

Office-Holder Leadership Is Critical to Public School Quality

by Wendy D. Puriefoy, June 14, 2004

The National League of Cities (www.nlc.org)

Voters say that stronger leadership from local elected officials is second only to parent involvement as a critical factor in improving the public schools in their community, according to an April 2004 poll.

For five years now, Public Education Network and Education Week have been tracking the degree to which the American public takes responsibility for quality public education, and how it holds itself and its elected officials accountable for promoting policies that support quality education for all children.

One finding that has remained constant over the years is the importance voters place on elected officials making education a top priority.

This is true for all elected officials, but particularly true when it comes to mayors and town managers.

Furthermore, voters believe that such leadership is best exemplified by a deep knowledge of education issues and committed advocacy on behalf of quality public education — not by executive takeover or privatization of school districts.

Effective education leaders, voters say, spend lots of time in schools. They fight for better resources from the state and from Congress, and they pull the community together to find solutions for problems in the public schools.

Candidates for elected office should take a hard look at voter preferences when it comes to education.

A majority of voters in every demographic and political group — including independents, voters under 30 and homemakers — say they are more likely to vote for candidates who place education at the center of their campaigns and at the top of their agendas. These same voters want to elect officials who will protect education from state budget cuts. Indeed, by a 2–1 margin, voters in every demographic group say they want education protected from budget cuts over their next highest priority.

Despite the financial pinch many families are feeling today, a substantial majority of voters nonetheless say they are willing to pay higher taxes to improve public education. When asked which education programs they want to see protected, voters mention early childhood education, reduced class size and teacher pay ... all areas that require significant investment.

The public is especially willing to support more education spending if they know how the money is going to be spent and what kind of accountability for outcomes can be expected. Portland, Ore., Durham, N.C., Mobile, Ala., Cleveland, Ohio, and Detroit, Mich., were able to get bond issues passed thanks in large part to the public information campaigns that were launched by local education funds in those communities to inform voters about the education issues at stake and how the bond proceeds would be used.

Americans are definitely paying attention to what goes on in their public schools. About three-quarters of voters (72 percent) believe their community is “very active” or “somewhat active” in supporting public schools, and 68 percent say their community takes a lot of responsibility for the quality of public schools.

More than half (57 percent) say their communities have come together to work on a public education problem, and they point to several key indicators of communities that take responsibility for public education:

- o strong leadership from officeholders;
- o a high level of parental involvement;
- o young people aware of their civic responsibilities and active in their communities; and
- o higher education and cultural institutions that use their resources to enhance learning opportunities for young people.

One thing is clear — responsibility for quality public education for all children cannot be left only to parents, educators and students. It is everyone's responsibility to make sure all children receive a quality public education.

This requires more focused community action, better information about education issues, adequate and stable financial resources and elected officials at all levels that are held accountable for what they do to strengthen our system of public education. These polls tell us Americans are ready for the challenge.

Wendy D. Puriefoy is president of Public Education Network, a national organization of local education funds and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. For more information, go to. www.publiceducation.org.