 states stand on the brink of one of the most ambitious education initiatives in our lifetime, Americans say they don't believe standardized tests improve education, and they aren't convinced rigorous new education standards will help. These are some of the findings in the 45th annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.

Results of the poll come in a time of unsettledness in the American education franchise. Recent major reform efforts — No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core State Standards — face uncertain futures even as the poll lays bare a significant rift between policy makers and ordinary citizens and parents.

For example:

- Fewer than 25% of Americans believe increased testing has helped the performance of local public schools.
- A majority of Americans reject using student scores from standardized tests to evaluate teachers.
- Almost two of three Americans have never heard of the Common Core State Standards, arguably one of the most important education initiatives in decades, and most of those who say they know about the Common Core neither understand it nor embrace it.



**WILLIAM J. BUSHAW** is executive director of PDK International, Arlington, Va. **SHANE J. LOPEZ** is senior scientist in residence, Gallup, Omaha, Neb.

In addition:

- Americans said their children are safe at school, and they reject the idea of arming teachers and principals.
- Americans support public charter schools, homeschooling, online learning, and self-paced instruction, but they reject school vouchers.
- While it's no surprise that Americans believe that high school dropouts are unprepared for careers, they also said high school graduates are unprepared for careers or college.
- A majority of Americans give the public schools in their community an A or B — the highest rating ever recorded by this poll — but fewer than one of five would give the schools nationally a B or better.
- Americans value having schools teach 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.
- Americans trust public school teachers and principals.
- Americans said preschool programs for children living in low-income homes would help those students perform better in school in their teenage years.
- Parents said schools do a poor job teaching children how to manage their finances more effectively.

The PDK/Gallup Poll is a scientifically based survey of 1,001 Americans 18 years and older. Because it is conducted annually and revisits many questions asked in prior years, the poll illuminates how American opinion about education changes over time. The poll also poses new questions developed by a panel of advisers convened to identify emerging issues.

As in the past, every question asked in the poll is reported, and all questions are listed verbatim as they were asked during telephone polling conducted in May 2013. While we present interpretations, we encourage readers to decide for yourselves whether the responses support the analysis. Please join us on Facebook and LinkedIn to express your own opinions.

## Common Core and new student tests

Most states have voluntarily adopted the Common Core State Standards, the result of an initiative launched in June 2009 as a bipartisan partnership between the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Intentionally, the U.S. Department of Education was not involved in developing these college and career standards in English language arts and mathematics. But Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made his support for the Common Core clear, and the education department spent \$330 million to develop new and better student assessments to align with the standards. Because the new tests will deploy in 2014, local school districts and state agencies have invested in aligning what teachers teach to these new standards and ultimately to what will be tested.

Until fall 2012, the Common Core enjoyed widespread acceptance. It was even touted in a national advertising campaign by ExxonMobil Corp. But opposition gathered, starting with scattered protests by conservatives at state capitals who renounced the standards as a federal government overreach. Next, the National Republican Committee in April 2013 unexpectedly adopted a resolution rejecting implementation of the Common Core. The battle continues.

This pushback opened an interesting line of inquiry for the poll, so first we asked Americans if they knew about the Common Core State Standards. For those who did know about the Common Core, we asked follow-up questions to learn how much they knew. Then we used a question from our archive regarding student testing. We discovered a lack of knowledge and lack of support for both the standards and the tests.



## FINDINGS

**Slightly more than one-third of Americans have ever heard of the Common Core;** among Americans with children in public schools, fewer than half recognized the Core.

**The majority of those who said they have heard of the Common Core selected the “somewhat knowledgeable” option.**

Among the third who had heard of the Common Core, only four of 10 said the standards can help make education in the United States more competitive globally; **a majority said the standards will make the U.S. less competitive or have no effect.**

Of those Americans who had heard of the Common Core, **many said — erroneously — that the standards are based on a blending of state standards, that the federal government is insisting that all states adopt the standards, and that there is a plan to create standards in all academic areas.**

**Fewer than one of four Americans said the increase in student testing has helped improve local public schools.**

**TABLE 1.** Now, on a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about the Common Core State Standards. (Asked only of those who have heard of the Common Core.)

	Those who have heard of Common Core		
	National totals		
	Will create standards in all academic areas '13 %	Core based on blend of state standards '13 %	Federal govt. insists all states adopt '13 %
(5) Strongly agree	21	7	14
(4)	28	23	24
(3)	24	39	26
(2)	10	14	10
(1) Strongly disagree	13	12	23
Don't know/refused	3	5	3

**TABLE 2.** Do you believe Common Core State Standards would help make education in the United States more competitive globally, less competitive globally, or have no effect globally? (Asked only of those who have heard of the Common Core.)

	Those who have heard of Common Core			
	National totals			
	'13 %	Rep. '13 %	Dem. '13 %	Ind. '13 %
More competitive	41	32	46	41
Less competitive	21	26	14	26
Have no effect	35	36	37	32
Don't know/refused	3	5	3	1

**TABLE 3.** Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in testing in the public schools to measure academic achievement. Just your impression or what you may have heard or read, has increased testing helped, hurt, or made no difference in the performance of the local public schools?

