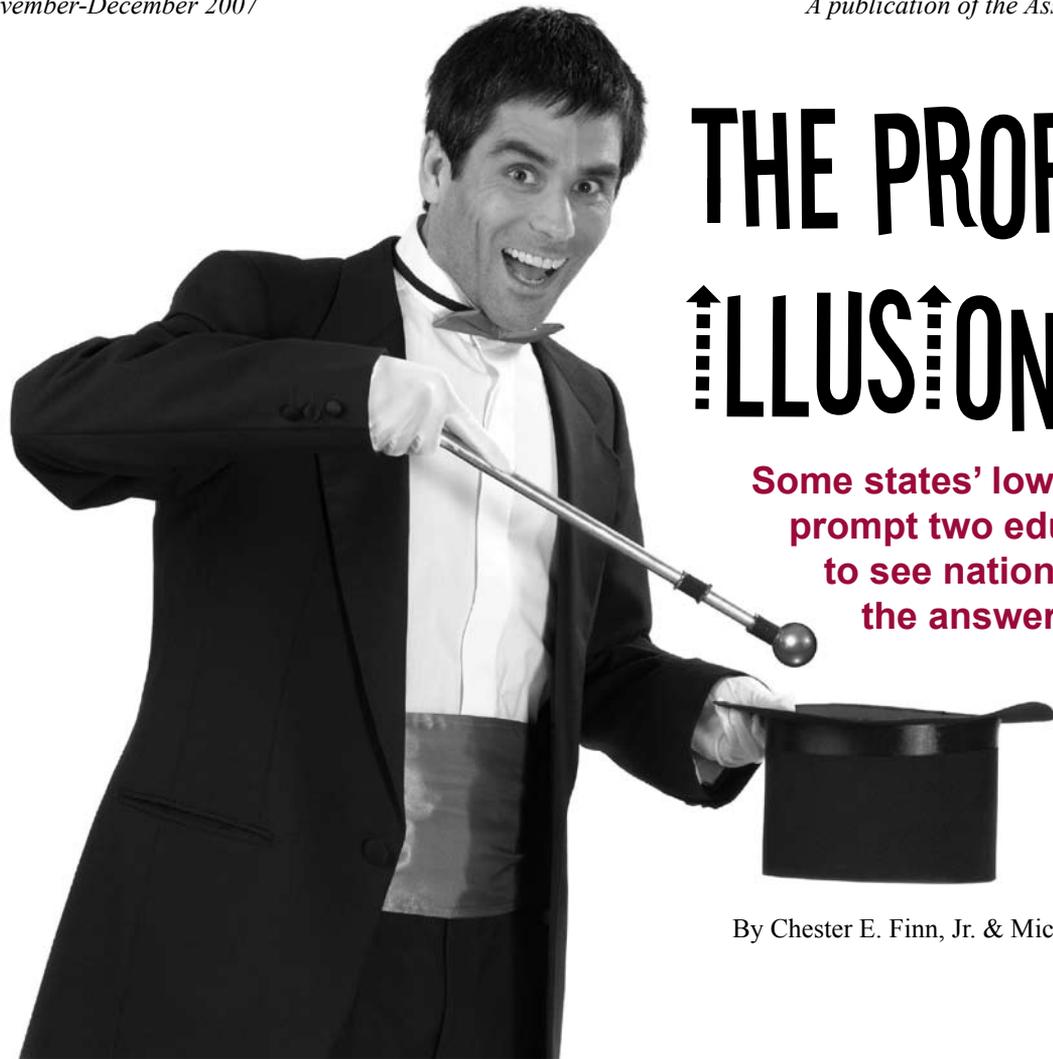


# Education Matters

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## THE PROFICIENCY ILLUSION

**Some states' low expectations prompt two education observers to see national standards as the answer.**

By Chester E. Finn, Jr. & Michael J. Petrilli

**Editor's note:** The views expressed in this article are not necessarily endorsed by the Association of American Educators. They are provided here for your awareness. AAE encourages you to respond to this article with your opinion. We would like to publish our members' responses in a future edition of *Education Matters*. To respond, visit [www.aaeteachers.org](http://www.aaeteachers.org).

No Child Left Behind made many promises. One of the most important of them was a pledge to Mr. and Mrs. Smith that they would get an annual snapshot of how their little Susie is doing in school.

