

Teachers', Board Members' and Citizens' Perceptions of Educational Issues: A Comparative Study

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This paper presents a comparison of the attitudes held by elected school officials, teachers and community members concerning eighteen current educational issues. The study is an outgrowth of community attitude surveys conducted in fifteen Maine communities by the Center for Educational Field Services, College of Education, University of Maine at Orono.

Introduction

The collective response to "The Nation At Risk" report and numerous similar state and local educational initiatives, illustrates that the educational community is being asked to more accurately reflect the public's expectations for public education. Whether you call it greater accountability or educational reform, relevant publics are making new demands on schools and educators.

Not unlike most private corporations, public schools must demonstrate that public opinion is important, desired and represented at the policy tables and in the board rooms of our public school systems! Differences in attitudes of the various publics concerning major educational issues need to be identified and considered by governing bodies that make educational policy.

As an aid to state and local leaders in the State of Maine in their efforts to gauge and respond to the attitudes about educational issues and the perceptions of public school services of their various constituents, the Center for Educational Field Services (CEFS) of the College of Education at the University of Maine at Orono offers a comprehensive survey/assessment service to local school districts. More specifically, the purpose of this survey/assessment service is to determine how members of a school community (including parent and non-parent community members, teachers, students, and recent graduates from the school system) regard the schools, where they perceive excellence, where they find shortcomings and whether their willingness to support schools financially is enthusiastic or reluctant. In addition, the survey assesses the attitudes of community member and teachers concerning 18 current educational issues. To date, the CEFS has conducted surveys in 21 communities in the State of Maine; 15 of these 21 communities participated in the assessment of attitudes concerning the 18 issues (surveys completed prior to 1983-84 did not include the education issues).

This paper describes survey results from a combined data base of 15 school communities in Maine and from

a similar survey of all elected school board members in the state. It focuses on attitudes concerning 18 current educational issues held by: a) community members representing rural, semi-rural and suburban school districts; b) teachers employed in the same districts; and c) elected school officials (board members) from across the state.

Method

Every household in fifteen Maine communities was mailed a survey/assessment questionnaire during the 1983-84 school year. In addition, randomly selected individuals in each community were personally interviewed using the same instrument. The questionnaire contained items designed to gauge respondents' satisfaction with public school services, opinions regarding the importance of various curriculum areas and school programs and attitudes about 18 topical educational issues. Teachers employed by each of these school districts were surveyed separately and asked to respond to the same 18 educational issues. Additionally, all elected school officials in the State of Maine were mailed a similar survey instrument in the late Fall of 1983.

A total of 2,442 usable survey responses were returned from the respective groups (1,601 community members, 663 elected officials, 208 teachers). Approximately forty percent (38.9%) of the respondents were males and sixty percent (59.9%) were female.

The 18 educational issues were grouped into three classifications for analysis: teacher issues, student issues and miscellaneous educational issues. Table 1 presents comparisons of the responses of community members, elected officials and teachers to seven teacher issues; Table 2 presents comparisons of the subgroups' responses to five student issues; and Table 3 presents results of comparisons of the subgroups' responses to six miscellaneous educational issues. Tables 4, 5 and 6 present comparisons between those in each of the subgroups expressing an opinion to the survey items and those indicating "don't know"

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Table 1
Teacher Issues

Survey Item	Group	Agree		Disagree		X ²	P
		N	%	N	%		
Beginning teachers' salaries are too low.	Community Members	592	(53.8)	509	(46.2)	149.1	.001
	Elected Officials	455	(74.0)	160	(26.0)		
	Teachers	184	(92.9)	14	(7.1)		
Teachers' salaries are too low.	Community Members	612	(53.6)	529	(46.4)	110.5	.001
	Elected Officials	429	(69.9)	185	(30.1)		
	Teachers	181	(88.3)	24	(11.7)		
Additional compensation should be made available for teaching positions that are hard to fill, and where teacher shortages have been identified.	Community Members	758	(55.2)	616	(44.8)	39.4	.001
	Elected Officials	341	(58.7)	240	(41.3)		
	Teachers	65	(33.3)	130	(66.7)		
Teacher salary increases should be based on merit.	Community Members	1092	(77.9)	309	(22.1)	181.5	.001
	Elected Officials	334	(65.1)	179	(34.9)		
	Teachers	60	(31.7)	129	(68.3)		
Teachers should be required to complete a competency exam.	Community Members	1243	(84.6)	226	(15.4)	214.1	.001
	Elected Officials	507	(86.4)	80	(13.6)		
	Teachers	83	(42.6)	112	(57.4)		
Teacher continuing contract/tenure laws should be eliminated.	Community Members	576	(57.4)	428	(42.6)	177.8	.001
	Elected Officials	433	(75.8)	138	(24.2)		
	Teachers	40	(21.4)	147	(78.6)		
Collective bargaining has been good for education in our district.	Community Members	359	(50.8)	347	(49.2)	100.5	.001
	Elected Officials	160	(33.3)	321	(66.7)		
	Teachers	123	(77.8)	35	(22.2)		

