

Focus on Quality



Californians' Views on Teachers and Teaching

The Center for the Future
of Teaching and Learning

Research Conducted by
Belden Russonello & Stewart

2003

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of California's teaching force. Over the past six years, the Center regularly has conducted public opinion research to inform our work and that of the policymaking community.

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This summary is based on a Californiawide survey of 1,006 adults conducted Oct. 3 through Oct. 14, 2002, which included an oversampling of parents of school-age children.

The public opinion research was conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart and Research, Strategy, Management, two firms that previously have conducted research for the Center. The complete research report is available free at the Center's Web site — www.cftl.org.

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Schools: Still Priority One

Seven years ago, we produced extensive public opinion research that showed just how strongly Californians wanted better schools and were willing to invest in them. We called the report *Priority One: Schools That Work*.

The top priority of Californians has not changed.

New research demonstrates that improving the education system remains the most important issue for the state's residents, more important than fixing the economy or reducing crime. And better schools are seen as the most important issue by people throughout California — by young and old; parents and nonparents; African Americans, whites and Latinos; and Republicans and Democrats.

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning has worked steadily to understand what Californians think about education issues, particularly about those aspects of education that will result in a stronger teaching force.

From this research, we get a clear picture of the public's agenda. Californians want qualified teachers who have the right training and the right personal characteristics to teach successfully.

California faces an unprecedented budget crisis. But that does not lessen the public's demand for better schools. Californians want the state to expand its investment in education, and they want to equalize the resources between schools in wealthy and poor communities. The public believes this investment is crucial to California's future.

This latest research was conducted for us by two of the nation's foremost public opinion companies — Belden Russonello & Stewart, with additional analysis by Research/Strategy/Management. These companies also conducted the 1996 research.

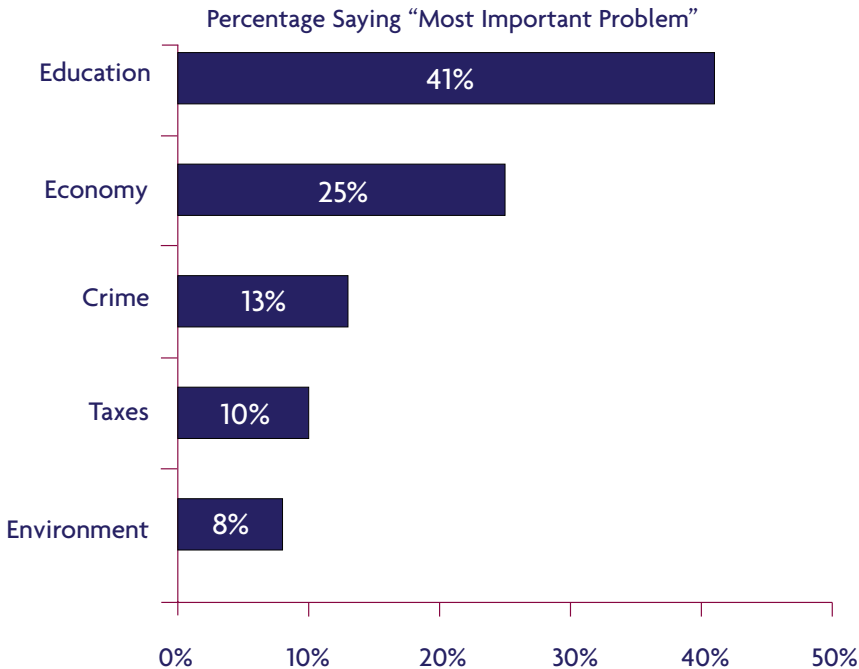
We offer the highlights in this brief booklet. The complete research report is available free on our Web site — www.cftl.org.

California policymakers have invested significant resources in California schools the last few years. If nothing else, this research should help them understand that the public supports that effort and will support more still.

Since its inception, the Center regularly has sampled public opinion. We commissioned statewide polls in 1996, 1998 and 2001. In 2002, we also commissioned opinion research with California teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. These surveys are available on our Web site — www.cftl.org.