But is NCLB-spawned information coming to Susie's parents and teachers truly reliable and trustworthy? This

fourth-grader lives in suburban Detroit, and her parents get word that she has passed Michigan's state test. She is "proficient" in reading and math. Mr. and Mrs. Smith naturally take this as good news; their daughter must be "on grade level" and on track to succeed in later grades of school, maybe even go to college.

Would that it were so. Unfortunately, there's a lot that Mr. and Mrs. Smith do not know. They do not know that Michigan set its "proficiency cut score"—the score a student must attain in order to pass the test—among the lowest in the land. So Susie may be "proficient" in math in the eyes of Michigan educationists, but she still could have scored worse than almost all of the other fourth-graders in the country.

Susie's parents and teachers also do not know that Michigan has set the bar particularly low for younger students, such that Susie is likely to fail the state test by the time she gets to sixth grade—and certainly when she reaches eighth grade—even if she makes regular progress every year. And they also do not know that "proficiency" on Michigan's state tests has little meaning outside the Wolverine State's borders; if Susie lived in California or Massachusetts or South Carolina, for example, she would have missed the "proficiency" cutoff by a mile.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith have been told that Susie is "proficient." What they do not know is that "proficient," defined in this way, means little. Thus, our new study, *The Proficiency Illusion*, asks whether states'

NCLB “cut scores” on their tests are high, low, or in between. Whether they’ve been rising or falling (i.e., whether it is been getting harder or easier to pass the state test). And whether they’re internally consistent as between, say, reading and math, or fourth and eighth grade.

To examine states’ cut scores carefully, you need a yardstick external to the state itself, something solid and reliable that state-specific results and trends can be compared with. So we turned to the Northwest Evaluation Association, which has a long-lived rock-steady scale and a “Measures of Academic Progress” (MAP) assessment used for diagnostic and accountability purposes by schools and school systems in many states. Not all states, to be sure, but it turns out that in a majority of them (twenty-six, to be precise), enough kids participate in both MAP and the state assessment to allow for useful comparisons to be made and analyses performed.

The findings of this inquiry are sobering, indeed alarming. We see that “proficiency” varies wildly from state to state, with “passing scores” ranging from the seventh (MAP) percentile to the 75th. We show that, over the past few years, twice as many states have seen their tests become easier in at least two grades. (Though we note, with some relief, that most state tests have maintained their level of difficulty—such as it is—over this period.) And we learn that only a handful of states peg proficiency expectations consistently across the grades, with the vast majority setting up to fail thousands of little Susies by middle school by aiming low in elementary school.

America is awash in achievement “data,” yet the truth about our educational performance is far from transparent and trustworthy. It may be smoke and mirrors. What to conclude?

First, Congress erred big time when NCLB assigned each state to set its own standards and devise and score its own tests; no matter what one thinks of America’s history of state/local primacy in K-12 education, this study underscores the folly of a big modern nation, worried about its global competitiveness, nodding

with approval as Colorado sets its eighth-grade reading passing level at the seventh percentile on the NWEA scale while South Carolina sets its at the 71st percentile. A youngster moving from middle school in Boulder to high school in Charleston would be grievously unprepared for what lies ahead. So would a child moving from third grade in Detroit to fourth grade in Albuquerque.

Second, many states are internally inconsistent, with more demanding expectations in math than in reading and with higher bars in seventh and eighth grade than in third and fourth (though

**“It is crazy not to have some form of national standards for educational achievement—stable, reliable, cumulative, and comparable.”**

occasionally it goes the other way), differences that are far greater than could be explained by conscious curricular decisions and children’s levels of intellectual development. This means that millions of parents are being told that their eight- and nine-year-olds are doing fine in relation to state standards, only to discover later that (assuming normal academic progress) they are nowhere near being prepared to succeed at the end of middle school. It means that too little is being expected of millions of younger kids and/or that states may erroneously think their middle schools are underperforming. And it means that Americans may wrongly conclude that their children are doing better in reading than in math—when in fact less is expected in the former subject.

What to do? It is crazy not to have some form of national standards for educational achievement—stable, reliable, cumulative, and comparable.