	National totals	
	'13 %	'07 %
Helped	22	28
Hurt	36	28
Made no difference	41	42
Don't know/refused	1	2

## COMMENTARY

JEFF CHARBONNEAU



### Let's educate the public about the Common Core

As we transition into the Common Core State Standards, we must remember that students, parents, and community members need to be as well versed in the standards as teachers. Our society has a vested interest in educational goals that we set for our students.

With less than half of the general population in the survey having even heard of the standards, let alone being very knowledgeable of them, there is a real and significant need to increase awareness and knowledge of the standards among all citizens.

*JEFF CHARBONNEAU is 2013 National Teacher of the Year. He is a science teacher at Zillah High School, Zillah, Wash.*

**TABLE 4.** Before today, have you ever heard of the Common Core State Standards?

	National totals		Public school parents	
	'13 %		'13 %	
Yes	38		45	
No	62		55	
Don't know/refused	0		0	

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

**TABLE 5.** How knowledgeable are you about the Common Core State Standards? Would you say very knowledgeable, somewhat knowledgeable, not very knowledgeable, or not at all knowledgeable? (Asked only of those who have heard of the Common Core.)

	Those who have heard of Common Core	
	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Very knowledgeable	15	14
Somewhat knowledgeable	51	63
Not very knowledgeable	28	20
Not at all knowledgeable	6	3
Don't know/refused	0	0

# Accountability, accountability, accountability

In addition to the Common Core, other education initiatives center on teacher and principal accountability. For example, state education agencies and local school districts are wrestling with federal and state requirements to hold teachers and principals more accountable for student achievement as measured by standardized tests. But do Americans support this? Further, do Americans believe such evaluations should be made public? Do they have the same interest in knowing about evaluations of other professionals? Do they believe newspapers should publish student test scores assigned to individual teachers? Strongly related to this question of accountability — do Americans lack trust and confidence in teachers and principals, suggesting the need for these and other accountability measures? Finally given the Chicago teachers' strike in September 2012, where do Americans stand on teacher strikes?

## FINDINGS

In just one year, Americans reversed their opinion, and now **58% oppose requiring that teacher evaluations include student scores on standardized tests.**

**Almost two of three Americans oppose releasing information to newspapers about how students of individual teachers perform on standardized tests.**

While 60% of Americans believe performance reviews of teachers should be released to the public, **a greater percentage believe similar reviews of medical doctors (76%) and police (70%) should be released.**

More than 70% of Americans have trust and confidence in the men and women who teach in public schools, and 65% have trust in public school principals. **These percentages are even higher for Americans under the age of 40.**

Americans are divided on whether public school teachers should be permitted to strike, although **there is substantially more acceptance of strikes now than when the question was asked in 1980.**



**TABLE 6.** Do you have trust and confidence in the men and women who are teaching children in the public schools?

	National totals '13 %	Under 40 '13 %	Over 40 '13 %
Yes	72	78	69
No	27	22	29
Don't know/refused	1	0	2

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

**TABLE 7.** Do you have trust and confidence in the men and women who serve as principals in the public schools?

	National totals '13 %	Under 40 '13 %	Over 40 '13 %
Yes	65	70	62
No	34	29	36
Don't know/refused	2	1	2

**TABLE 8.** Some states require that teacher evaluations include how well a teacher's students perform on standardized tests. Do you favor or oppose this requirement?

	National totals '13 %	'12 %
Favor	41	52
Oppose	58	47
Don't know/refused	1	1

**TABLE 9.** Some newspapers are releasing information about how the students of individual teachers perform on standardized tests. Do you favor or oppose the release of this information to the public?

	National totals '13 %	'11 %
Favor	37	51
Oppose	63	48
Don't know/refused	0	1

**TABLE 10.** Should the performance reviews of the following professionals be released to the public? How about for doctors? Teachers? Business leaders? Police officers?

	National totals			
	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %
	Doctors	Teachers	Business leaders	Police officers
Yes	76	60	59	70
No	24	39	40	30
Don't know/refused	0	1	1	0

**TABLE 11.** Should public school teachers be permitted to go on strike?

	National totals		Public school parents	
	'13 %	'80 %	'13 %	'80 %
Yes	52	40	47	43
No	46	52	50	49
Don't know/refused	2	8	3	8

**COMMENTARY**

**VON SHEPPARD**



## 21st-century skills require 21st-century teaching

I'm encouraged that this year's poll results reflect that more than 75% of Americans believe that testing either hurt or made no difference in student performance in public schools.

As a former principal of a high-poverty school, the stakes were high for our students to do well on the test and make Adequate Yearly Progress. But more important for me were the teacher-to-student relationships that were being developed because they are the gateway to developing the 21st-century skills this poll addresses. Poll respondents agreed that building character, setting goals, and developing effective communication skills are critical to students growing and achieving at high levels.

Americans are realizing that educating students is not about teaching to the test or evaluating teachers on student performance. It's about how teachers relate to their students, motivate them, and create a pathway for them to unlock their potential.

*VON SHEPPARD is assistant superintendent of Boulder Valley School District, Boulder, Colo.*

**COMMENTARY**

**MOLLIE MILLER**



## Questioning the need for testing

We are heading in the wrong direction by focusing on the results of testing. Most important, what happens when testing is over? Will students be able to apply this knowledge to real-world situations? As a future educator, I don't want to spend all of my classroom time preparing for a test. What about social skills and building character? If the majority of the population thinks that standardized tests are hurting or not making a difference, then why do we continue to focus on them?

