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April 23, 2003

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- Sports
- Business
- Technology
- Entertainment
- Culture
- Weather

WEEKLY

- Family Times
- Auto Weekend
- Wash. Weekend
- Books
- Home Guide
- Arts
- Nat'l Weekly Edition

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- Classifieds
- Gift Guide
- TWT Gift Shop
- Tourist Guide
- Int'l Special Reports
- Employment Extra

Unruly students still trouble U.S. schools

NEW YORK, April 23 (UPI) -- Despite the Bush administration's push for higher educational standards, the bigger concerns are unruly students, teacher morale and indifferent parents, a study by Public Agenda indicated Wednesday.

An overwhelming majority of teachers, 81 percent, say parents don't make sure their children behave well or study, the research and policy organization said.

The review of opinion polls and other sources over the past decade acknowledged that with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the standards movement is in high gear.

Support for higher standards and accountability remains solid among teachers, parents and students, said the report, entitled "Where We Are Now."

"The standards movement has taken hold in American schools and continues to enjoy broad support, but there are some troublesome fault lines," said Deborah Wadsworth, president of Public Agenda.

"Teachers in particular seem to be caught between and rock and a hard place," she said. "They believe in higher standards, but often feel they can't count on students to make the effort or parents and administrators to back them up."

She said employers and professors who deal with the students after they graduate from high school still have major complaints about youngsters' writing and basic math skills.

Most are particularly critical of youngsters' grammar and spelling, their ability to write clearly and their capacity to do simple math, the report said.

But the report also said their opinions are slightly more favorable than they were five years ago.

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"Where We Are Now" draws upon findings from more than two dozen national public opinion studies conducted by Public Agenda and others over the past decade.

The report lists "12 things you need to Know about Public Opinion and Public Schools." They are:

- The public -- including parents, teachers and students -- believes that setting standards and enforcing them promotes learning. Social promotion, they say, harms kids.

- Standards and promotion policies have changed in recent years, and attitudes about local schools have improved. Even so, many students still move ahead without acquiring needed skills.

- The vast majority of parents and teachers say standardized tests are useful, and few students are overly anxious about them. But people also think tests can be misused, and many say there's too much emphasis on them.

- Although teachers support high academic standards, they have qualms about some aspects of testing.

- Teachers are troubled by lack of parental support and poor student behavior. Teachers also say their views are generally ignored by decision makers.

- Americans say all students need the basics, and parents want their own children prepared for college. For most, a college diploma is as indispensable as a high school diploma used to be.

- There is a dramatic gap between the way employers and college professors rate high school graduates and the way parents and teachers view them.

- The vast majority of employers and professors continue to have serious doubts about public school graduates' basic skills -- especially when it comes to writing.

- Teachers say lack of parental involvement is a serious problem. According to both teachers and parents, parental involvement should focus on what goes on at home rather than on school management issues.

- Teachers, parents and students continue to voice concern about the rough-edged, uncivil atmosphere in many high schools. Few see high schools as places of respect or civility.

- Superintendents and principals say their biggest problems are politics and bureaucracy. Most want more autonomy over their own schools.

-- Holding schools and educators directly accountable for student achievement is still uncommon. Teachers and principals have doubts about it, while parents and the public tend to support it.

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