Yet even if national standards are not in the cards in the near term, state standards need an immediate and dramatic overhaul. In our view, the place to start isn’t third grade; it is the end of high school, with the expectation that students be college and work-ready when they graduate. Then everything else should be “backward mapped” so that standards in

the various grades proceed cumulatively from kindergarten to graduation and it becomes possible to know at every stage along the way whether a child is or is not “on course” to meet the twelfth-grade exit expectations.

And as for NCLB, it is time for Congress to back itself out of the “100 percent proficient by 2014” provision—a mandate that is clearly dampening state expectations. Consider what an official from the Maryland Department of Education told the *Washington Post* in response to our new study: “We think our cut scores are reasonable for what people are being asked to do by 2014, especially given that it is for all subgroups—students who do not speak English or students with special needs.”

The country is ready, we submit, to begin thinking afresh about standards-based reform in general and NCLB in particular. For this enterprise not to collapse, we need standards and tests that are suitably demanding as well as stable, cumulative (all the way through high school), trustworthy, and comparable. American K-12 education is a long way from that point today. ■



*Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C., and a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education.*



*Mike Petrilli is Vice President for National Programs and Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, where he oversees research and publications, including The Education Gaffly.*



## **YOUR OPINION COUNTS**

Tell us what you think of the authors’ ideas. We will print readers’ responses in an upcoming edition of *Education Matters*. To give your opinion, visit [www.aeteachers.org](http://www.aeteachers.org). Click on “Contact Us” and, then, “Send a Comment.”

# Violence IN OUR SCHOOLS

By David W. Kirkpatrick

**T**hirty years ago, one student in four said violence was a problem at their school. At one point, nearly half of the nation's students reported they were afraid to use their school's restrooms.

School violence thus has a long history, and efforts to counter it often show little success.

Fifteen times in five years, violent death and injury struck at a school. Each time everyone asked, Why?

One standard response is that too many families are dysfunctional. Yet few if any of the families of the assailants have been judged to be guilty on this count. Frequently, they don't even fit the stereotype of low-income or urban families. Many, if not most, of the assailants have come from middle- and upper middle-class families, some from reportedly expensive homes.

However, even if the charge of family failure should be true, there is no way "society" can enter the homes of millions of families to determine the upbringing of their children.

Even more nebulous is the response that society has lost its bearings and no longer honors old-fashioned values. Again, even if true, it's not a helpful guide. Even the federal government with all its resources cannot control "society."

More importantly, such broad-based explanations ignore the role of the schools. While schools cannot "correct" families or society, they can improve themselves.

Even the proposed and enacted solutions within the schools tend to concentrate on security. Some "zero-tolerance" weapon policies that result in students being suspended or even expelled for such things as pointing a finger and saying "Bang," seem to border on the irrational.

Others responses, while perhaps having merit, still have shortcomings. One call is for security guards. In at least one instance of school violence, one of the guards was among those shot.

Some people prescribe the use of more metal detectors. While this may have a deterrence effect, it should not lead to complacency. In one instance, two students set off a false fire alarm and, from a distance, shot at those leaving the building. Metal detectors would have been useless. In others, had the assailants faced metal detectors, the ones staffing them might have been among those shot, perhaps even the first ones to be victims.

What are some of the things many major tragedies have in common?

First, they have not occurred in inner city schools.

Second, with rare exceptions, minorities and low-income students have not been involved as assailants or victims, which means race was not a factor.

In virtually every case the perpetrators indicated they were the targets of bullying, that they were loners who believed that no one cared for them or seemed to be aware they existed. These are things about which the school system can and should do something.

While it is true that these events generally occur in public schools, not in the 25,000 nonpublic schools, to frame it as a public vs. private school phenomenon is too simplistic.

Violent incidents have not involved many public schools in general but mostly large ones where attendance is compulsory.

**Hundreds of studies have found that large schools are less effective and more dangerous than small ones.**

Violence, at least of this magnitude, is rare in the nation's 100,000 public schools that are small. More to the point, and often overlooked in the school choice debate, thousands of public schools whatever their size, such as magnet schools and charter

schools, are schools of choice. Everyone, staff and student alike, is there voluntarily.