*MOLLIE MILLER is national president of the Future Educators Association.® She graduated from West Windsor Plainsboro High School South, West Windsor, N.J., and plans to attend Mercer County Community College this fall.*



# School safety

Many Americans will remember exactly where they were when they first learned that 26 children, teachers, and administrators were massacred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, 2012. Following a national outpouring of grief came recommendations on how to thwart future tragedies, including arming teachers and principals. We wondered how this event influenced Americans' opinions about safety in school.

## FINDINGS

**Most parents aren't fearful about having their children play outside in their own neighborhoods, but they are even more confident about their child's safety at school.**

**Overwhelmingly, parents don't worry about their child's physical safety while attending school, but they are more concerned about the actions of other students than intruders.**

**By a margin of almost two-to-one, Americans support increasing mental health services rather than hiring more security guards to promote school safety.**

**Americans are split on the need to employ armed security guards, particularly in elementary schools, while most Americans reject arming teachers and administrators.** However, Americans do support screening procedures for visitors to elementary, middle, and high schools, similar to those used in other government buildings.

**TABLE 12.** When your child is outside playing in your own neighborhood, do you fear for his or her safety?

	Public school parents		
	'13 %	'98 %	'77 %
Yes	33	31	28
No	66	68	68
Don't know/refused	1	1	4

**TABLE 13.** Thinking about your oldest child when he or she is at school, do you fear for his or her physical safety?

	Public school parents		
	'13 %	'98 %	'77 %
Yes	12	36	25
No	88	63	69
Don't know/refused	0	1	6

**TABLE 14.** In thinking about your oldest child's safety, are you more concerned about intruders in the school or the actions of other students?

	Public school parents '13 %
Intruders in the school	14
Actions of other students	80
Neither issue (volunteered)	6
Don't know/refused	1

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

**TABLE 15.** To promote school safety, some school districts are considering adding more security guards while others are considering increasing mental health services. Which do you think would be most effective in promoting school safety — hiring more security guards or providing more mental health services?

	National totals '13 %	White '13 %	Nonwhite '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
	Hiring more security guards	33	34	27
Providing more mental health services	59	58	64	52
Both would be equally effective (volunteered)	6	5	6	7
Neither would be effective (volunteered)	2	2	1	3
Don't know/refused	1	1	2	1



**TABLE 16.** Now, please think about your community's elementary schools. On a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.

	Strongly agree (5)		(4)	(3)	(2)	Strongly disagree (1)		Don't know/ refused
	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %
<b>Elementary schools should employ armed security guards.</b>								
National totals	20	15	22	16	26	0		
Public school parents	17	18	22	15	28	1		
<b>Elementary schools should allow teachers and administrators to be armed.</b>								
National totals	18	11	13	11	47	0		
Public school parents	23	10	13	12	42	0		
<b>Elementary schools should have screening procedures similar to those used in government buildings for anyone who wishes to enter the school.</b>								
National totals	38	19	19	14	10	1		
Public school parents	32	19	21	18	10	1		

**TABLE 17.** Now please think about your community's middle-/junior high schools and high schools. On a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.

	Strongly agree (5)		(4)	(3)	(2)	Strongly disagree (1)		Don't know/ refused
	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %
<b>Middle-/junior high schools and high schools should employ armed security guards.</b>								
National totals	31	17	22	10	20	0		
Public school parents	31	20	20	10	19	0		
<b>Middle-/junior high schools and high schools should allow teachers and administrators to be armed.</b>								
National totals	21	11	13	12	43	0		
Public school parents	24	11	14	15	36	0		
<b>Middle-/junior high schools and high schools should have screening procedures similar to those used in government buildings for anyone who wishes to enter the school.</b>								
National totals	42	20	20	12	7	0		
Public school parents	34	21	23	13	9	0		

**COMMENTARY**

**DORIS TERRY WILLIAMS**



## Misguided policies should be corrected

Parents feel their children are safer at school than at play in their own neighborhood, but recent acts of school violence have ignited debate over school safety. I'm encouraged that the strongest sentiments oppose arming teachers and principals and that, given a choice, more respondents prefer mental health services over armed guards.

Eighty percent of respondents are more concerned about violent actions by students than intruders. That concern is corroborated by a recent Rural Trust study indicating that students were far more likely to be the perpetrators of acts of school violence.

This speaks to the need for more mental health services and for greater effort building developmentally appropriate relationships and climates that validate the worth and contributions of all students. The close counts across poll responses suggest that this debate is far from over and that much more must be done to make the case that our children are not our enemies but the victims of misguided politics.

*DORIS TERRY WILLIAMS is executive director of The Rural School and Community Trust, Washington, D.C.*

# New styles of schooling

Americans give high grades to the schools in their local communities but millions of parents are still homeschooling their children or sending them to charter schools. Does this indicate that Americans are more accepting of alternatives to the traditional public schools? How far does that acceptance extend?

