

SURVEY: PARENT SUPPORT FOR “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND” IS THIN, THREE-QUARTERS OPPOSE FUND CUT-OFF IF THEIR CHILD’S SCHOOL “FAILS”

Little Backing Found for Additional Federal Funds for NCLB Implementation; “High-Stakes Testing” Among the Topics That Cause Support for NCLB to Melt.

WASHINGTON, D.C.//February 11, 2004//Most American parents who know about “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) school reforms like the concept, but they also would oppose implementation of any of its punitive terms in their own child’s school, according to the first national opinion survey since NCLB implementation to zero in specifically on what the parents of school-age children think about the two-year-old initiative. Conducted among 699 parents by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), the survey is sponsored by Results for America (<http://www.ResultsForAmerica.org>), a project of the nonprofit Civil Society Institute.

According to the RFA Survey, a third of all parents (34 percent) who have heard of NCLB see the school reforms as “punishing schools for failure instead of rewarding them for success,” a quarter view it as “limiting learning by students” (25 percent), while fewer than half (46 percent) associate NCLB with “improving learning.” The RFA survey also found almost no parental support (10 percent) for increased spending on the increasingly controversial school reform plan. This is true even though there is widespread awareness (78 percent) of NCLB among parents, with two-thirds (68 percent v. 22 percent) of the NCLB-aware parents expressing support for the concept of the school reforms.

What drives this seemingly schizophrenic view of NLCB among parents?

Many parents have major concerns when the focus shifts from the *abstract* concept of NCLB to the *real-world* specifics of the reforms, including high-stakes testing (only 51 percent support, with just 17 percent expressing “strong” support and 33 percent “somewhat” supportive) and taking funds from schools deemed to be “failing,” particularly those of their children (only 19 percent supporting such a move). Significantly, most parents would prefer to see any additional federal education funds spent on smaller class sizes (52 percent), not enforcement or further implementation of NCLB (10 percent).

“This survey makes it clear that concerns about ‘No Child Left Behind’ go up the closer it gets to the homes of parents and the schools attended by their children,” said Civil Society Institute President Pam Solo. **“What you end up with is lukewarm backing for NCLB that resembles what Mark Twain said about the Platte River: it’s a mile wide and an inch deep. Parents don’t much like the idea of high-stakes testing on which everything rides on the outcome of dubious quizzes or the notion that their own child’s school could be branded a ‘failure’ and penalized.”**

Opinion Research Corporation Senior Research Manager Wayne Russum said: **“These survey results indicate that, while American parents are supportive of the concept of ‘No Child Left Behind’ for America’s schools, the level of support melts away significantly when they are asked to consider what this could mean specifically in the context of their child’s school. The**

lack of intensity in the support of NCLB seems most apparent in the very low level of backing for spending additional federal funds to implement or enforce NCLB. It is worth noting that this does not appear to be a political or ethnic phenomenon; the seemingly schizophrenic view of NCLB's conceptual and 'real world' terms cuts across most demographic and political groupings."

"The survey mirrors our experience with parents and their concerns about NCLB," said Parents for Public Schools Executive Director Ken Rolling. **"In our work with 25 local chapters in 15 different states, we've found that parents like the intention of NCLB – no one disagrees with its goal of a better education for our children. But what they don't like is the implementation when they hear the details of how NCLB really works."**