One federal study of charter schools concluded that the average size of new ones is 137 students—larger ones tend to be converted public schools. The average nonpublic school is also smaller than the average public one—with about 200 pupils enrolled in each of the former to 500 in the latter. Even there, averages can be misleading. It has been reported that half of all public high schools enroll more than 1,500 students; 70 percent have more than 1,000.

Hundreds of studies have found that large schools are less effective and more dangerous than small ones. In addition to the research, we are repeatedly given living, or dying, proof.

Why can't we learn? ■

*David W. Kirkpatrick is Senior Education Fellow, U.S. Freedom Foundation, Washington, D.C., and Senior Education Fellow, Buckeye Institute, Columbus, OH.*





# SOCIAL WORKER Thought ENFORCERS

## Study Declares Social Work Education to Be a National Academic Scandal

**S**ocial work education is a national academic scandal. So concludes a study released last month by the National Association of Scholars (NAS).

The study, which reviewed social work education programs at ten major public universities, aimed at assessing whether they conformed to the academic ideals of open inquiry, partisan disengagement, and intellectual pluralism. Instead, it found the descriptions of social work education programs to be, at every level, chock full of ideological boilerplate and statements of political commitment.

For example, all ten programs reviewed accepted accreditation from a body—the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)—that expects programs “to integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression”; nine of the ten programs require students to conform to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), which enjoins social workers, using similar left/liberal rhetoric, to, among other things, “engage in social and political action” and “advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.”

The mission statements of the programs reviewed are replete with similar ideologically fraught statements ranging from an avowal of commitments to the “empowerment of oppressed

people” to an emphasis on understanding “the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination that lead to poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and ageism” as a means of advocacy “for social and economic justice.” These thematic preoccupations receive further reinforcement in several official student handbooks.

Course descriptions also contain highly politicized content or ideologically slanted premises. For example, “Organizing for Social and Political Action” at the University of Michigan is described as preparing students to use “political advocacy as a form of mobilization” with special emphasis “placed on organizing communities of color, women, LGBT populations, and underrepresented groups in U.S. society,” while “Muslim Families” at the University of Washington assumes the existence and discusses “the effect and interaction of cultural imperialism on Muslim communities, both in the United States and abroad.”

Commenting on these findings, NAS president Stephen H. Balch remarked, “It is totally unacceptable for an academic discipline to load mission statements with question-begging concepts that preempt the discussion of unsettled questions, prepare students to become activists for particular causes, or require that students swear loyalty to creedal formulations in order to graduate. Social work education does all these things.”

“What we’ve uncovered,” observed Dr. Balch, “reveals a field that has supplanted open-minded inquiry with left-wing, morally



Dr. Stephen Balch, president of the  
National Association of Scholars

# Chilling Academic Freedom

The story of Emily Brooker

In fall 2005, Emily Brooker, then a student in the Missouri State University's undergraduate social work program, enrolled in "Social Welfare Policy and Services II," (a course necessary for graduation) taught by Professor Frank G. Kauffman.

In the course, the class was required to engage in a semester-long project advocating homosexual foster homes and adoption, and to sign a letter to the Missouri state legislature urging homosexual adoption. Brooker told Kauffman that she did not want to sign the letter because it conflicted with her religious beliefs.

Just before the final exam, Brooker was notified that she was being brought up on the most serious charges in the Social Work Program, a "Level 3" violation of the Standards of Essential Functioning in Social Work Education. She was required to attend a hearing before seven faculty members. Her parents were not admitted to the hearing room, and she was not permitted to record the proceedings. At the hearing, which lasted 2½ hours, the primary focus was on Brooker's "discriminatory conduct" in refusing to sign the homosexual adoption letter.

The faculty committee demanded she write a paper explaining how she could "lessen the gap" between her personal ethics and the professional ethics of a social worker. They also demanded that she affirm her commitment to their code of ethics.

After conforming to their demands, she was allowed to graduate.

Four months after graduation, Brooker filed her civil rights complaint. She alleged that faculty and administration at Missouri State engaged in indoctrination rather than education; that the defendants had engaged in "unlawful retaliation" for her protected speech, thus depriving her of equal protection as well as due process; and that she had been "denied full membership" in the academic community at MSU.