## ● FINDINGS

**Americans' support for public charter schools remains high at slightly less than 70%, and two of three Americans support new public charter schools in their communities.**

**A majority of Americans said that public charter schools provide a better education than other public schools.**

**Sixty percent of Americans support allowing parents to homeschool their children, with even higher levels of support among public school parents.**

**An overwhelming majority of Americans favor having public schools provide services to homeschooled children**, including services for disabled children (90%), opportunities for students to attend public school part-time (75%), and opportunities for students to participate in public school athletic and other extracurricular programs (80%), with support even higher among parents.

**Seventy percent of Americans oppose private school vouchers — the highest level of opposition to vouchers ever recorded in this survey.**

Three of four Americans favor allowing high school students to earn college credits via the Internet while attending high school; there's even stronger support for the concept among public school parents. **However, support declines for allowing high school students to earn high school credits online.**

**Sixty percent of Americans support allowing students to progress through school at their own pace without regard to the usual grade levels.**

60% of Americans favor allowing parents to homeschool their children. And 60% would allow students to progress at their own pace.





**TABLE 18.** Should a student be able to progress through the school system at his or her own speed and without regard to the usual grade level? This would mean that he or she might study 7th-grade math, but only study 5th-grade English. Would you favor or oppose such a plan in the local schools?

	National totals		Public school parents	
	'13 %	'80 %	'13 %	'80 %
Favor	60	62	62	60
Oppose	39	30	37	35
Don't know/refused	1	8	2	5

**TABLE 19.** As you may know, charter schools operate under a charter or contract that frees them from many of the state regulations imposed on public schools and permits them to operate independently. Do you favor or oppose the idea of charter schools?

	National totals				
	'13 %	'12 %	'11 %	'10 %	'09 %
Favor	68	66	70	68	64
Oppose	29	30	27	28	33
Don't know/refused	3	4	3	4	3

**TABLE 20.** Would you support new public charter schools in your community?

	National totals	
	'13 %	'10 %
Yes	67	65
No	32	33
Don't know/refused	1	2

**TABLE 21.** Generally speaking, would you support a large increase in the number of public charter schools operating in the United States?

	National totals	
	'13 %	'10 %
Yes	59	60
No	39	38
Don't know/refused	1	2

**TABLE 22.** Do you believe students receive a better education at a public charter school than at other public schools?

	National totals	White	Nonwhite	Public school parents
	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %
Public charter schools	52	53	48	51
Other public schools	31	29	42	28
No difference (volunteered)	9	10	6	10
Don't know/refused	8	9	4	11

**TABLE 23.** There are increasing opportunities for high school students to earn college credits online over the Internet. Do you favor or oppose this practice?

	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	75	80
Oppose	24	19
Don't know/refused	1	2

**TABLE 24.** There are increasing opportunities for students to earn high school credits online over the Internet. Generally speaking, do you favor or oppose this practice?

	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	56	63
Oppose	44	36
Don't know/refused	1	0



**TABLE 25.** As you may know, some parents choose to homeschool their children rather than sending them to public or private schools. Do you favor or oppose the practice of parents teaching their children at home?

	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	60	64
Oppose	38	33
Don't know/refused	2	3

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

**TABLE 26.** Would you favor or oppose making the following public school services available to children who are schooled at home?

	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	90	90
Oppose	10	10
Don't know/refused	0	0

**THE OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO ATTEND PUBLIC SCHOOL PART-TIME.**

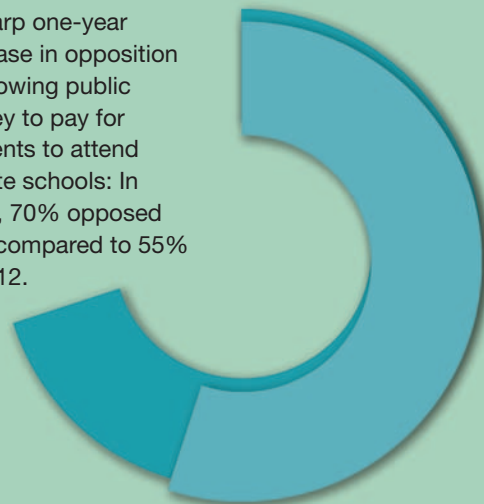
	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	75	81
Oppose	25	19
Don't know/refused	0	0

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

**THE OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC SCHOOL ATHLETIC PROGRAMS AND OTHER AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES.**

	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	80	85
Oppose	20	15
Don't know/refused	0	0

A sharp one-year increase in opposition to allowing public money to pay for students to attend private schools: In 2013, 70% opposed this, compared to 55% in 2012.



**TABLE 27.** Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?

	National totals		
	'13 %	'12 %	'11 %
Favor	29	44	34
Oppose	70	55	65
Don't know	1	1	1

## Beyond the basics

Are Americans in sync with policy makers on what is taught and tested in the public schools, particularly given the continued emphasis on English language arts and mathematics instruction? To examine this, we created a series of new questions to determine levels of support for instruction in 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, student motivation, goal setting, well-being, and character. We asked a question we first asked 15 years ago about extracurricular activities.

### FINDINGS

**By a slight margin, Americans selected critical thinking skills as most important of the 21st-century skills, closely followed by communication skills.** Slightly lower on the list were setting meaningful goals, motivating students, increasing student creativity, and collaborating on projects. Building student character was listed as least important, though 51% of respondents strongly agreed that schools should play a role in this.

