

Ohioans Consider Efforts to Improve their Schools

**Results of a Public Opinion Survey of Ohio Residents
on Education Issues**

**Conducted for
the Ohio Governor's Commission for Student Success**

by
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Introduction

The Ohio Governor's Commission for Student Success commissioned a research project by Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) to examine public awareness and attitudes on academic standards, assessments and accountability in Ohio. We conducted a two-phased research project of focus groups and a survey.

In the first phase, focus group research explored perceptions of state academic standards and tests among parents of public school children in Ohio. A total of four focus groups were held -- two on June 26 in Cleveland and two on June 27 in Columbus. The groups were separated by urbanity and ethnicity in order to have a more open and focused discussion with participants from similar backgrounds. In Cleveland one group was held with suburban White parents, and another with urban African-American parents. In Columbus one was held with suburban parents and another with rural parents.

A moderator's guide was developed by BRS in consultation with the Ohio Governor's Commission for Student Success and KSA Plus Communications. Three of the groups were moderated by BRS partner Nancy Belden, and the urban group was moderated by African-American moderator Donita Buffalo of Buffalo Qualitative Research.

Survey

The focus group discussions were followed by a statewide survey of Ohio residents, including an oversample of public school parents. The survey took place August 1 to 13, 2000 and was conducted by telephone. The questionnaire for the survey was written by BRS in collaboration with colleagues at KSA Plus Communications and the Ohio Governor's Commission for Student Success.

The survey was carried out among a representative probability sample of 1,002 residents of Ohio, aged 18 and older. The sample was stratified and controlled so that we included an over-sample of 490 public school parents. 512 interviews were conducted with the remaining population. Professional, fully trained and supervised telephone interviewers, using a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system, conducted the fieldwork. A briefing session was conducted to familiarize the interviewers with the sample specifications and the instrument for this study. The sampling frame used for the study was a list of randomly created telephone numbers (a technique known as random digit dial or RDD) for telephone exchanges across Ohio. Interviewers randomly selected respondents by requesting to speak with the adult in the household who had the most recent birthday. All phases of interviewing, training, and data collection were supervised daily by BRS.

The demographic characteristics of the sample were matched to the most recent Census estimates for Ohio. The data have been weighted statistically and bring gender, age, race and parental status into their proper proportions. The margin of sampling error (or sampling tolerance) for the entire survey is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the .95 confidence level, and plus or minus 4 percentage points for each of the parent and non-parent sub-samples of approximately 500. Tables in the report use many cross tabulations, based on smaller subgroups and thus the margin of error for these is higher. The smallest cells used are 89 individuals in the northwestern region and 88 in the southeastern section.

The cross tabulations are largely self-explanatory, but a few notes may be helpful. "Public school parents" are those respondents who say they have a child or children in K-12th grade attending public schools; all other respondents, with or without children, are in the non-public school parent category. The category labeled "Teacher in household" includes teachers and respondents who live in a household with a teacher. Income is household income as reported by the respondent. The counties that make up the regional breaks are described in Appendix B.

Executive Summary

The Ohio Governor's Commission for Student Success commissioned a survey of 1,002 Ohio residents to ascertain the public's perceptions of the public schools, academic standards, assessments, and accountability. The survey was preceded by four focus groups among Ohio public school parents.

Overall, the research finds Ohio residents are looking to raise the level of learning in their public schools. Large majorities support establishing high academic standards that all students are required to meet. Ohioans also want fair assessments that determine whether students have reached the standards and flexible measures to assess whether students should be promoted or graduated.

The public accepts tests and acknowledges their value. Ohioans are, however, not likely to accept what appears to be punishing or blaming children if tests scores are low, or to believe that merely making standards higher or making tests tough will drive more learning.

Key Findings

Ohio residents support the move to raise academic standards. The public in Ohio endorses setting statewide academic standards in their public schools, with eight in 10 calling the adoption of higher standards a move in the right direction. A plurality says existing academic standards are too low.

A majority believes statewide academic standards, spelling out what students should learn in various levels of school, exist in Ohio. Of those who say there are academic standards, only 19% say they are very familiar with them.

The focus group research sheds light on this finding. Public school parents in the focus groups believed *the statewide proficiency tests were the standard*. In some of the discussions, the parents pointed to the tests specifically as the academic standard to which their children are held. At other times, parents referenced the tests as evidence that a standard is being measured, and said they just assume there are standards.

Ohioans stress the need to learn the basics but are less supportive of requiring higher skills. Teaching basic math and English skills is considered the most fundamental duty of the public schools. Large majorities believe these two areas should be requirements for high school graduation. The basics today include strong computer skills with nearly half the public saying these skills, along with American history and government, should be acquired before students leave high school. However, other subject areas and skills, including algebra, biology and chemistry are less often viewed as important for everyone to master before graduating.

Good teaching is the key to improving schools. Ohio residents support a range of approaches to improving the public schools, but those that are in the most demand focus on improving the capacity to teach. Topping the list are providing and requiring professional development and requiring proficiency testing of teachers.

Viewed as much less effective are policies seen as punishing or rewarding teachers and students. Specifically, Ohioans reject withholding or giving raises based on students' performance on standardized tests, as well as extending the school day or year.

There is general acceptance of statewide tests for promotion and graduation, but more often the public believes other measures (such as grades and teachers' individual assessments) are good indicators of learning.

Tests are important. Ohioans agree with the principle of having students pass statewide tests before they are promoted in elementary school or graduate from high school. Seventy percent agrees with the policy of requiring students to pass a test of their knowledge and skills to graduate from high school. Six in ten (62%) supports the principle of requiring students to pass a reading test for promotion from 4th to 5th grade.

Support for 4th grade tests tempered. While it is a large majority (62%) that supports requiring students to pass the 4th grade test, a sizable minority *strongly* opposes this policy. Over a third (35%) of the general public disapproves and most of those (a quarter of the total) strongly disapproves of the 4th grade test tied to promotion. In particular, three in ten public school parents strongly

disapprove. Furthermore, a sizable proportion (30%) of all Ohioans believe there is too much testing at the elementary and middle school level.

Several measures are considered good ways to help decide whether to promote or graduate students. Half say *tests* are an excellent or good method for helping to decide if a child is ready to move from 4th to 5th grade. However, more call *grades* and *teachers' assessments* excellent or good ways. Three-quarters say a student's grades and two-thirds say teachers' recommendations are excellent or good means for helping make the decision to promote in elementary school.

While the public does agree with the policy of a high school graduation test (as noted above), other measures are also important when deciding whether to graduate a student. In particular, a student's *grades* are cited as an excellent or good way by nearly eight in ten, compared to six in ten who say this is so for statewide *test* results. *Student attendance* and *teacher recommendations* are also considered by six in ten to be excellent or good ways to help determine whether to grant a diploma – putting them on a par with state tests.

In a separate question, seven in ten Ohio residents give thumbs up to graduating students who fail the 10th grade test, as long as they have good grades and teachers' recommendations.