In 2006, Brooker settled her lawsuit against Missouri State University. The University agreed to clear the Level 3 charges against her, pay her \$9,000, waive academic fees at Missouri State or reimburse her for two years of degree work toward a Masters in Social Work at any public institution in the state, with \$3,000 per year for living expenses. Professor Kauffman stepped down from his administrative duties as director of the Master of Social Work Program ■

*Adapted from "NAS Study Declares Social Work Education to be a National Academic Scandal."*

relativist, and occasionally paranoid dogma. There is certainly room for vigorous debate about the extent to which responsibility for life's problems derives from individual choices as opposed to social structures, discrimination, or even, as the CSWE would have it, 'the global interconnections of oppression.' But there is little in the doctrinaire, activist stance of contemporary social work education to encourage such colloquy. Instead, academic freedom has been replaced by ideological lockstep.

"The rampant politicization of social work education," Balch continued, "represents a two-fold challenge. First, it is a challenge to American higher education at large. Defenders of the American university claim that the seriousness of the problem of political correctness has been greatly exaggerated by critics. There is, however, nothing subtle about political correctness in social work. It is the 'Jolt Cola' of political correctness. Unless America's higher education leadership insists that social work education conform to the ideals of academic freedom and political neutrality that academe claims to profess, its own intellectual integrity is open to fundamental question. We call upon the leadership of American higher education to exercise this responsibility.

"The second challenge is to the First Amendment and the obligation of all public institutions to remain faithful to freedom of speech and conscience. In public universities and colleges, the ideological tests imposed by social work education, reaching to issues such as abortion and sexual morality, penalize students who have traditional religious and moral views. Failure to abolish these tests exposes such institutions to legal action. Likewise, government agencies whose licensing requirements make CSWE accreditation a condition for social work employment are similarly exposed. We therefore call on public universities and colleges, as well as federal, state, and

local agencies, to rid themselves of these tests and requirements."

"As a first step," Balch concluded,

**"Academic freedom has been replaced by ideological lockstep."**

"the National Association of Scholars is sending letters to the forty-nine state agencies that license social workers and require CSWE-accredited degrees. We will also renew our efforts to get the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources to

strip CSWE of its gatekeeper functions in hiring social workers for the Public Health Commissioned Corps. Should no action be taken by these agencies, we will follow up with additional measures." ■

*The National Association of Scholars is America's foremost higher education reform group. Located in Princeton, it has forty-six state affiliates and five thousand professors, graduate students, administrators, and trustees as members and associates. To read the study, "NAS Study Declares Social Work Education to Be a National Academic Scandal," visit [www.nas.org/press.html](http://www.nas.org/press.html) and look for the September 11, 2007, press release.*



# You Speak Out

## AAE Member Survey Sheds New Light on Performance Pay Debate

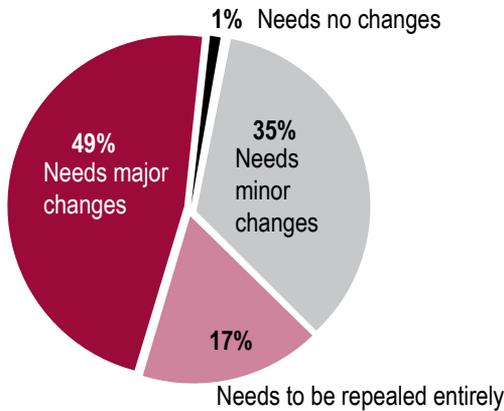
The Association of American Educators (AAE) released its second survey on No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Survey results showed distinct differences of opinion with teacher labor unions, particularly with regard to performance pay and the use of “growth models” for accountability, both of which give teachers credit for student academic gains made during the school year.

AAE survey respondents, all of whom are active classroom educators, appear to agree with language that is currently in a draft bill of NCLB in Congress that encourages districts to implement some kind of performance-based pay system for teachers.

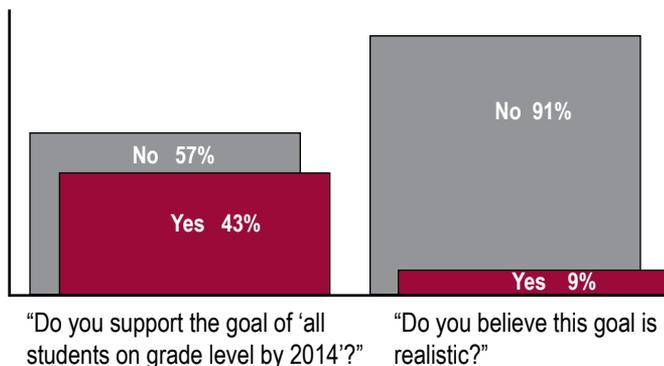
“Teachers know better than anyone which parts of NCLB work and which parts need to be improved or removed altogether,” said Gary Beckner, AAE Executive Director.