**More than 90% of Americans believe activities such as band, drama, sports, and newspaper are very or somewhat important, with a high percentage selecting very important.**

**TABLE 28.** I would like your opinion about activities such as the school band, drama, sports, and the school newspaper. Would you say these school activities are very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important to a young person's education?

	National totals		Public school parents
	'13 %	'97 %	'13 %
Very important	63	63	66
Somewhat important	31	27	31
Not too important	4	8	2
Not at all important	1	2	1
Don't know/refused	0	0	0

**TABLE 29.** On a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. **Note: Statements appear in the order that received the strongest support.**

	National totals					
	Strongly agree (5)		(3)		Strongly Disagree (1)	
	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %
Today's schools should teach students critical thinking skills.	80	15	4	1	1	0
Today's schools should teach students communication skills.	78	16	4	0	1	0
Today's schools should teach students how to set meaningful goals.	64	25	8	2	1	0
Today's schools should know how to motivate students.	61	24	12	2	2	0
Today's schools should teach students how to collaborate on projects.	57	27	13	2	2	0
Today's schools should foster students' creativity.	58	26	13	2	1	0
Today's schools should promote students' well-being.	54	23	19	3	1	0
Today's schools should build students' character.	51	25	16	6	2	0

**COMMENTARY**

**ROGER P. WEISSBERG**



**Make social and emotional learning a priority**

The 2013 PDK/Gallup poll indicates that the majority of people agree that public schools should teach students a full range of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies, including how to set meaningful goals, communication skills, how to collaborate on projects, and character. This aligns with the views of many researchers and teachers. In May 2013, a national survey by Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates indicated that most teachers believe promoting SEL will benefit students from all backgrounds (97%), and will have positive effects on school attendance and graduation (80%), standardized test scores and overall academic performance (77%), college preparation (78%), workforce readiness (87%), and citizenship (87%).

The PDK/Gallup Poll shows that demand for SEL comes not only from educational researchers and practitioners, but also from the public at large. SEL is an idea whose time has come, and it should be a priority in education.

*ROGER P. WEISSBERG is president and CEO of CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, Chicago, Ill. (Photo by Steven E. Gross)*

**COMMENTARY**

**OTHA THORNTON**



**American education needs engaged parents**

The 2013 PDK/Gallup poll shows overwhelming agreement that our schools should teach students critical thinking and communication skills. These skills are essential for success in college and the workplace; that's why they're emphasized in the Common Core State Standards. Families must play an active role in advocating for these standards and the resources and tools that teachers and students need for success.

A majority of those polled agree with the PTA that teachers and administrators should not be armed. But families need to be engaged in developing policies intended to ensure our children's safety at school. Sustained and meaningful family engagement ensures that every student has a voice and no young person is left without an advocate.

*OTHA THORNTON is president of the National PTA, Alexandria, Va. He is the first African-American male PTA president in the organization's 177-year history.*



# Challenges facing the public schools

For 45 years, the first question we have asked Americans is to describe the biggest problem facing the public schools in their communities. We ask it first so that the other questions will not affect their responses, and no prompts are provided. This question provides one of the best metrics on how Americans perceive their schools. Lack of financial support has been the leading concern since 2002. We then ask Americans to grade the schools in their communities and the nation's schools using A through Fail.

This year, to gauge Americans' awareness of national education issues, we asked if they had heard of three national education initiatives. Finally, we asked Americans if they approve of closing neighborhood schools because of declining enrollment and if schools should provide free public education benefits to children of immigrants who are in the United States illegally.

## FINDINGS

**Lack of financial support continues to be the biggest problem facing public schools.** Public school parents agree, and they see overcrowding as the second biggest problem.

**Three new concerns rose to near the top of the list of the biggest problems facing public schools: lack of parental support, difficulties in getting good teachers, and testing requirements and regulations.**

**Fifty-three percent of Americans gave the schools in their communities an A or B, the highest percentage ever recorded.** However, grades assigned to the nation's schools are much lower, with most Americans saying other schools are just average, a result that has been fairly consistent across the years.

Almost all Americans have heard of the No Child Left Behind, federal education legislation approved by Congress in 2002.

**But, fewer than half of Americans have heard of President Obama's two important education initiatives, Race to the Top and waivers giving states flexibility in meeting federal education requirements.**

**Fifty-five percent of Americans oppose providing free public education benefits to children of immigrants who are in the United States illegally.** This is a highly partisan issue with Republican opposition at 80%, while 66% of Democrats express support.

**Americans are divided on closing neighborhood schools because of declining student enrollment in order to save money.**

**TABLE 30.** What do you think are the biggest problems that the public schools of your community must deal with?

	National totals		Public school parents
	'13 %	'03 %	'13 %
Lack of financial support	35	25	36
Lack of discipline	8	16	3
Overcrowded schools	7	14	11
Lack of parental support	5	3	8
Testing/regulations	4	1	4
Fighting	3	4	1
Difficulty getting good teachers	3	5	3
Use of drugs	3	9	3

**TABLE 31.** Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves in your community were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here — A, B, C, D, or Fail?

