

# The View from the Classroom

By Nancy Belden

“A major challenge is to demonstrate how schools can have high expectations while dealing with the multitude of differences that students represent.”

survey, who taught academic subjects and/or elementary grades and had at least one year of experience, were selected in a probability sample based on a list of teachers developed by Market Data Retrieval.

The movement to raise academic standards in American schools and the associated efforts to establish more accountability—usually involving more or different testing programs—are among the most talked about, high priority policy initiatives in the nation today. While many polls look at public and parent attitudes on these issues, fewer have sought out teachers. This is a critical gap to fill, as teachers in fact believe that some of the changes being pushed in the name of school reform are counterproductive, according to a national poll conducted for *Education Week* by Beldon Russonello & Stewart in August to September 2000.

Along with the children they instruct, the women and men who teach school are the most central players in K to 12 education. Ultimately, it is teachers who will make or break the systems others try to put into place. And to parents and the public at large, teachers offer the most credible testimony

concerning what we need to do to improve our public schools.

The *Education Week* survey of 1,019 public school teachers aimed to probe the educators' perspectives on what is happening in education reform and in classrooms. Teachers in the



Many of the findings echo what parents and other stakeholders in public education have said in other surveys and focus groups conducted by Beldon Russonello & Stewart over the past decade. On some points, however, the teachers have stronger and different views.

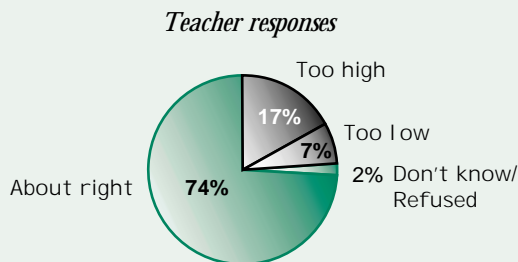
The survey confirmed that teachers share the public's support for the principle of raising academic standards. Indeed, as

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Figure 1

## Public Less Inclined to Settle

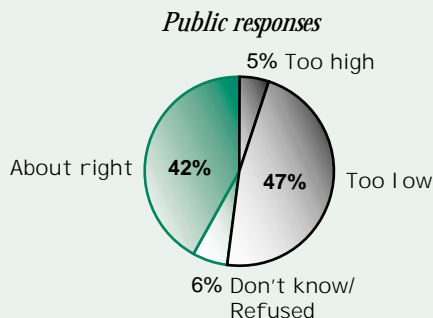
**Question:** Would you say the academic standards for students in the state where you teach are too high, too low, or about right?



**Note:** Asked of public school teachers.

**Source:** Survey by Belden Russonello & Stewart for *Education Week*, August 28-September 17, 2000.

**Question:** Would you say the academic standards for students in the state where you live are too high, too low, or about right?



**Source:** Survey by Belden Russonello & Stewart for the Business Roundtable, July 12-26, 2000.

we travel to conduct focus groups and surveys in all parts of the country, we find great consensus from teachers, parents, students and citizens generally on the importance of elevating educational expectations for all children.

On the other hand, teachers feel less urgency than the public to change the status quo. In a Belden Russonello & Stewart survey of the general public conducted in July 2000, 42% said the academic standards in the states where they live are about right, while fully 47% called them too low (see Figure 1). Perhaps because new, higher expectations have already been adopted in many schools, teachers are far more likely to believe that the standards in the states where they teach are already at the right level: 74% said the standards are about right, while only 7% said they are too low.

Although they see some proposed changes in a positive light, teachers are wary of other demands coming down the pike in the name of education reform. They identify potential pitfalls in the way new standards are being put into practice, and they sound a

warning bell that setting high standards is not the lone answer to increasing student learning.

Certainly, the teachers reported that new standards were having direct impacts on their classrooms. For example, in the previous 12 months, most said, they had adopted or developed modules, units, or lesson plans linked to the state standards and modified their curricula to fit them. Seventy-nine percent said they spend class time instructing their students in test-taking skills, such as pacing and how to fill in bubbles, and in giving their pupils practice tests. Many (65%) said they had amended what they teach "to fit what is on the state tests."

Many of these changes were for the better. Most teachers agreed that compared to three years ago, the curriculum was more demanding, teachers were collaborating more and expecting more from their students, and students were writing more.

Teachers did harbor reservations, however, that mirrored perspectives we hear

from parents and other stakeholders on the effects of the increased emphasis on testing on the classroom. Two-thirds (67%) said the new standards programs had led to teaching that focuses too much on state tests.

Similarly, 66% said state testing was forcing them to concentrate too much on information that would be on the test to the detriment of other areas. Only 29% said the testing was helping them focus on what children really need to know. Echoing another complaint we hear from parents, seven out of ten teachers said they did not have time to cover all the material required by the state standards.

A central tenet of the reform movement has been that the bar needs to be raised for what students are expected to learn. And, indeed, according to two-thirds (63%) of the teachers, the expectations they hold out for their students are higher than they were three years earlier. About half (49%) of those who said so attributed this at least in part to new standards being in place.

The ultimate goal, of course, is for students to learn what they need to succeed

in a changing and complex world. Nearly two-thirds of the teachers were confident of their students' ability to meet the state standards set for their grade levels, with 57% saying most were able and 7% saying all were able.

But when it comes to the bottom line—increasing student learning—the message from teachers is that while setting new standards is a part of the mix, it is not the only ingredient. Sixty percent said students are indeed learning more than they were three years earlier (although only 18% said they are learning a lot more); but only four in ten believe both that they are learning more and that the cause of this upswing is the new higher standards. Four in ten do not even believe students are learning more than in years past, and the remaining 20% said any gains in learning are due entirely to factors other than new academic standards (see Figure 2).

