

Ready or Not: Grade Level Preparedness Teachers' Views on Current Issues in Education

The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1992

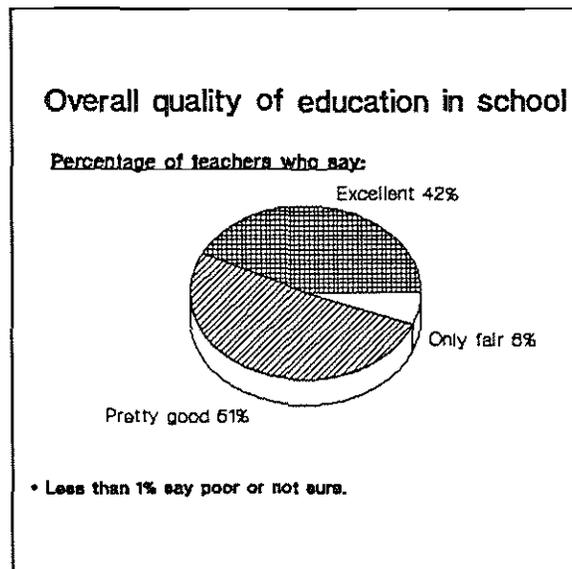
Key Findings from a New National Poll Conducted by Louis Harris and Associates

This survey was designed to assess teachers' perspectives on an issue that is key to the new national goals for education: student grade level preparedness. Specifically, it examines the kinds of problems that make it difficult to be a good student (e.g., lack of support from parents and poverty) and how well prepared teachers feel they are to deal with these problems.



As has been true since The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher began in 1984, almost all teachers in public schools continue to rate the overall quality of education in their own school as positive (93%), with over two in five rating it excellent (42%).

Question: *Thinking about the public school in which you teach, how would you rate the overall quality of education in your school...?*



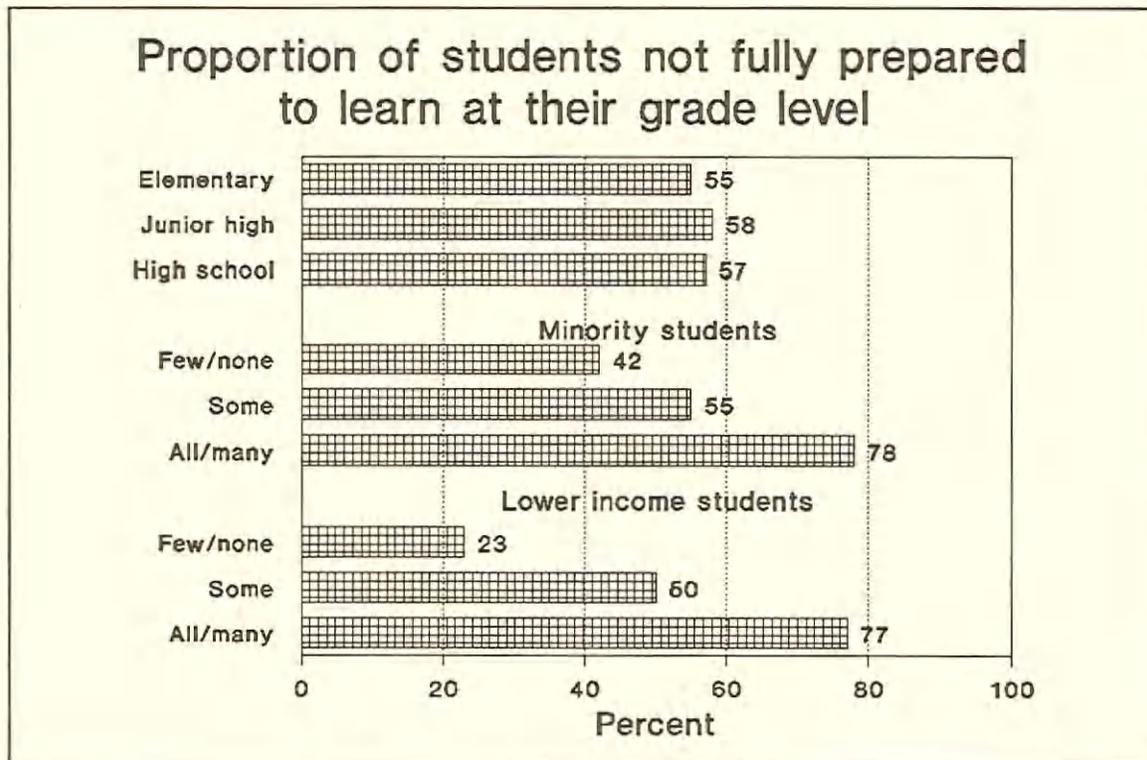
The likelihood of an excellent rating decreases somewhat as school level moves from the lower grades to high school, and decreases markedly as the proportion of minority and lower income students increases.