	National totals				
	'13 %	'08 %	'03 %	'98 %	'93 %
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>47</b>
A	13	12	11	10	10
B	40	34	37	36	37
C	29	30	31	31	31
D	11	11	10	9	11
Fail	4	5	5	5	4
Don't know/refused	3	8	6	9	7

**TABLE 32.** How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally — A, B, C, D, or Fail?

	National totals				
	'13 %	'08 %	'03 %	'98 %	'93 %
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>
A	1	3	2	1	2
B	18	19	24	17	17
C	53	44	52	49	48
D	19	13	12	15	17
Fail	6	5	3	5	4
Don't know/refused	3	16	7	13	12

**TABLE 33.** To save money, some school districts are closing neighborhood schools because of declining student enrollment, causing students to attend another public school. Do you favor or oppose this process?

	National totals '13 %	White '13 %	Nonwhite '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
Favor	47	49	33	44
Oppose	50	47	64	53
Don't know/refused	3	3	3	3

**TABLE 34.** Do you favor or oppose providing free public education benefits to children of immigrants who are in the United States illegally?

	National totals '13 %	Rep. '13 %	Dem. '13 %	Ind. '13 %
Favor	44	19	66	41
Oppose	55	81	33	58
Don't know/refused	1	0	2	1

**TABLE 35.** There are several national education programs that many Americans may or may not know about. Please tell me whether you have heard of the following programs or not.

	National totals '13 %	Public school parents '13 %
<b>NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND</b>		
Yes	97	99
No	3	1
Don't know/refused	0	0
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>RACE TO THE TOP</b>		
Yes	43	43
No	57	58
Don't know/refused	0	0
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>WAIVERS THAT GIVE STATES FLEXIBILITY IN MEETING FEDERAL EDUCATION LAWS</b>		
Yes	42	41
No	56	57
Don't know/refused	1	2

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

## A deeper dive:

### How parents view the schools their children attend

Along with asking all Americans to grade the schools in their community and the nation's schools, we asked parents to assign a grade to the school that their oldest child attends. In addition, we asked a series of questions, again just of parents, about the relationship between their child and the school that their child attends.

#### FINDINGS

**Public school parents continue to give the schools attended by their oldest child very high grades with almost three of four assigning either an A or B, significantly higher than the grades Americans assign the schools in their community.**

**Parents agree that their child has a higher level of well-being because of the school he or she attends, that schools are doing a good job helping children build stronger relationships with friends and family members, and that schools help students become healthier and more involved in the community.**

**On the other hand, parents believe schools do a poor job teaching children how to manage their finances more effectively.**

**TABLE 36.** Using the A, B, C, D, and Fail scale again, what grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?

	Public school parents				
	'13 %	'08 %	'03 %	'98 %	'93 %
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>72</b>
A	36	25	29	22	27
B	35	42	39	40	45
C	23	16	20	25	18
D	4	6	8	8	5
Fail	1	5	4	3	2
Don't know/refused	0	5	0	2	3

**TABLE 37-41.** For the following questions, please use a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree. You may use any number between 1 and 5.

	Parents					
	Strongly agree (5) %	(4) %	(3) %	(2) %	Strongly disagree (1) %	Don't know/refused %
<b>TABLE 37.</b> My child has substantially higher well-being because of the school he or she attends.	<b>2013</b> 33	<b>31</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>2011</b> 38	32	18	8	4	0
<b>TABLE 38.</b> My child's school encourages him or her to build stronger relationships with friends and family members.	<b>2013</b> 32	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>2011</b> 43	25	19	8	3	2
<b>TABLE 39.</b> My child's school teaches him or her to manage finances more effectively.	<b>2013</b> 7	<b>8</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>7</b>
	<b>2011</b> 9	17	35	18	16	4
<b>TABLE 40.</b> My child's school does things to help him or her become healthier.	<b>2013</b> 24	<b>32</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>2011</b> 33	30	23	9	6	0
<b>TABLE 41.</b> My child's school encourages him or her to be more involved in the community.	<b>2013</b> 27	<b>26</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>2011</b> 36	28	21	8	5	2

# The President's education priorities

For several years, we've asked Americans to grade, again using letter grades A through Fail, the President's support for America's public schools. Further, President Obama identified three education priorities: making college more affordable, investing more in early childhood education, and redesigning America's high schools. We asked Americans which of these three priorities they felt was most important. We then followed up with questions about high school preparation for college and careers, college preparation for careers, and questions about early childhood education.

## FINDINGS

**Grades assigned to President Obama for his performance in support of public schools remained unchanged.** Of course, grades are drastically different from those Americans who self-identify as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents.

**Overwhelmingly, Americans recognize that not only is a high school dropout not ready for a career, neither is a high school graduate.** Many Americans also said high school graduates are not ready for college. A majority also said college graduates are not ready for work.

However, in spite of what they say about high school graduates, **Americans do not rate redesigning American high schools as the greatest priority.** Of the three education priorities identified by the President, making college more affordable was rated most important followed by making more investments in early childhood education, and, last, redesigning America's high schools.

Three of four Americans believe preschool programs for children from low-income households would help these same children perform better in school in their teenage years, and **almost two of three Americans are willing to support these programs with taxes.**

**TABLE 44.** Do you think that preschool programs for children from low-income and poverty-level households would help students perform better in school in their teenage years — a great deal, quite a lot, not much, not at all?