Another major tenet underlying the reform movement is the notion that *all* children can

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learn at high levels. While many teachers might agree that high levels of learning are a possibility for all, only 32% said most students should be *required* to meet the same academic standards, regardless of whether or not college is in their post-high school plans. Sixty-six percent said there should be alternatives available to students. Thus, a major challenge for teachers, school leaders and reformers is to demonstrate how schools can have high and challenging expectations, while dealing with the multitude of differences that students represent.

A third fundamental principle of the movement is that the players—teachers, principals and schools, and students—must be held accountable for doing their jobs, which is increasing learning for all students.

Undoubtedly, there is a widespread desire among the public for accountability in schools as public institutions. In the last decade or more, many states and school districts have set up accountability systems to measure their educators’ success. Much of the focus has been on rolling out new or revamped statewide tests. In some places tests are used diagnostically to help figure out what to do about failing schools or about individual students or teachers. In other states, teachers and schools receive “rewards and punishments” based on how well their students perform on the tests.

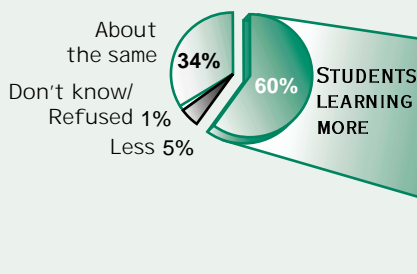
However, public school teachers reject the notion that student test scores are an adequate measure of teachers’ success or failure in the classroom. Only 2% of those in the survey said using the scores for this purpose was an excellent idea, only a quarter found it a good idea, a third called it “just fair” and 39% said it was poor or very poor (see Figure 3).

Teachers suggested there are better ways to evaluate them. Seven in ten (71%) endorsed assessments of their effectiveness by other experienced teachers who observe them in their classrooms. A majority (54%) said proficiency testing for teachers themselves—as opposed to the testing of students—is a good way to evaluate them. This approach is especially favored by math, science and English teachers in middle and high schools. The message from teachers, reinforced in focus groups time and again, is that there are fuller, fairer ways to evaluate educators’ performance than looking at student test scores.

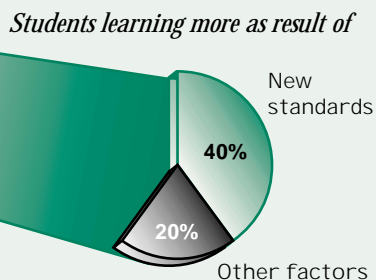
Figure 2

### Increases in Student Learning

**Question:** Are students learning more, learning less than they did, or is it about the same as three years ago?



**Question:** In your opinion, are students learning more due to the result of new statewide academic standards, or is it the result of other factors?



Source: Survey by Belden Russonello & Stewart for *Education Week*, August 28-September 17, 2000.

What about using test results to monitor and regulate the educational advancement of the students themselves? A lot of angst has invaded education circles as reformers have pushed for state and even national testing to gauge how well we are educating children. Today the President of the United States and the Secretary of Education are promoting their Texan model, relying on a state exam to judge teachers' job performance and students' learning. In some states (including Texas) students are now or soon will be denied promotion to the next grade, or denied graduation, based on their scores on state tests.

Other states are grappling with the question of how best to devise a system to evaluate student progress and act accordingly; and some are developing systems that include other measures of student success to be used along with tests. Many opinion polls have demonstrated public support for using tests, especially when they are *in part* the basis for decisions about grade promotion and graduation, rather than the sole "accountability" measure.

Nowhere are reactions to these proposals about testing hotter topics than among educators themselves. When given a choice in the survey, an overwhelming majority of teachers voted to reject a policy of testing to determine grade promotion, choosing instead to allow teachers and principals to promote children based on test scores as well as their grades and individual assessments (chosen by 88%).

In the case of high school graduation, opinions were more divided but remained weighted against having a single high-stakes test. Thirty-seven percent of the teachers opted for passing a state test as a requirement for graduation, but many more (58%) chose allowing students to receive diplomas based on other parts of their records.

Figure 3

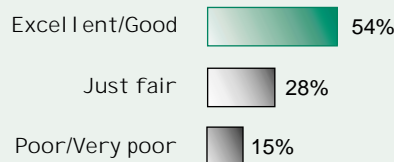
### Grading the Teachers

**Question:** Here are some ways that school districts may evaluate teachers. Please tell me if you think each one is an excellent, good, just fair, poor or very poor way to help evaluate how good a job teachers are doing:

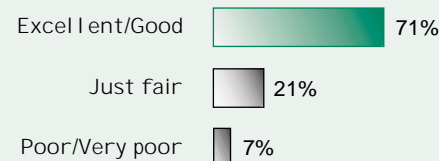
*How well the students in their classes perform on statewide tests year to year?*



*How well they know the subject matter they teach, as demonstrated on proficiency tests the teachers take?*



*Assessments of their effectiveness, made by other experienced teachers who observe the teachers in the classroom?*



**Note:** Asked of public school teachers.

**Source:** Survey by Belden Russonello & Stewart for *Education Week*, August 28-September 17, 2000.

The same type of pattern emerges in other polls with the public: people prefer that schools use multiple measures to determine the status of students, and are especially inclined to say elementary school children should have the benefit of different measures.

Standards reform *is* being felt in many positive ways—but there are bumps of no insignificant size

along the way. Continuing the gains, the teacher survey suggests, will require attention to many components. Teachers are on the front lines in the efforts to improve education, and they send out the word to parents and the public about what is going on in their schools. Policymakers would do well to heed their message.