Education Is Top Issue in California

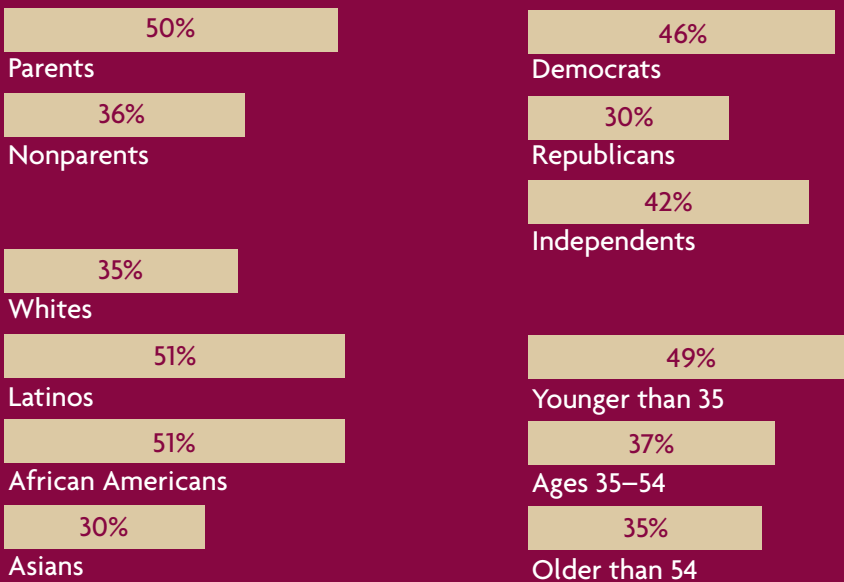
“Which one of the following issues, in your opinion, is the most important issue for the state government in California to address right now?”



A Closer Look

Across the state, 41 percent of Californians say education is the top problem the state should address. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying education is most important issue:



Investing in Schools

The state of California has set rigorous academic standards that all students are expected to meet before they graduate. The public clearly agrees with high standards for students and just as clearly feels that the state needs to spend more to create better schools where all students meet the standards.

California's academic standards are among the most rigorous in the nation. Our previous focus group work suggests that the public has little grasp of the details of the standards and actually thinks of standards as many things beyond what the state would define as its learning expectations for students.

Within the context of this lack of understanding of the state's standards, about half of the public feels the standards are too low, and only about one in 10 Californians believes the standards are too high.

More than three in four Californians feel that the same academic standards should be required of all students, regardless of whether they plan to attend college. Although substantial majorities of every group in the state feel this way, the belief is strongest among Latinos, African Americans and Asians — about nine in 10 Latinos, African Americans and Asians feel there should be a single set of standards.

Politicians and business leaders often talk about the need to create better schools to make the state a more prosperous place, a place that will create and attract good jobs.

Nearly eight in 10 Californians believe that the state should spend more on schools, with more than four in 10 believing the state should spend a lot more. Not surprisingly, parents are even more likely to feel that the state should spend a lot more.

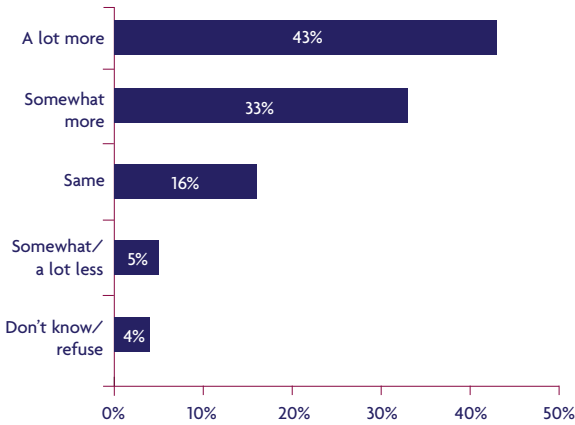
The people of California also see an increased investment in public schools as a potential competitive edge over other states. In truth California spends less per student than the majority of states, but only about a third of Californians know this.* Yet half of Californians believe that the state should spend more than other states, and only three residents out of 100 believe California should spend less.

* Source: National Education Association. "Rankings and Estimates: A Report of School Statistics, Update Fall 2002." Retrieved Jan. 10, 2003, from the Worldwide Web: www.nea.org/edstats/reupdate02.html.

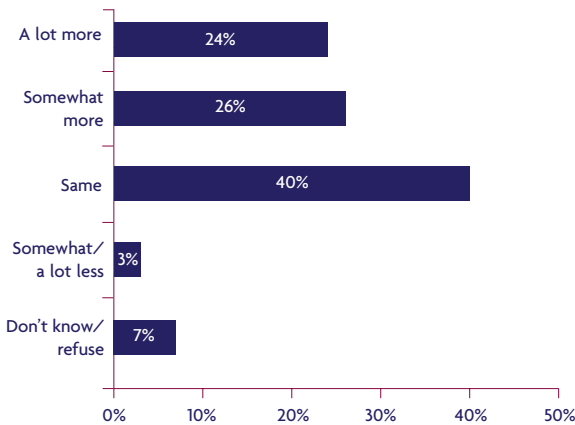
A Closer Look

Californians Believe State Should Invest More in Education

"In your opinion, should California be spending a lot more, somewhat more, the same, somewhat less or much less on public education than it does now?"

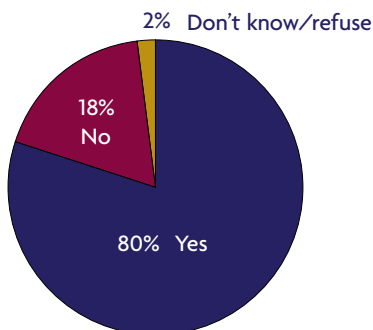


"Do you believe that California should spend more, less or about the same per student as other states spend on public education? Is that a lot or somewhat more/less?"