	National totals		
	'13 %	'06 %	'92 %
A great deal	45	49	39
Quite a lot	28	32	35
Not much	21	13	16
Not at all	6	5	5
Don't know/refused	1	1	5

**TABLE 45.** It has been proposed that the public schools make preschool programs available to three- and four-year-olds whose parents desire such programs. These programs would be supported by taxes. Would you favor or oppose such programs?

	National totals	
	'13 %	'91 %
Favor	63	55
Oppose	37	40
Don't know/refused	0	5

**TABLE 42.** President Obama is starting his second term in office. How would you grade his performance in support of public schools using the A, B, C, D, or Fail scale?

	National totals				Rep.	Dem.	Ind.
	'13 %	'12 %	'11 %	'10 %	'13 %	'13 %	'13 %
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>30</b>
A	9	10	11	7	0	18	6
B	27	27	30	27	7	46	24
C	27	25	25	26	26	25	30
D	15	17	14	18	26	7	15
Fail	18	17	15	15	36	1	19
Don't know/refused	5	4	5	7	4	2	6

**TABLE 43.** How important are the following national educational initiatives to America's future? Please rate as very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important.

	National totals		
	Making college affordable '13 %	Investing in early childhood '13 %	Redesigning high school '13 %
Very important	76	61	42
Somewhat important	17	23	39
Not too important	5	10	15
Not at all important	2	6	3
Don't know/refused	0	0	2

**TABLE 46.** Next are some questions about students and their future. On a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following items.

	National totals							
	Today's high school dropout is ready for the world of work.		Today's high school graduate is ready for the world of work.		Today's high school graduate is ready for college.		Today's college graduate is ready for the world of work.	
	'13 %	'12 %	'13 %	'12 %	'13 %	'12 %	'13 %	'12 %
<b>(5) Strongly agree</b>	3	3	4	4	5	8	8	14
<b>(4)</b>	2	3	13	14	24	25	34	40
<b>(3)</b>	8	10	34	38	44	43	35	29
<b>(2)</b>	20	19	28	26	17	17	14	10
<b>(1) Strongly disagree</b>	67	65	21	18	10	7	9	7

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

# Harnessing public opinion

Being a policy maker is a tough balancing act of leading and listening. Get too far ahead of the public, and they won't follow; listen too much to what they want, and you may be leading them somewhere that's not a good place to be.

We see something of that confusion in this year's poll results.

The Common Core State Standards is a significant education initiative with the potential to dramatically change instruction in U.S. classrooms, but most Americans don't know about it, and those who do know about it don't understand it.

How far can such an ambitious plan go when the American public is not on board to support and promote it? For the most part, we believe that teachers and principals support the Common Core, and we know that Americans trust these professionals. Therefore, it's critical that policy makers seize the opportunity to prepare teachers and principals to talk with their communities about the value of these new standards and how they will increase student learning.

But teachers and principals also have reservations about the accountability proposals attached to implementation of the new standards. The standards must be paired with superior student assessments that document student problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. However, those new assessments initially will make it appear as though students are learning less in school. When test scores decline as anticipated, will teacher jobs be threatened?

Package this concern of education professionals with the American public's opinion of testing. Most Americans believe the significant increase in testing in the past decade has hurt or made no difference in improving schools. Further, a majority of Americans don't support using student standardized test scores to evaluate teachers. This convergence of public opinion about testing threatens to sharpen the pushback that policy makers will feel if they insist on staying the course and make high-stakes employment and other accountability decisions based on new challenging standards and associated assessments.

Americans trust and have confidence in public school teachers and principals, one of our strongest indicators each year. Our sense is that the public will not tolerate a system in which teachers and principals are evaluated on test scores. Policy makers would be smarter to invest in systems that focus on improving teacher skills. Shifting course in this direction may deliver the necessary support among the profession for the Common Core and a new willingness among educators to help educate the public about its importance.

## School safety

Policy makers may also be out of step with public opinion when it comes to the safety of our children. So let's listen carefully to what

## COMMENTARY

HELEN GYM



## Policy makers should listen to parents

As a public school parent in Philadelphia, I'm not surprised the 2013 PDK/Gallup poll on education indicates a significant gap between parents and education policy makers. Overwhelmingly, parents give high marks to the schools their children attend; 71% give them an A or B, the highest percentage in 20 years. We don't fear for our child's physical safety in school. We want to see our children progress at an individualized pace, we value extracurricular activities, and we believe the biggest problem facing public schools is financial support.

But contrast these beliefs with education policies that are stripping away art and science education, extracurricular activities, and critical supports like librarians, counselors, and aides. Our national agenda endorses homogenized, test-driven curricula, limiting teachers' collective bargaining rights, and misplaced fearmongering about safety in schools. Parents said they are more concerned about the actions of other students (80%) than armed intruders (14%). Parents' top priority for securing schools calls for more mental health services. But where is that reflected in the agenda of our legislators?

Parents overwhelmingly believe in public schools. We want financial support and smaller class sizes. We want a focus on teaching and learning, not just test scores. Since education policy makers say parent support is a top indicator of school success, they would do well to act on what parents are saying.

