



# Summary of the 2011 Future Educators Association® Student Poll

## OVERVIEW

For the first time, the Future Educators Association®, a federally-recognized student organization that supports individuals interested in pursuing education-related careers, polled its student members on several important education issues. The 13 questions that appeared on the web-based poll were a subset of the 2010 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, a renowned research poll that is conducted annually to allow educators and policy makers to track public opinion about one of this nation's most important institutions — its public schools. The purpose of the FEA Student Poll is to give our future teachers a voice in education conversations at the national level. For the first time, educators and policy makers have the opportunity to hear what the next generation of educators thinks about current education issues and what they expect for their future careers in education. We believe that this perspective is critical to improving our education system, particularly when considering ways to make careers in education more attractive to promising young people who are interested in the field.

## SCHOOL QUALITY

To begin, we wanted to get a sense of Future Educators Association® student members’ opinions of education in general. Across the board, FEA students are more optimistic than the average American adult about the current state of our nation’s public schools, including their opinions of President Obama’s support of education. However, it is obvious that the students agree that there is room for improvement.

More specifically, nearly half (49% ) of the FEA student members polled would give President Obama an A/B for his performance in support of public schools. When this question was asked of adults in 2010, only 34% said they would give the same grade.

*Table 1. President Barack Obama has been in office for over a year. How would you grade his performance in support of public schools using the A, B, C, D, Fail scale?*

	Student totals	2010 US adult totals
	%	%
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>34</b>
A	13	7
B	36	27
C	33	26
D	8	18
Fail	4	15
Don't know	6	7

FEA students also rated schools in their community significantly higher than the general American public. Over 60% of FEA students give their community schools an A/B when rating their quality of work, which is much higher than the 49% of adults who gave their community schools the same grade.

*Table 2. Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves in your community were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here – A, B, C, D, or FAIL?*

	<b>Student totals</b>	<b>2010 US adult totals</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>49</b>
A	16	11
B	45	38
C	28	33
D	8	11
Fail	2	5
Don't know	1	2

When asked about public schools in the nation as a whole, FEA students were similar to adults in that their opinions lowered significantly. Only 37% of students give the nation’s schools an A/B. Though their opinions decreased significantly, it’s clear that FEA students still view US schools more positively when compared to adults. (Only 18% of adults gave the nation’s schools an A/B.)

*Table 3. How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally – A, B, C, D, or FAIL?*

	<b>Student totals</b>	<b>2010 US adult totals</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>18</b>
A	4	1
B	33	17
C	45	53
D	10	20
Fail	2	6
Don't know	6	3

## IMPROVING SCHOOL QUALITY BY IMPROVING TEACHER QUALITY

FEA students didn't just offer their critique of public schools. They also shared their opinions on how U.S. public schools can improve. In the 2010 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, adults were asked the following open-ended question: In your opinion, what are the main things a school has to do before it can earn an "A"? The top five answers were:

- Improve the quality of teaching (34%)
- Implement a challenging curriculum (12%)
- Help students be more successful (12%)
- Implement standardized testing/grading (6%)
- Establish closer relationships with parents (5%)

We took these top five responses and we asked FEA students to rank them in order of importance. Similar to adults, the FEA students ranked "improving the quality of teaching" as the most important thing a school can do. Also ranking very highly was "help students be more successful." These two actions were, by far, viewed as central to improving schools.

Much less significant were "implement a challenging curriculum" and "establish closer relationships with parents." The least important thing for schools to focus on – according to FEA students – was "implementing standardized testing."

Similarly, of the three-quarters of FEA students who believe increasing student or teacher learning time would increase student learning, significantly more believe that having teachers spend time learning new ways to teach would have a greater effect on student learning than having students spend more time in school.

*Table 4. Which of the following do you think could have a greater effect on increasing student learning? Having students spend more time in school with their teachers, having teachers spend more time learning new ways to teach, or neither of these would increase student learning?*

	Student totals %	2010 US adult totals %
Having students spend more time in school with their teachers	20	29
Having teachers spend more time learning new ways to teach	62	38
Neither of these would increase student learning	14	31
Don't know	4	2

FEA students also believe that the primary purpose for evaluating teachers should be to help them improve their ability to teach, rather than documenting ineffectiveness or establishing their salaries. Adults believe that the primary reason for evaluation should be to document ineffectiveness.

Table 5. In your mind, what do you think should be the primary purpose for evaluating teachers?

	Student totals %	2010 US adult totals %
Helping them improve their ability to teach	81	60
Establishing their salaries based upon their skills	7	13
Documenting ineffectiveness that could lead to dismissal	8	26
Don't know	4	1

## STUDENT LEARNING AND REWARDS

We also asked several questions to try and better understand FEA students' opinions on what is most influential in student learning and what incentives are appropriate for encouraging student learning.