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

- More than three in four parents (78 percent) have heard of NCLB. Most parents who have heard of NCLB support the concept (68 percent v. 22 percent), as other surveys have shown.
- Fewer than half (46 percent) of parents aware of NCLB see it as improving learning, while 34 percent perceive it as "punishing schools for failure instead of rewarding them for success." One-quarter (25 percent) see NCLB as actually "limiting learning by students."
- Parents are split down the middle on using "high-stakes testing" as a component of NCLB. After being read a neutrally worded definition of high-stakes testing, nearly half (45 percent) oppose such testing. The 51 percent support level for such testing is lukewarm at best, with only 17 percent evincing strong support and 33 percent limiting their support to "somewhat."
- Nearly three quarters (73 percent) say they would not support withholding funds from their child's school for failing under NCLB, with only 19 percent willing to support such a move. Supporters of NCLB are just as opposed to withholding of federal funds from their own schools (72 percent), and 61 percent of Republican parents join most independents (84 percent) and Democrats (79 percent) in opposition to withholding of such funds.
- Given the chance for additional federal money for their child's school, more spending on NCLB ranks among the lowest parental priorities. When parents are presented with the question: "If there was more federal money available for your school, which one of the following would you want it to go to?," only 10 percent picked "implementing the No Child Left Behind Act" from a list of five choices, while half (52 percent) would put the money towards "provid(ing) smaller classes." About one parent in ten would use additional federal monies to "restore or expand arts learning programs" (12 percent), "increase access to after school programs" (11 percent) and "increase professional development opportunities for teachers" (10 percent). Even among supporters of NCLB, only 12 percent would direct additional funds to implementing "No Child Left Behind," as would comparable proportions of Democrats (8 percent), Republicans (10 percent) and independents (13 percent).

- Among parents, the #1 use of federal funds in school is to “provide technical assistance to states and local school districts to promote new and more effective approaches to teaching and learning.” Given five choices for the “most appropriate role for the federal government when it comes to education,” 27 percent of parents say the Washington lawmakers “should provide technical assistance to states and local school districts to promote new and more effective approaches to teaching and learning.” One in five (20 percent) believe the federal government “should turn the money over to the states and let them decide what to do with it,” while the same percentage see the federal government’s role as “assist(ing) local communities in balancing education spending between school districts.” Only 13 percent believe “it should only give funds to local school districts that meet federal government standards,” while 16 percent feel that “the federal government should not be involved in local education decisions.”

For a full set of the RFA survey topline results, go to <http://www.ResultsForAmerica.org>.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

A series of questions were asked across three waves of CARAVAN®, ORC International’s twice-weekly national survey. The purpose of the research was to gain an understanding of the views of American parents on “No Child Left Behind” school reforms. Results are based on telephone interviews conducted among a sample of 699 parents of school children (kindergarten through the 12th grade). Respondents were identified from a probability sample of 3,047 adults 18 years old and older (1,525 men and 1,522 women) living in private households in the continental United States. Interviewing was completed at ORC's Central Telephone Facilities during the period of January 22- February 1, 2004.

Completed interviews of the 3,047 adults were weighted by four variables: age, sex, geographic region and race, to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the total adult population. The margin of error at a 95 percent confidence level is plus or minus four percentage points for the sample of 699 parents. Smaller sub-groups will have larger error margins.

ABOUT RESULTS FOR AMERICA

Results for America is a project of the nonprofit Civil Society Institute, which is based in Newton, Massachusetts. The mission of the Institute is to serve as a catalyst for change by creating problem-solving interactions among people, and between communities, government and business, that can help to improve society. Visit Civil Society Institute on the Web at <http://www.civilsocietyinstitute.org>.

RFA seeks to shape and tap the tremendous amount of community-level knowledge, experience and innovative action that could solve America’s problems in four key areas:

- Great Kids, Great Schools, Great Communities. Results for America supports investing in public schools, making sure parents have more of a say in their schools and creating conditions that will lead to learning and success for every child.

- Healthy Families, Healthy Economy, Healthy America. Results for America supports affordable health care and prescription drugs. It also supports a commitment to biomedical technologies and breakthrough treatments and cures for life-threatening illnesses that affect millions of us.
- Clean Air, Clean Energy, Bright Future. Results for America supports reducing our debilitating dependence on oil and fossil fuels and making sensible investments in alternative energy sources.
- Rational Foreign Policy, A Safer World. Results for America supports a rational foreign policy that works in concert with global organizations not in opposition to them. It also supports restoring America to its place in the world community as a nation respected and admired rather than mistrusted and feared.

ABOUT PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Parents for Public Schools is a national organization of community-based chapters working to strengthen public schools through broad-based enrollment. Invigorated by a diverse membership, our proactive involvement helps public schools attract *all* families in a community by making sure *all* schools effectively serve *all* children. We believe that quality public education is vital to our democracy and to America's future. For more information, go to <http://www.parents4publicschools.com/>.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A streaming audio replay of this news conference will be available by 6 p.m. EST on February 11, 2004, at <http://www.ResultsForAmerica.org>.