

In Education, Change is the Status Quo

An AASA Survey of School Superintendents

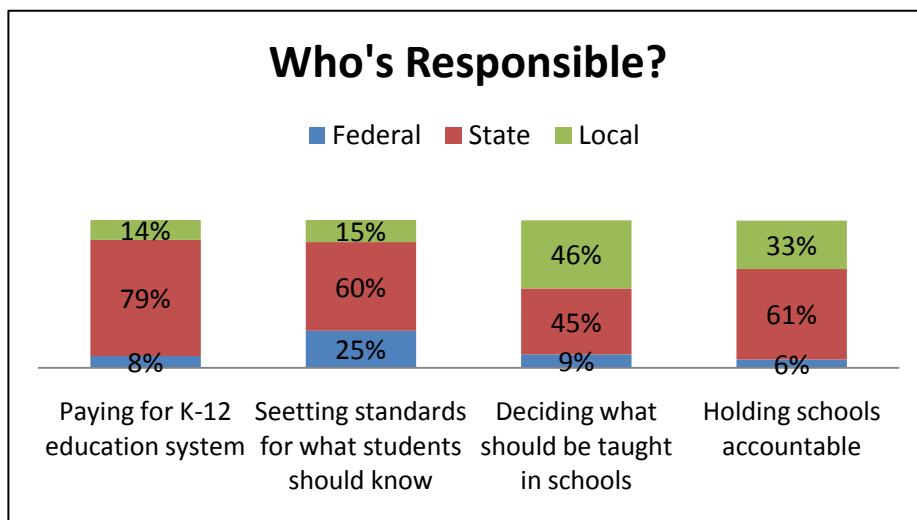
'Change is the new constant—the new status quo.' The opening line of this year's annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup *Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* couldn't sum it up better: America's public schools are constantly changing: change in education is the status quo. School administrators, educators, and policy makers at the local, state and federal level have been engaged in a decades-long approach to shaping and molding America's public school system into one that meets the ever-changing needs of a growing country. The schools of today are different than the schools of previous generations.

While recent trends in the dialogue of improving America's public schools seem to pit the traditional educational system against a group of mostly non-educators working in think tanks and foundations, the reality is that these two groups are traveling different paths toward a common destination: shaping a federal role that results in helping states and school districts improve educational outcomes for all students—with special focus on low income students, students who are just learning English and minority students for whom the vestiges of discrimination create barriers to learning inside and outside of school. The shared goals remain to continually improve America's public school system, to improve the lives of all children, and to promote a vibrant economy and a political culture needed to propel the nation forward to the future.

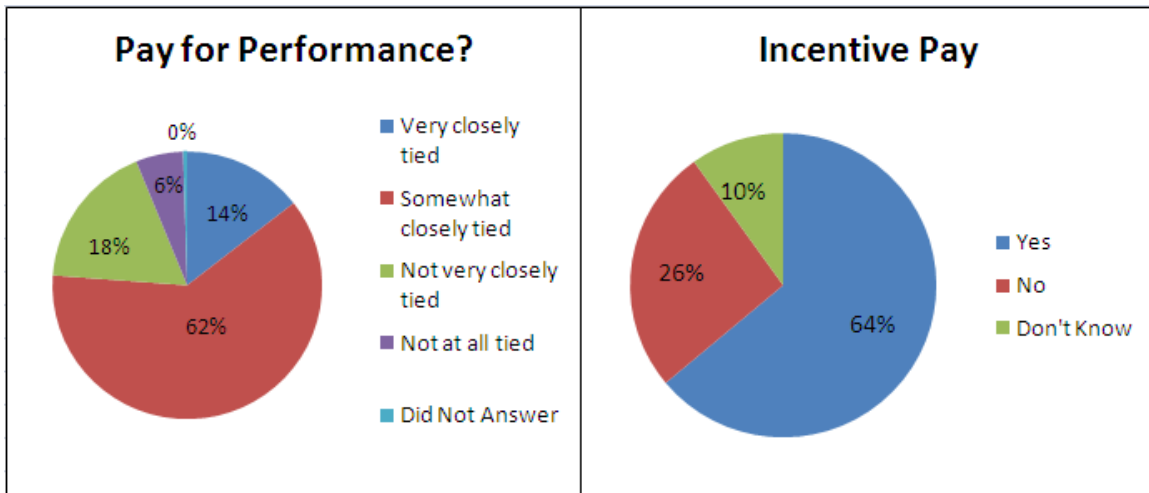
For more than 40 years, Phi Delta Kappa has partnered with Gallup to survey the American public and gauge public opinion on public schools. Looking to bridge the gap—or connect the dots—between two groups that have more in common than not, AASA worked in conjunction with PDK to survey school administrators to see what—if any—similarities or differences exist between the opinion of the general public and that of administrators leading America's public school systems. While the full Gallup/PDK survey included 50 survey items, the AASA mini-survey used only seven of those items. The selected items touched on topics or policy issues for which AASA wanted to gauge member opinion.