STUDENTS ARE NOT FULLY PREPARED TO LEARN AT THEIR GRADE LEVEL

The first national education goal defined by the President is that all children begin school prepared to learn. But the findings suggest that achieving this goal is a long way off.

While only 15% of teachers overall feel that all or most of their students come to school not fully prepared to learn at their grade level, 55% of teachers report that all, most, or at least more than one-quarter of their students are unprepared. This proportion is consistent across all school levels.

Question: About what proportion of your students would you say come to school not fully prepared to learn at their grade level?

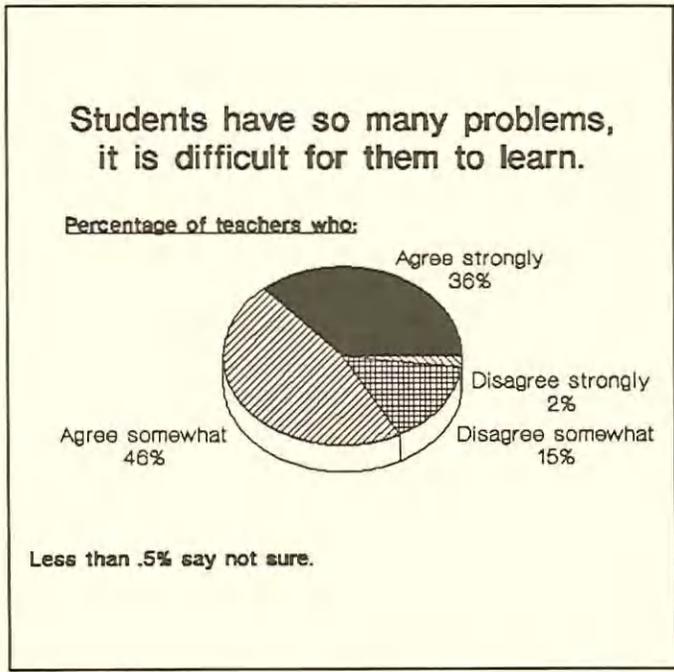


The proportion of teachers who say a significant number of their students are unprepared rises dramatically as the proportion of minority and lower income students increases. Among teachers with few or no minority students in their school, 42% estimate that all, most, or at least more than one-quarter of their students come to school not fully prepared to learn at their grade level. That figure rises to 55% among those reporting some minority students, and to 78% among those who say many or all students in their school are minorities. Among teachers who report

there are few or no lower income students in their school, 23% say all, most, or at least more than one-quarter of their students come to school unprepared to learn at their grade level. That figure rises to 50% among those reporting some lower income students, and to fully 77% among those who say many or all students in their school are from lower income families.

Observation: It should be noted that lack of preparedness is a problem at all grade levels. While many interpretations of this finding are possible, perhaps the most troubling implication is that public schools have not been successful in overcoming the obstacles to learning, particularly for students from low-income and minority backgrounds. If they were, one would expect to see the proportion of teachers who say all, most, or more than one-quarter of their students are unprepared decline as grade level rises.

