



Public Agenda STEM Survey

by – Michael T. Martin

The Public Agenda polling organization published a report on June 2, 2010, titled “Are We Beginning to See the Light?” It illuminated a survey of parents of K-12 school children and the general public conducted by the organization about the role of science and math in society and education.

One survey question asked parents to compare the difficulty of the math and science classes they took in high school with those taken by their child. Sixty-one percent said their child’s math courses were “harder” and 49 percent said their child’s science courses were “harder.” For each subject, only 8 percent said their child's courses were "easier."

Other questions indicated that most parents and other respondents were generally happy with the academics at their schools. The report began by asking what respondents thought “is the most important thing the United States can do to make sure its economy is healthy.” The choice “create more/better paying jobs” was chosen by 37 percent of parents and 33 percent of other respondents. The choice “need better education system” was last at 6 percent for parents and 4 percent for non-parents. Even “Don’t Know” scored higher at 10 percent and 11 percent.

When asked to choose what were “the most pressing problems facing the high schools in your local community,” the response was overwhelmingly “social problems and kids who misbehave” (63/50 percent of parents/other) versus 27/34 percent “low academic standards and outdated curricula.”

When asked if public schools should teach “a lot more math and science,” parents said “things are fine as is” (52 percent), while non-parents chose “more math and science” (68 percent).

A majority of parents felt “the schools in your community are doing a good job preparing students” for college English courses (55/38 percent parents/other), college math courses (52/39 percent), college science courses (50/39 percent), and to be successful adults (53/36 percent). The alternative choices were “they need to be doing a lot better” and “don’t know.” Thus, there was not really a negative choice, but non-parent respondents tended to think the schools could be improved.

Both parents and other respondents indicated that teachers are not the main reason “why students may do poorly in math and science,” but rather 61/55 percent think it is because “students think the subject is irrelevant to their lives.”

Asked how they would spend additional money on schools, a plurality chose “reducing class size” (35/31 percent) followed by “improving math and science education” (28/26 percent) and “paying teachers more” (19/21 percent).

When asked what subject “would you say your child enjoys more – Math, English or both equally,” 35 percent chose math, 30 percent chose English and 30 percent chose “equal in both.” Similarly, when asked what subject “your child does better in,” 52 percent chose “equal in both,” but 29 percent chose math and 16 percent chose English.

What is most obvious in the survey results is the strong dichotomy between the positive responses of parents who are experiencing education for their children and the less positive responses of others who do not have this experience.

The press release for the survey trumpeted that there was strong support for a national curriculum in math and science. That may be overstating. Fifty-three percent of parents said a national curriculum in math would help “a lot,” and 48 percent said a national curriculum in science would help “a lot.” More telling is the fact that among 16 issues surveyed, the national curriculum questions ranked ninth and 12th in level of approval among the all issues. Paying math and science teachers more than other teachers ranked last, with only 28 percent saying it would help “a lot.”

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