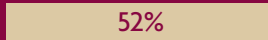
Californians Want All Students To Meet Same Standards

"In your opinion, should all students be required to meet the same set of academic standards regardless of whether they are planning to go to college?"

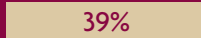


Across the state, 43 percent of Californians say the state should spend a lot more on public education. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying state should spend a lot more:



Parents



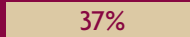
Nonparents



Women



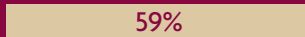
Men



Whites



Latinos



African Americans



Asians



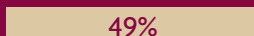
Democrats



Republicans



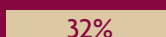
Independents



Younger than 35



Ages 35-54



Older than 54

Finding Good Teachers

The public believes that the current performance of California schools is not good enough. When asked to rate education’s problems, the public starts with the lack of involvement by parents and not enough funding getting to schools. Teachers and teaching are not seen as the top problems, but they are seen as the logical solutions to building better schools.

We looked carefully at Californians’ attitudes toward teaching quality and found that four in 10 Californians say poor teaching is a very serious problem. But attitudes differ by race, ethnicity and income. Three in 10 white parents say poor teaching is a problem compared to more than five in 10 Latino parents, for example. In addition, poor residents are much more likely to see poor teaching as a problem than are wealthier residents.

“More than three-quarters of Californians think it is an excellent or good idea to pay teachers more to take assignments in high-poverty communities.”

There has been plenty of publicity in the past few years about the growing shortage of qualified teachers in the state. The public recognizes the shortage — eight in 10 Californians say there are too few qualified teachers — and also understands that it is the state’s poorest communities that are most likely to have the least experienced teachers (see chart, page 9).

More than seven in 10 Californians think the shortage of qualified teachers is a serious problem (see chart, page 9). Here, too, there are differences among groups. African Americans, for example, are twice as likely as whites to see this shortage as extremely serious, and residents of the Bay Area are more likely to believe it is extremely serious than are residents of Orange County and San Diego.

Similarly, when asked whether the schools in their community commonly hired teachers without credentials, Latino parents are twice as likely (four in 10) as white parents (two in 10) to say that the practice is extremely or very common.

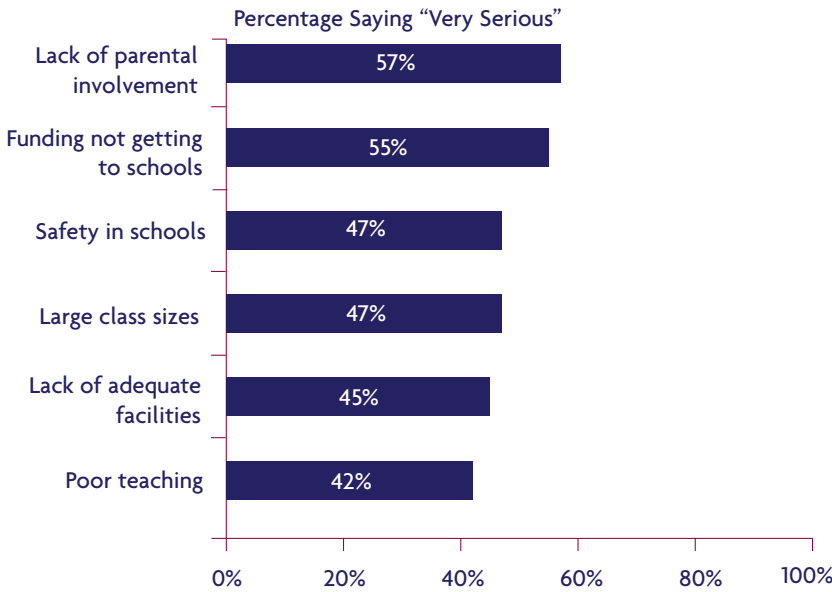
Most Californians (eight in 10) think it is common for teachers to be teaching subjects for which they have not been trained, and they don’t like it (see chart, page 9). More than nine in 10 say it is important that teachers teach only the subjects in which they are trained.

These findings also make it clear that Californians believe teachers are underpaid. Six in 10 residents think teachers are paid too little, and only about one in 20 Californians thinks teachers are overpaid (see chart, page 10). Here, too, there are differences — African Americans are more likely than Asians, Latinos and whites to believe teachers are paid too little, and residents of cities and suburbs are more likely than rural residents to see teachers as paid too little.

There is a wide range of policy proposals in Sacramento to get good teachers into the state’s hard-to-staff classrooms. We asked Californians to prioritize nine of them (see chart, page 11). The public has considerable enthusiasm for providing a wide range of financial incentives. But there is much less interest in hiring uncredentialed teachers or lowering the requirements to become a credentialed teacher.