### No Child Left Behind Law

“Do you think the NCLB law needs major changes, minor changes, no changes, or should be repealed entirely?”

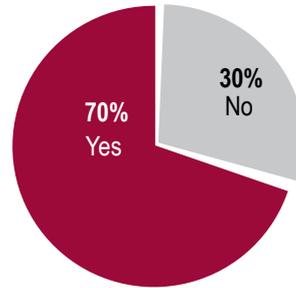


### NCLB Timeline



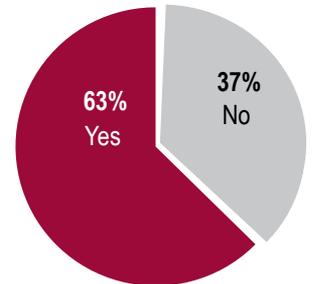
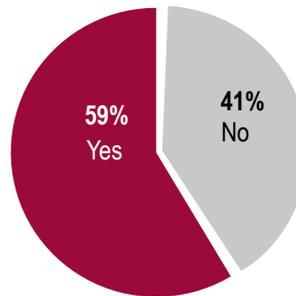
### Teacher Compensation / Performance Evaluations

“Currently pay increases are usually calculated as a result simply of the highest degree earned and the number of years you have in the system. Do you feel this model should be improved upon?”

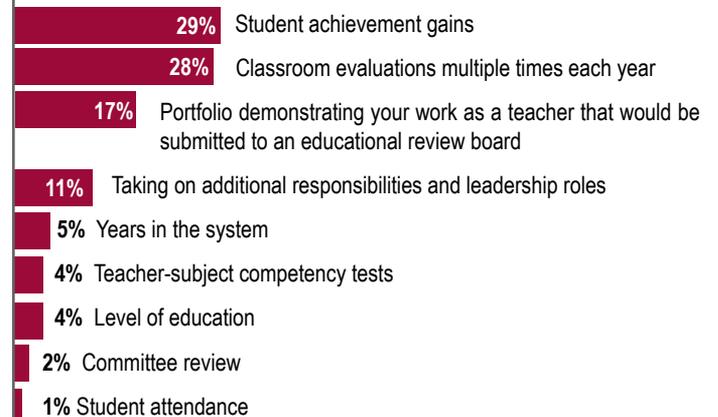


“Would you accept additional compensation based on the tested academic growth of your students from the beginning of the school year to the end? (Note: All teachers would receive a base salary identical to their current amount, but some teachers could receive more for exceptional academic progress or student gains.)”

“If you regularly achieve higher student performance gains than other teachers teaching the same type of students, should you be allowed to earn a bonus?”



Which of these measures do you feel would be most representative of the work that you do?



(Note: Figures rounded up to the nearest whole percent; total is over 100%.)

## Growth Model

Support is increasing for the incorporation of growth models in the measurement of AYP (Adequate yearly progress – all students expected to reach grade-level proficiency). This is because many students start the school year far below grade-level proficiency. While teachers may help students regain much lost academic ground, they are unlikely to regain so much in one year to be able to qualify for AYP. The growth model rewards educators for helping students achieve more than one year of academic progress in one school year of time, even if that does not bring all students to AYP.

“Would NCLB be better if this change was made?”

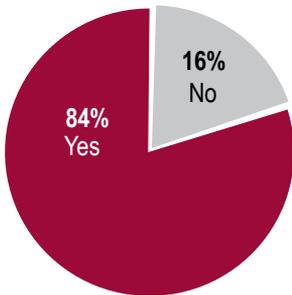


## Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) Status

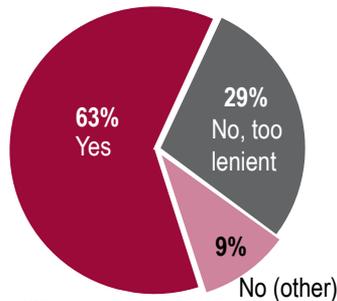
The criteria for Highly Qualified Teacher status require three things:

- attaining a bachelor’s degree or better in the subject taught
- obtaining full state teacher certification
- demonstrating adequate content knowledge in the subjects taught

“Do you agree with these criteria set by the federal government for HQT?”