Keeping It Local: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is the largest and most comprehensive federal law providing funds to support states' and school districts' local efforts to improve educational outcomes for low income students. ESEA is scheduled to be rewritten in the coming year. One of the hottest topics in the reauthorization is the whether or not it is proper for the federal government to impose change in local practices and policies governing the daily operations of public schools. The response to the Gallup/PDK question from both the general public and local school administrators was overwhelming: both administrators and the general public believe that state and local government—not federal government—should be the primary agency responsible for public education. Seventy-one percent of the general public believes the decision of what should be taught in schools lies at the state or local level, as do 91 percent of school administrators. The general public and school administrators both believe that the federal government should not be involved in deciding what is taught in schools: 43 percent of the general public believes the state should decide what is taught in schools, as did 45 percent of administrators. Local administrators differed from the public regarding the size of the local role in deciding what is taught in public schools: 28 percent of the general public believed the local government should decide what is taught in schools, compared to 46 percent of administrators.

Both local administrators and the general public expressed a strong preference for eliminating the federal role in holding public schools accountable: nearly all (94 percent) school administrator respondents believe the federal government should not have a role in holding schools accountable, as do 80 percent of Americans. More than three-quarters (79 percent) of administrator respondents believe the state is responsible for paying for K-12 education, and 60 percent think the state should set standards for what students should know. In every area questioned paying for public education, setting standards for public schools, deciding what should be taught and holding the schools accountable—the public and local school administrators agreed the federal government’s role should be minor. That strong public opinion is at odds with U.S. Department of Education’s plans for the reauthorization of ESEA and the implementation of the stimulus funds granted to public schools support state and local efforts in dealing with the revenue shortfalls caused by the great recession.

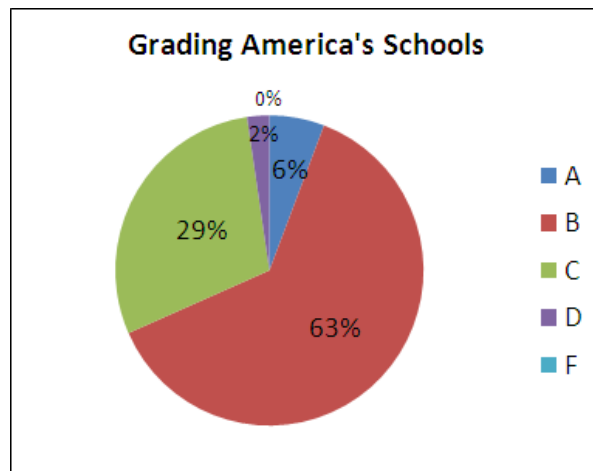


Pay for Performance and Incentive Pay: Perhaps the second hottest topic in the coming reauthorization of ESEA is how to improve teaching through better evaluation and support of teachers and how to provide a financial reward to teachers who are determined to be more effective. Determining teacher effectiveness may involve tying student test scores to teacher evaluation and subsequently teacher pay. Both school administrators and the general public agree that teacher salaries should be closely tied to student achievement: roughly three quarters of school administrators (76 percent) and the general public (73 percent) believe that a teacher’s salary should be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ closely tied to his/her students’ academic achievement. Roughly two-thirds of school administrators (64 percent) and the general public (68 percent) believe that teachers should be paid higher salaries as an incentive to teach in schools identified as ‘in need of improvement.’ The convergence of public and professional opinion on tying student outcomes to teacher salary and incentive pay most likely means we can expect state legislation related to linking student performance and teacher pay, as well as state and federal discussion around the thorny questions of how to best measure student outcomes, how to fairly and accurately tie those outcomes to salaries, and how to structure salaries so as to place teachers in hard-to-staff classrooms and schools.