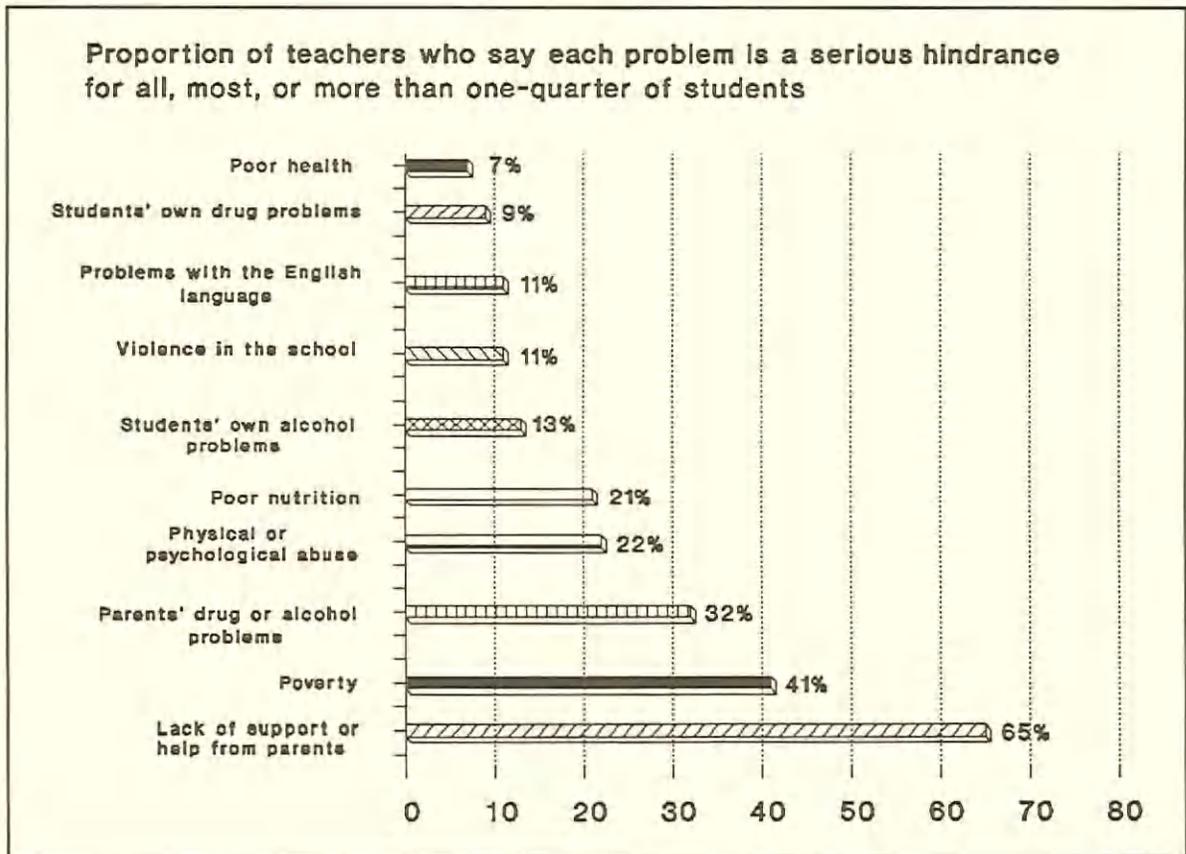
Question: ... (Do) you agree/disagree that many of your students come to school with so many problems that it is difficult for them to be good students?



Fully 82% of teachers agree at least somewhat that many of their students come to school with so many problems that it is difficult for them to be good students. As the proportion of minority and lower income students increases, agreement with this statement increases markedly.

LACK OF PARENTAL SUPPORT IS BY FAR THE MOST SERIOUS HINDRANCE TO STUDENTS' ABILITY TO LEARN, ACCORDING TO TEACHERS

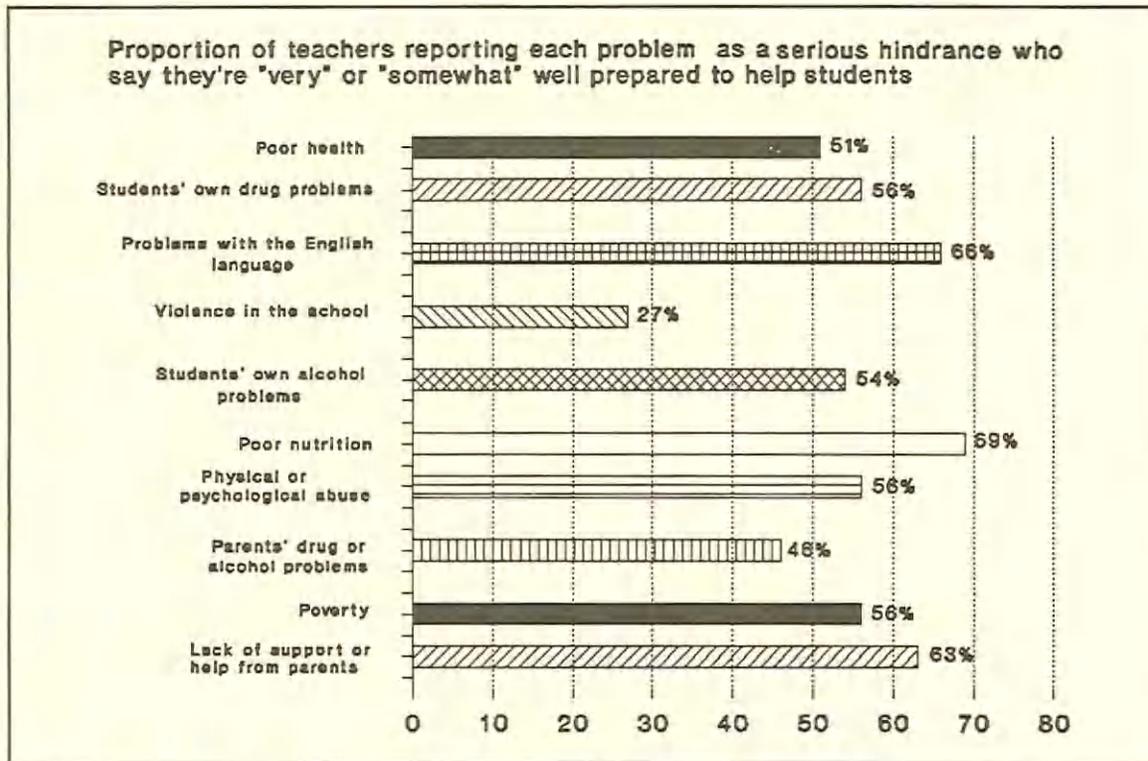
Of the ten specific problems tested, only one stands out for most teachers as a serious obstacle to learning. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (65%) say lack of support or help from parents presents a serious hindrance for all, most or at least more than one-quarter of their students.