“Do you agree with your state’s implementation of HQT?”



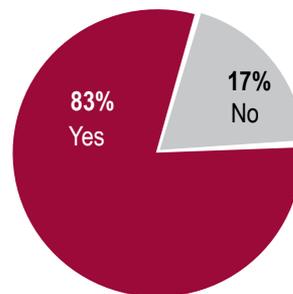
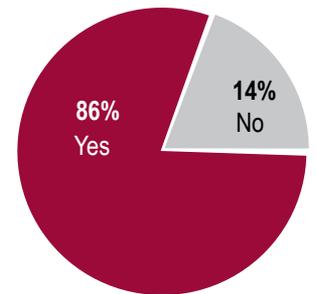
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## Supplemental Education Services

“Do you support a federally funded program that allows low-income students in low-performing schools the option of receiving tutoring and after-school help through a variety of providers including nonprofits, local school districts, and faith-based entities?”

“Would you support a requirement that would mandate federal funds earmarked for tutoring to be used only for its intended purpose and not to be used for discretionary spending by a school or school district?”





## Supreme Court Decision Involving IDEA



On October 10 the U.S. Supreme Court announced that the justices split 4 to 4 on the case, *Board of Education of New York City v.*

*Tom F.*, on behalf of Gilbert F., a minor child, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy having recused himself from the case. As a result of the split, the decision in the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit stands. The Second Circuit decision was decided in the plaintiff's favor, Thomas E. Freston.

In that Second Circuit decision, the court stated that public school enrollment is not required for students with learning disabilities who wish to enroll in a private school and receive tuition reimbursement from the public school. The ruling does not affect people outside the Second Circuit which covers Connecticut, New York, and Vermont.

Under IDEA, the Individuals with Disability Act, public schools are required to provide private school tuition reimbursement for students with disabilities when the public school cannot provide adequate services for the student. The case began in the late 1990s when Freston argued that he should not have to first enroll his son, Gilbert, who has learning disabilities, in a public school before receiving tuition reimbursement for his enrollment at private school.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 71,000 students attend private

schools through the use of tuition reimbursement from public schools. Last year New York City alone paid \$57 million in tuition reimbursements.

For more information see, "With Justices Split, City Must Pay Disabled Student's Tuition," at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

## Two Democrat Groups at Odds with the NEA



The NEA announced they will not support the pay-for-performance component of the Miller-McKeon draft legislation, but this is

not the case for all Democrat groups. The Center for American Progress (CAP) and Democrats for Education Reform have become advocates for the program.

In a brief for the media, CAP stated, "This is an important initiative that deserves support on both sides of the aisle especially from progressives who believe in strengthening public education for low-income students."

Its media brief challenges many of the NEA's claims that pay-for-performance evaluations would be based solely on test scores, that school districts would not have a say in the implementation of the program, and that it would be a disincentive for teachers to work collaboratively.

Democrats for Education Reform, a grassroots organization, is also supportive of the pay-for-performance plan. A spokesperson for the group stated the plan "is a comprehensive and thoughtful package of carrots and sticks."

## \$3.5 Million in Grants Awarded to Charter Schools



Recently the U.S. Department of Education awarded twenty-two grants totaling \$3.5 million across the country to help design and

build new charter schools.

"By acting as laboratories for best practices, charter schools are helping to break apart the myth that some children can't learn, changing attitudes about education, and getting great results for students," Secretary Spellings stated.

There are currently over 4,000 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia that serve over 1 million students. Charter schools are growing at annual rate of 10 percent and over two-thirds are receiving start-up funds from the Department.

## New Name for NCLB?



Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, would like to change the name of No

Child Left Behind when it is reauthorized because it is linked to President George W. Bush. Suggestions include "Quality Education for All Children Act" and "Educating Americans for Today's World."



Read AAE press releases at [www.aateachers.org](http://www.aateachers.org). Click on "Press Room."