Lack of Parental Involvement Ranked Most Serious Problem for Education

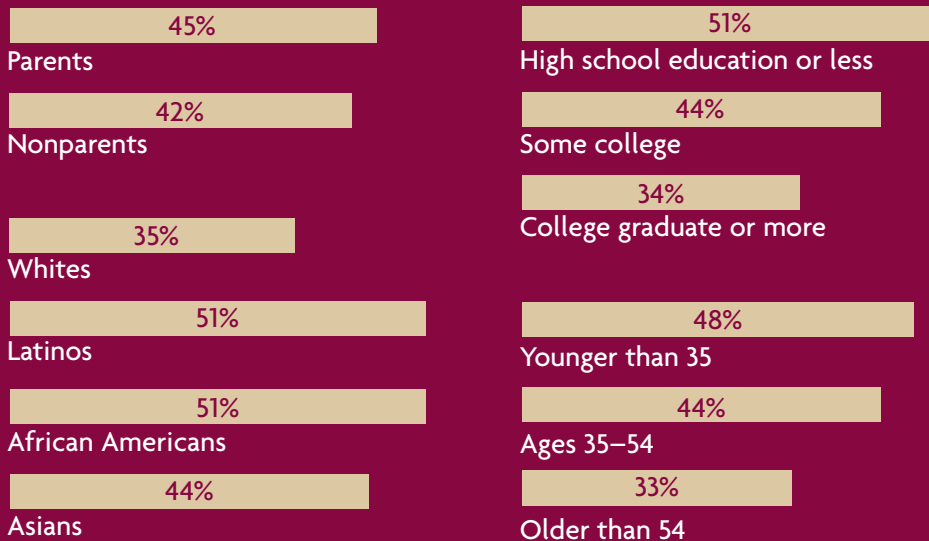
“How serious of a problem would you say each of the following is for public education in California?”



A Closer Look

Across the state, 42 percent of Californians say that poor teaching is a very serious problem. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying poor teaching is a very serious problem:



Finding Good Teachers (cont.)

For example, more than three in four Californians think it is an excellent or good idea to raise teacher salaries. More than three in four Californians also believe it is a good idea to pay teachers more to take assignments in high-poverty communities. More than seven in 10 think it is an excellent or good idea to pay more to math, science and special education teachers; to provide tax deductions to teachers who work in high-poverty areas; or to forgive student loans for teachers who work in disadvantaged schools.

“Fewer than three in 10 Californians think it is an excellent or good idea to lower the requirements to become a credentialed teacher, and slightly more than three in 10 would hire people who have a college degree in the subject they would teach but no training in how to teach.”

Contrast those numbers to fewer than three in 10 Californians who think it is an excellent or good idea to lower the requirements to become a credentialed teacher and slightly more than three in 10 who would hire people who have a college degree in the subject they would teach but no training in how to teach.

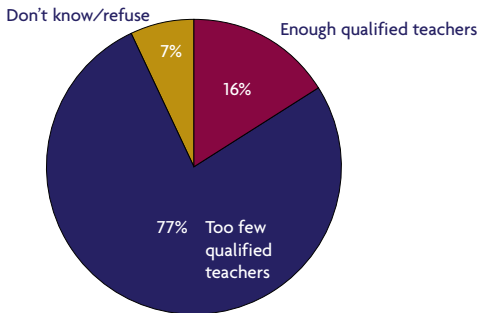
Again, there are differences among various groups. Mothers, for example, are more likely than fathers to be strong proponents for increasing teacher salaries; African Americans are more likely than whites to prefer raising teacher salaries. People who identify themselves as

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to prefer paying more to teachers in high-poverty areas. African Americans and Latinos are more likely than whites or Asians to support more pay for math, science and special education teachers.

And while there is not a great deal of support among any group for lessening requirements to become a credentialed teacher, African Americans and Latinos are far more likely than whites or Asians to say this is a good or excellent idea to alleviate the shortage.

Californians Know There Are Too Few Qualified Teachers ...

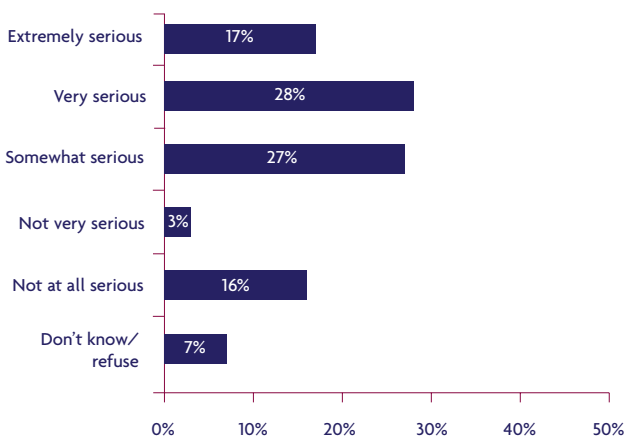
“As far as you know, do the public schools in California have enough qualified teachers for the teaching jobs or too few qualified teachers?”