*HELEN GYM is cofounder of Parents United for Public Education and a blogger at the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, Philadelphia, Pa.*

## ANATOMY OF AN ANNUAL POLL

The PDK/Gallup poll was conducted in May, but the work of poll codirectors William J. Bushaw, Shane J. Lopez, and their teams began much earlier and continued long after. This is the nutshell version:

<b>January</b>	Solicit issues, topics, and questions for the poll from policy makers and educators.
<b>February</b>	Convene an advisory committee to consider suggestions, select topics, and frame questions.
<b>March</b>	Finalize poll topics and search the PDK/Gallup poll archive to determine if similar questions have been asked in the past. Draft preliminary wording for new questions.
<b>April</b>	Assemble and review a draft survey instrument to ensure that question items are written correctly and are free of any ordering bias. Conduct test interviews.
<b>May</b>	Fine-tune the final survey questionnaire for interviewers. Administer telephone interviews and collect data. Process and weight data to reflect U.S. census population parameters.
<b>June</b>	Review and analyze data.
<b>July</b>	Write about results for an article in the September issue of <i>Kappan</i> .
<b>August</b>	Release results to media, PDK members, U.S. Congress, school district superintendents, state education commissioners, and other policy makers.
<b>September</b>	Publish the complete poll report in the September issue of <i>Kappan</i> and post online at <a href="http://www.pdkpoll.org">www.pdkpoll.org</a> and <a href="http://education.gallup.com">http://education.gallup.com</a> .

Americans are saying. First, do everything possible to keep guns and other weapons out of school. Americans like neither the idea of arming teachers and principals nor having armed security guards in schools. What they do want is more mental health services for students, possibly because they are more concerned about the actions of other students than intruders at school.

Policy makers would do well to carefully weigh Americans' common sense opinions about school safety and make investments in proactive measures, such as improving mental health services and using common sense screening procedures rather than placing more guns in schools. **K**

## METHODOLOGY

This report represents findings from a quantitative survey that Gallup conducted on behalf of PDK International. The overall objective of this study is to learn the opinions of the American public about key issues facing K-12 education in this country.

To achieve this objective, Gallup conducted 1,001 interviews with members of the Gallup Panel age 18 years and older who reside in telephone households. All interviews were conducted via outbound telephone interviewing, with a national sample of adults age 18 and older drawn from the Gallup Panel. The Gallup Panel is a nationally representative research panel. All members of this proprietary in-house, probability-based, longitudinal panel of U.S. households have been recruited via dual frame landline and wireless telephone methodology or address-based sampling (ABS). Unlike most panels, Gallup Panel members do not receive incentives for participation. The Gallup Panel includes 60,000 individuals who represent more than 50,000 households. Gallup recruits members on an ongoing basis to account for



attrition. Gallup sampled a national cross-section of households to yield a representative survey across all segments of the population in telephone-owning households. The obtained sample was statistically adjusted (weighted) to be representative of U.S. adults nationwide.

Gallup conducted surveys in English only from May 7 to May 31, 2013. Up to five calls were made to each household to reach an eligible respondent.

For results based on the total sample of 1,001 adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the margin of error attributable to sampling error is  $\pm 3.8\%$ ; in the case of subsamples, the margin of error would be greater. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls. Reported frequencies may not add up to 100% due to rounding or the exclusion of "don't know" and refused results in some cases.

## COMPOSITION OF THE SAMPLE

<b>Adults</b>	<b>%</b>
No children in school	67
Public school parents	30
Nonpublic school parents	3
<b>Age</b>	<b>%</b>
Over 40	68
40 and under	32
<b>Gender</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	48
Female	52
<b>Race</b>	<b>%</b>
White	85
Nonwhite	15
<b>Region</b>	<b>%</b>
Northeast	19
Midwest	21
South	36
West	23
<b>Political party</b>	<b>%</b>
Republican	26
Democrat	34
Independent	37
Undesignated	3
<b>Education</b>	<b>%</b>
Total college**	67
Total high school***	33

\* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

\*\* Those with some college and/or a college degree

\*\*\* Those with high school diploma or less education

## ADVISORY PANEL

The questionnaire for the 2013 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools was developed in consultation with a panel of experts in education convened by poll codirectors **William J. Bushaw** and **Shane J. Lopez**. The advisory panel selected the topics asked in this year's poll. PDK International and Gallup express their appreciation for the guidance provided by these panel members.

**Kim Anderson**, director, NEA Center for Advocacy and Outreach

**Kathleen M. Andreson**, past president, PDK International

**Andy Coons**, chief operating officer, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

**Corina Cortez**, adviser to the executive director, National Education Association

**Virginia Edwards**, president, Educational Projects in Education

**John Jackson**, president and CEO, Schott Foundation

**Daina Lieberman**, teacher, Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools

**Connie Rath**, dean, Gallup University

**Bill Skilling**, superintendent, Oxford (Mich.) Community Schools

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## PDK ARCHIVE AND DATABASE

The PDK/Gallup poll archive includes more than 800 questions — organized by topic — asked of Americans since the first PDK/Gallup poll in 1969. Multiple year results are available when the same question was used in subsequent polls.

PDK members can access the PDK/Gallup poll archive by logging in to PDK at [www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org). Copies of all PDK/Gallup polls are available to PDK members free at [www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org). Nonmembers can buy previous polls for \$4.95 each.