The first question deals with paying students for good grades. In April 2010, *Time* published "Should Schools Bribe Kids?" This article focused on whether financial incentives in the classroom are really effective. Because of the recent interest in this topic, PDK and FEA included a question about this in their polls. Overall, both adults and FEA student members opposed the idea of paying student to make good grades.

Table 6. Recently, some school districts have experimented with the idea of paying students money for specific behaviors or achievements, such as reading books and getting good grades. We would like to know your views on the practice. Do you support or oppose the idea of school districts paying small amounts of money to students to, for example, read books, attend school, or get good grades?

	Student totals %	2010 US adult totals %
Support	35	23
Oppose	59	76
Don't know	6	1

We also asked adults and students whether success is based on students' natural ability to learn or on how hard students try. Again, both groups overwhelmingly agreed that success in school is based on how hard students try.

*Table 7. Some people believe a student’s success in school is based on his or her natural ability to learn. Others believe it has more to do with how hard they try. Which do you believe?*

	<b>Student totals</b> %	<b>2010 US adult</b> <b>totals</b> %
Success is based on students’ natural ability to learn	14	23
Success is based on how hard students try	81	73
Don’t know	4	4

Finally, we asked FEA students which is a more important factor in determining whether students learn in school: the school or students’ parents. Approximately two-thirds of American adults believe that students’ parents are the most influential factor. While FEA students agree, they do so at a much lesser rate.

*Table 8. In your opinion, which is a more important factor in determining whether students learn in school — the school or the student’s parents?*

	<b>Student totals</b> %	<b>2010 US adult</b> <b>totals</b> %
The school	42	22
The student’s parents	51	76
Don’t know	7	2

## **IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE**

In recent years, President Obama has implemented several initiatives to increase the number of youth enrolling in and graduating from college. In fact, one of his primary education goals is to once again lead the world in college graduation rates by the end of this decade. We wanted to know how Americans felt about this, and so we asked them whether they think a college education is important. Two-thirds of adults feel that a college education is very important, where 89% of FEA student members think it is very important. We were not surprised that FEA members think a college education is important since they plan to pursue a career in education and that will most likely require a college degree.

Table 9. How important is a college education today: very important, fairly important, not too important, or not important at all?

	Student totals %	2010 US adult totals %
Very important	89	75
Fairly important	10	21
Not too important	1	3
Not important at all	0	1

### **BIGGEST PROBLEMS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Participants in both surveys were also asked about the biggest problem currently facing public schools. Every year, this is the first question that is asked in the PDK/Gallup poll. It is asked as an open-ended question, and it is asked first so the responses are not biased by other questions. The top three responses among American adults in 2010 were lack of financial support/funding/money (36%), followed by lack of discipline and then use of drugs/dope.

We took these top five responses and we asked FEA students to rank them in order of importance. Similar to adults, FEA students (61%) ranked “lack of financial support” as the biggest problem schools face. Twenty-three percent of FEA students believe that “lack of discipline” is the primary issue schools must deal with, and 15% feel that it is drugs.

### **TEACHER PAY**

Over the past several years, teacher pay has been a part of the national education conversation. Many have debated the belief that we need to pay teachers more to attract high-quality students to consider careers in teaching: In other words, we need to pay teachers more if we want to compete with other countries. There have also been many conversations focused on how teacher salaries should be determined, such as the criteria that should be used. For that reason, we asked adults and FEA students two questions about teacher pay.

In the first question, we asked whether a teacher’s salary should be tied to his or her students’ academic achievement. Nearly 75% of adults believe that salary should be very closely tied or somewhat closely tied to student achievement. FEA students are more evenly split on the issue. Fifty-six percent support very closely or somewhat closely tying salaries to student achievement, and 41% believe that teacher salaries should not be very closely tied to teacher salaries, if at all.

Table 10. In your opinion, how closely should a teacher’s salary be tied to his or her students’ academic achievement?

	Student totals %	2010 US adult totals %
Very closely tied	12	19
Somewhat closely tied	44	54
Not very closely tied	24	14
Not at all tied	17	13
Don’t know	3	*

\* = less than half percent

We also asked FEA students and adults whether teachers should be paid higher salaries as an incentive to teach in schools that have been identified as in need of improvement. Sixty-eight percent of adults and 55% of FEA students believe that we should pay teachers more to work in these hard-to-staff schools.

*In your opinion, should teacher be paid higher salaries as an incentive to teach in schools that have been identified as in need of improvement or not?*

	Student totals %	2010 US adult totals %
Yes, they should	55	68
No, they should not	32	31
Don’t know	13	1

## **A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR EDUCATION**

Based on the survey results, it is clear that Americans feel positively about their schools and teachers, but they think there are changes that we need to make to America’s education system to put high-quality teachers in every classroom. And for the first time, we have added the voice future educators to this conversation. By listening to FEA students’ ideas about how to improve education, we will not only make better decisions, but we can also begin to consider what future teachers expect in their careers and shape the field of education to be a more attractive career path.