“Teachers and teaching are not seen as the top problems, but they are seen as the logical solutions to building better schools.”

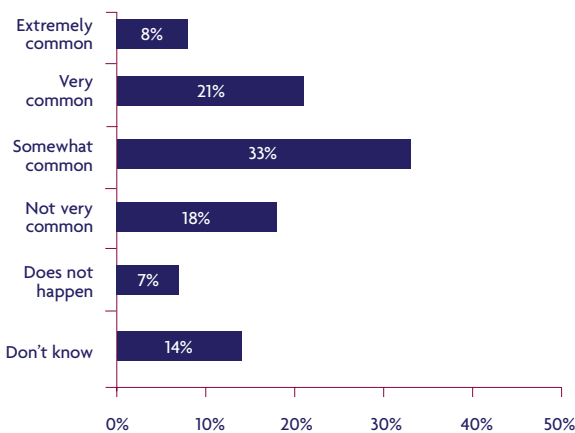
... That It's a Serious Problem ...

“How serious would you say the teacher shortage in California is?”

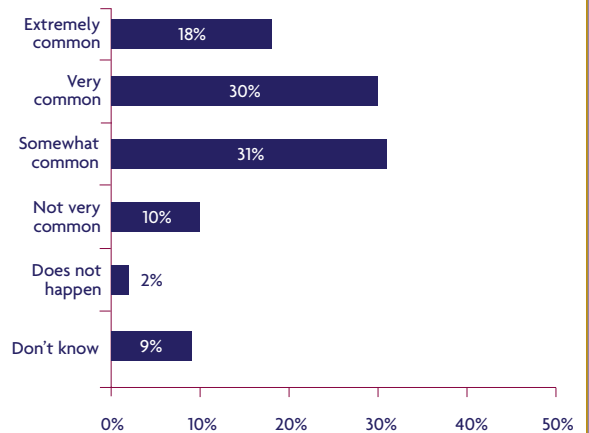


... And That Many Classrooms Have Underqualified Teachers

“How common do you think it is for the public schools in your community to hire teachers who have not obtained their credentials?”

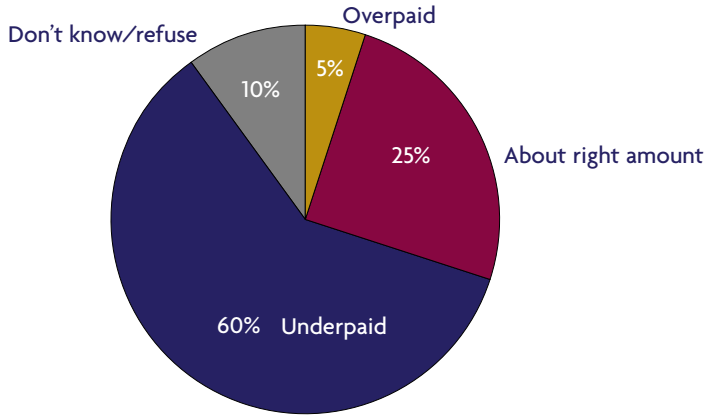


“How common do you think it is that public school teachers in California are teaching subjects for which they are not trained?”



Teachers Not Paid Enough

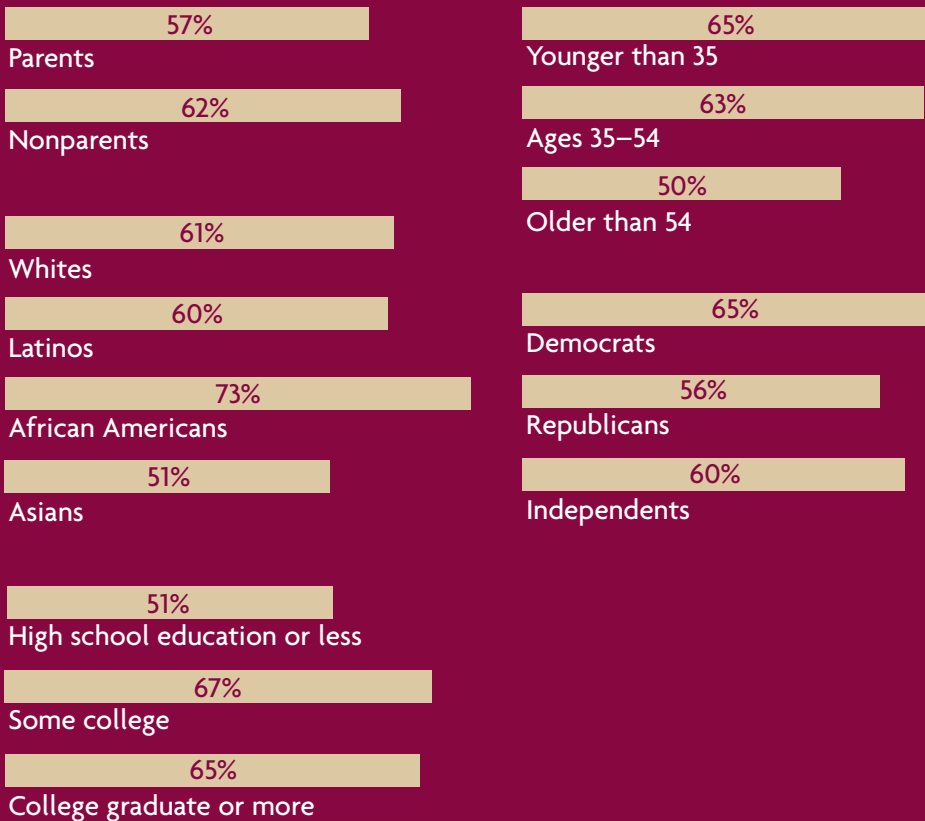
“In your view, are public school teachers in California underpaid, overpaid or paid about the right amount?”