Nine out of the ten problems tested are viewed as being more serious in schools with high proportions of minority and lower income students than in schools with few or no students in those categories. The one exception is students' own alcohol problems. Similar proportions of teachers across the board see this as a hindrance for a substantial number of students. However, while poor nutrition, violence in the school, problems understanding English, students' own drug problems, poor health, and -- not surprisingly -- poverty itself appear to be extremely rare hindrances to learning in schools with few or no lower income students, lack of parental support, student alcohol problems, parents' substance abuse problems, and physical or psychological abuse are reported as hindrances by substantial minorities of teachers even in schools with few economically disadvantaged students.

FEW TEACHERS CREDIT THEMSELVES WITH THE EXPERTISE TO DEAL WITH THESE PROBLEMS

Fewer than one-third of teachers who report that any of the ten problems tested is a serious hindrance for all, most, or more than one-quarter of their students believe they themselves are very well prepared by their education and training to help their students with that problem. The proportions of those who feel very well prepared range from a high of 30% for "problems speaking or understanding the English language" to a low of 6% for "parents' drug or alcohol problems."



However, many more teachers who report each of the problems is a serious hindrance to a substantial number of students feel at least somewhat well prepared to help their students. These responses range from a high of 69% for "poor nutrition" to a low of 27% for "violence in the school." In fact, majorities feel very or somewhat well prepared to help with eight of the ten problems tested.

Observation: As supportive as teachers might be, few feel very well prepared to help their students with a range of problems that present barriers to learning. A recent emphasis on nutrition may have imbued teachers with an understanding of the issue and a sense of where to turn when there is a problem; on the other hand, most teachers who say violence is an issue seem wholly unprepared to deal with the problem.

THE SURVEY DESIGN

A sample of 1,000 teachers, designed to be representative of all teachers in the public schools in kindergarten through grade 12 throughout the United States, was surveyed.

As in prior MetLife Surveys of the American Teacher, Louis Harris and Associates drew a random sample of current teachers from a list of 1.2 million teachers compiled by Market Data Retrieval of Westport, Connecticut. Sample sizes for complete interviews were set for each state, based on statistics of public school teachers in each state, published by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics.

In June 1990, the sample was established for periodic surveying. At that time, each teacher was contacted at his or her school by telephone, and requested to participate in two surveys during the 1990-1991 and 1991-1992 school years. The message included a toll-free number to allow a return call.

Each teacher was screened to ensure that he or she currently teaches in an elementary or secondary level public school. Interviews were conducted by telephone from March 2 through 12, 1992. The average interview length was approximately five minutes.

WEIGHTING OF THE TEACHERS' SAMPLE

The achieved sample of teachers was weighted to the latest, best available parameters of race, sex, years of teaching experience, geographic region and size of location. This adjusts these key variables, where necessary, to their actual proportions in the population.

POSSIBLE SAMPLING ERROR

It is customary with probability samples of 1,000 to write that "this survey has a possible sampling error of +/- 3%." However, this is a somewhat misleading statement because in any survey there is a small possibility that measurement errors are substantially greater than this, and there is no way to calculate the probabilities of errors arising from factors such as human error, non-response, interviewer bias or respondents who do not understand the questions.

For more information, please write to:

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