Grading the Nation’s Schools:

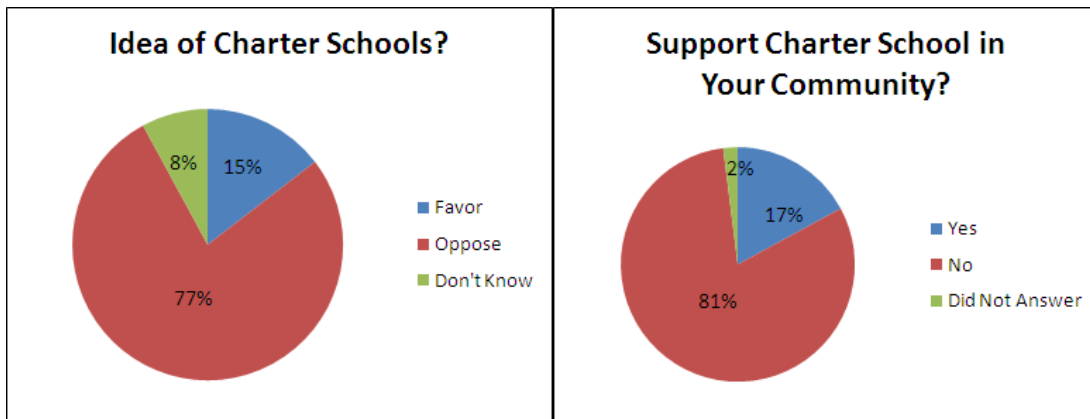
The most frequently discussed and benchmarked questions of the annual PDK/Gallup poll ask respondents to assign letter grades to schools. Respondents are asked to grade the nation’s schools, their community’s public schools and the school their oldest child attends or attended. AASA chose only to ask about the nation’s schools because there is an obvious bias in asking administrators to grade the schools they administer. The grades of schools nationally generated distinctly different responses from the general public and school administrators. Public opinion polls over the years have found Americans give high grades to the schools they know and lower grades to the schools they don’t know as well— that is, the nation’s schools. As such, it is not surprising that school administrators gave the national public school system higher marks: one percent of the general public gave the nation’s schools either an ‘A’ compared to six percent of school administrators.



Earning That ‘A’: When asked what a school must do to earn an ‘A’, school administrators and the general public reported the same top three answers: improve the quality of teaching, implement a challenging, world-class curriculum, and help students be more successful.

Keys to School Improvement	Response
Improve the quality of teaching	75.2%
Implement a challenging, world-class curriculum	55.1%
Help students be more successful	48.5%
Improve the quality of school leadership	30.0%
Increase access to the best learning material available	28.4%
Increase the use of technology	25.3%
Establish closer relations with parents	25.0%
Improve student discipline	12.2%
Create a clean and safe environment	9.5%
Offer opportunities to explore interests through sports and extracurricular activities	5.9%
Better manage the schools	3.4%

Charters: More than three quarters of school administrator respondents (77 percent) oppose the idea of charter schools, and 81 percent would not support a new charter school in their community. This is in stark contrast to the results of the general PDK poll, where 68 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of charter schools. The results of this question may be misleading, however. AASA’s dialogue and discussion around charter schools is more nuanced than simple favor/oppose or yes/no responses.



The Gallup/PDK question did not consider these nuances that AASA supports, i.e. public school choice and charter schools that operate under the governance of local public school boards. AASA members feel that the operating rules for charters must be the same as the operating rules for regular public schools. The playing field must be level, including non-discriminatory and unconditional enrollment for all children. Therefore, the same regulations and accountability should apply to all schools receiving public funding. The manner in which charter schools are financed must be addressed so that their creation does not have an adverse effect on the quality of existing public schools. The Gallup/PDK question did not permit consideration of that view.

American Association of School Administrators
801 N. Quincy St., Ste. 700, Arlington, VA 22203-1730
703-528-0700 | info@aasa.org