A Closer Look

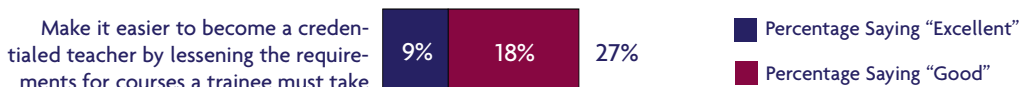
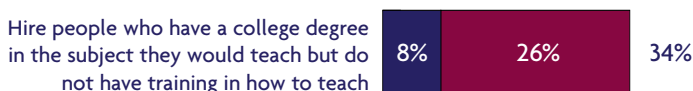
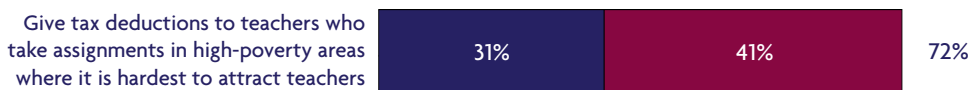
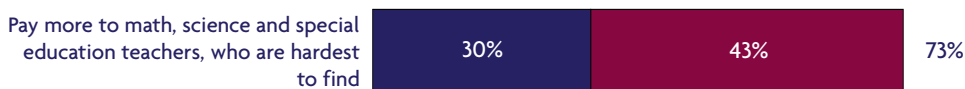
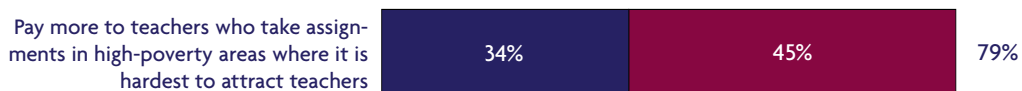
Across the state, 60 percent of Californians say that public school teachers are underpaid. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying teachers are underpaid:



Ranking of “Solutions” to Teacher Shortages

“Here are some ways that have been suggested to increase the number of public school teachers in areas where there is a shortage. Please tell me whether you think each of these is an excellent idea, good, just okay, poor or very poor idea for attracting more people to teach.”



■ Percentage Saying “Excellent”
 ■ Percentage Saying “Good”

Judging Teachers

Great policy debates are being waged in California and across the country on how to educate new teachers, how to measure quality in teachers and how to compensate them.

The public seems to understand the complexity of the problem and sees solutions that do not lend themselves easily to government policies. While the public appreciates important measurable teacher characteristics such as university training and subject matter knowledge, the public is just as insistent that teachers be patient and that they love children — characteristics that are more difficult to measure.

The public believes that successful teachers need a mix of both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. We asked Californians to rate 11 characteristics commonly linked to successful teaching. The public believes, for example, that it is as important for teachers to be patient as it is for them to be trained in how to teach. And the public sees a sense of humor in a teacher as just as important as experience as a student teacher.

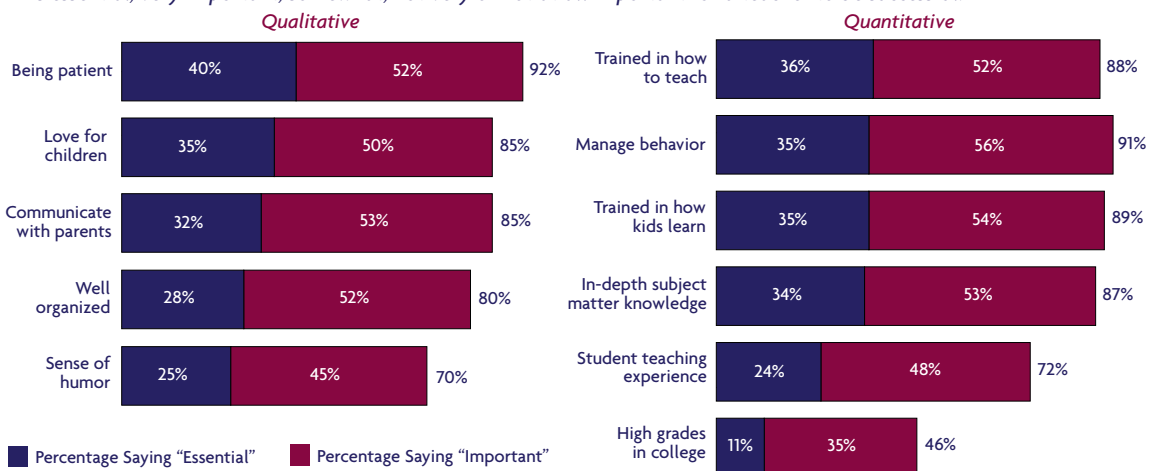
And like most questions, there are differences among Californians on these views. Younger people, for example, are more likely to rate highly the importance of being trained in how to teach. Mothers are more likely than fathers to emphasize the ability to manage classroom behavior; women emphasize more than men the patience of teachers or their love for children.

Many policymakers have talked about rewarding teachers based on the academic performance of their students. When asked how teachers should be evaluated, members of the public prefer qualitative evaluation measures (see chart, page 13). For example, nearly five in 10 Californians think it is an excellent idea to measure the interest a teacher shows in his or her students, but only two in 10 rate as excellent the idea of evaluating teachers based on student scores on state tests.

Again, there are significant differences. Whites, for example, are far more likely than African Americans, Latinos or Asians to prefer evaluating teachers based on their interest in students. Conversely, African Americans, Latinos and Asians are more likely than whites to prefer evaluation based on student performance on state tests.

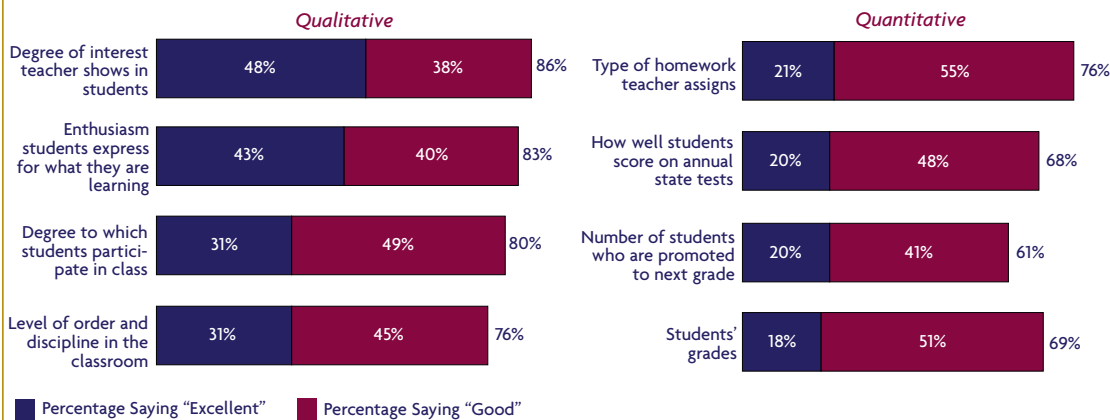
Mix of Teacher Characteristics Important to Californians ...

“Here is a list of characteristics that a teacher might or might not have. Please tell me if you think each quality is essential, very important, somewhat, not very or not at all important for a teacher to be successful.”



... But They Think Teachers Should Be Evaluated Qualitatively

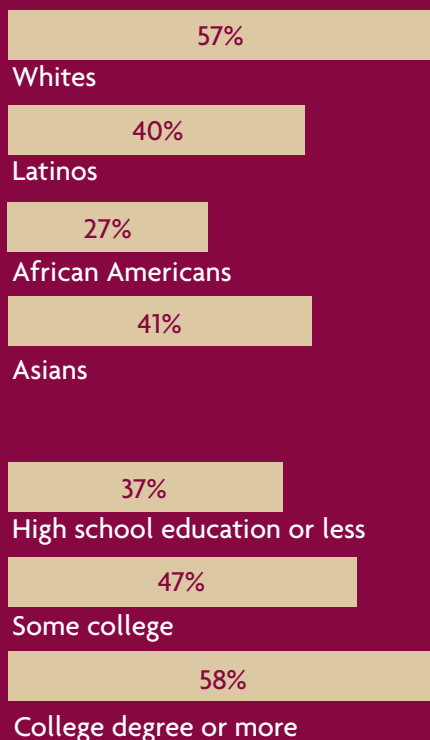
"If you were trying to evaluate the job performance of a teacher, how good an indicator would each of the following be?"



A Closer Look

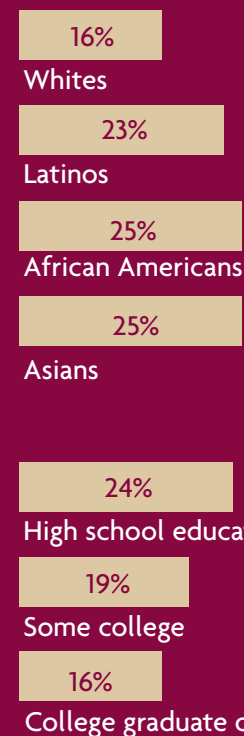
Across the state, 48 percent of Californians say it is an excellent idea to evaluate teachers on the degree of interest a teacher shows in his or her students. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying it is an excellent idea:



Across the state, only 20 percent of Californians say it is an excellent idea to evaluate teachers based on how their students perform on annual state tests. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying it is an excellent idea:



Better Schools: Focus on Teachers

We asked Californians to rate 18 proposals to improve schools, which represent the wide range of solutions under consideration in Sacramento. Their preferences very much reflect their view of the key problems — money and teachers.

We used a 10-point scale, where 10 means the proposal would make schools “a great deal better,” and one means it would do nothing to improve schools.

At the top of the public’s solutions is equalizing equipment, technology, buildings and books so schools in rich and poor neighborhoods have equal resources. Nearly six in 10 Californians say this would make schools a great deal better. Those who offer the strongest support are mothers, African Americans, Latinos, and people with the least income and education.

The next tier of solutions — seen as making schools a great deal better by between four in 10 and five in 10 Californians — are: offering free preschool to all children in poor neighborhoods, hiring more teachers and reducing class sizes in elementary schools, requiring teachers to pass tests of knowledge and skills before being allowed to teach, and requiring teachers to continue their professional development by taking courses and keeping up with the subjects they teach.

In the middle of the pack are an assortment of proposals such as sending teams of experts to help teachers in schools doing poorly on state tests, assigning highly experienced teachers to schools doing the worst in each school district and providing more student teaching time to prospective teachers.

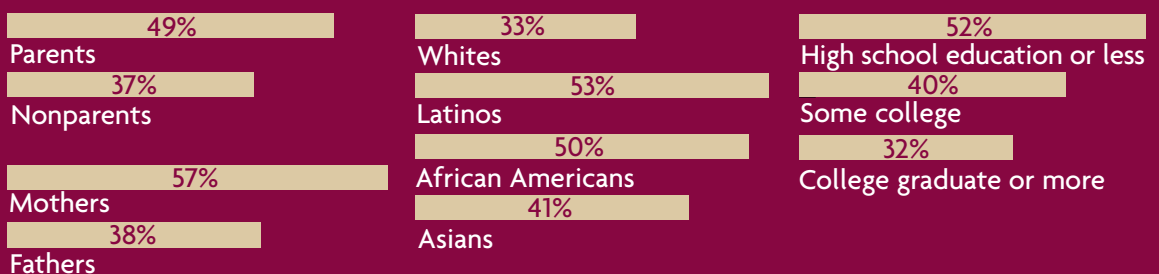
Many of the least popular ideas are those that could be viewed as more punitive. Fewer than one in four Californians sees each of the following as making schools a great deal better: firing teachers and principals whose classes show no improvement on state tests over several years; basing pay raises on how students do on state tests; giving more state money to schools that are improving and allowing teachers and parents to decide how best to spend that money; and extending the school year for students in the lowest-performing schools.

At the bottom of the public’s list is a proposal to limit the number of new teachers in schools to no more than one teacher in five so that most are more experienced. Only 15 percent of the public thought this would help schools get a great deal better.

A Closer Look

Across the state, 41 percent of Californians say it would make schools a great deal better if teachers had to continue professional development by taking courses and keeping up with the subjects they teach. But there are differences among Californians.

Percentage saying continued teacher education would make schools a great deal better:



Equal Resources Tops List of Ways To Improve Schools

“Here is a list of ideas for improving California’s public schools. Please tell me how effective each idea would be in improving the quality of education. Use a 10-point scale where 10 means the idea would make public schools a great deal better, and one means it would do nothing to improve California’s schools.”



Conclusion

California has far too few qualified teachers, and that is a shortage that we project to grow significantly worse in the next decade. The distribution of qualified and effective teachers is uneven and unfair — the state's poorest children are by far the most likely to be taught by the least-experienced, least-qualified teachers. (A December update on the California teaching force is available free on our Web site — www.cftl.org.)

The state has increased significantly its expectations of what all students are supposed to learn before they graduate and added serious consequences for students.

And California is facing its most drastic budget deficit ever. Policymakers are likely to be arguing over how deep the cuts will be rather than how to expand education programs or add new ones.

But policymakers would do well to heed the California public, which puts improved schools as the top priority for the state. Across the state, people of all stripes want better schools, not merely maintenance of the status quo.

Indeed, the public wants the state to spend more on schools, not less, and equalize the resources between wealthy and poor schools.

Californians want the state to invest in teachers, whom they believe are underpaid. The public has no tolerance for any lessening of the requirements for earning a teacher's credential and would continue to invest in the professional development of experienced teachers to make them more effective.

These are difficult times. But the public sees these investments as crucial to California's future.

So do we.



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