Table 2
Student Issues

Survey Item	Group	Agree		Disagree		X ²	P
		N	%	N	%		
Truants and school dropouts are not a major problem in our school district.	Community Members	466	(54.5)	390	(45.6)	28.3	.001
	Elected Officials	219	(42.6)	295	(57.4)		
	Teachers	118	(62.4)	71	(37.6)		
Students should be required to pass a competency exam before graduating from high school.	Community Members	1161	(79.3)	303	(20.7)	37.4	.001
	Elected Officials	503	(83.7)	98	(16.3)		
	Teachers	124	(63.3)	72	(36.7)		
High school graduation requirements should be strengthened.	Community Members	947	(75.7)	304	(24.3)	50.0	.001
	Elected Officials	544	(89.6)	63	(10.4)		
	Teachers	148	(78.3)	41	(21.7)		
Discipline is a major problem in our district schools.	Community Members	624	(57.9)	454	(42.1)	2.8	.248
	Elected Officials	328	(61.0)	210	(39.0)		
	Teachers	124	(63.3)	72	(36.7)		
Substance abuse is not a major problem in our district schools.	Community Members	327	(31.0)	728	(69.0)	43.3	.001
	Elected Officials	157	(30.7)	354	(69.3)		
	Teachers	87	(57.2)	65	(42.8)		

Table 3
Miscellaneous Issues

Survey Item	Group	Agree		Disagree		X ²	P
		N	%	N	%		
Administrative salaries are too low.	Community Members	198	(19.3)	827	(80.7)	75.3	.001
	Elected Officials	183	(30.7)	414	(69.3)		
	Teachers	82	(48.5)	87	(51.5)		
An extended school year for teachers would improve the quality of instruction.	Community Members	484	(39.4)	744	(60.6)	38.4	.001
	Elected Officials	200	(39.5)	306	(60.5)		
	Teachers	32	(16.7)	160	(83.3)		
There should be more community involvement in the establishment of local educational goals.	Community Members	1240	(88.3)	165	(11.7)	85.1	.001
	Elected Officials	532	(89.6)	62	(10.4)		
	Teachers	130	(65.3)	69	(34.7)		
Programs of staff development should be required to maintain and improve instructional quality.	Community Members	1345	(95.2)	68	(4.8)	24.3	.001
	Elected Officials	603	(97.9)	13	(2.1)		
	Teachers	182	(89.7)	21	(10.3)		
Tuition tax credits or a voucher system would have a positive effect on the public schools in Maine.	Community Members	341	(48.6)	361	(51.4)	19.9	.001
	Elected Officials	138	(38.9)	217	(61.1)		
	Teachers	34	(29.3)	82	(70.7)		
The school day for students should be lengthened.	Community Members	408	(28.0)	1050	(72.0)	78.6	.001
	Elected Officials	249	(42.9)	331	(57.1)		
	Teachers	24	(12.1)	175	(87.9)		

on the teacher issues, student issues and miscellaneous educational issues respectively. In all cases chi squares were computed for analysis and are reported in each table.

Results

Data from the combined surveys reveal differences in the expressed opinions of community members, elected officials and teachers on 17 of the 18 topical educational issues. Differences in awareness of the issues are apparent among the various subgroups by the proportion of "don't know" responses.

Most elected school officials and nearly all teachers are of the opinion that educators' salaries are too low, while only half of the community members agree that such is the case; additionally, approximately one-third of the community members responded "don't know" to the three salary questions on the questionnaire. When asked their attitudes toward providing additional compensation for hard to fill teaching positions (e.g., science, mathematics); more than half of the community members and elected school officials agree with this idea, while only a third of the teachers agree.

A similar difference in subgroup opinion occurs on the issue of requiring competency examinations for teachers;

85% of the community members and elected officials agree with the idea, while less than half of the teachers support such a proposal. Along the same line, a sharp difference of opinion is apparent concerning the elimination of teacher continuing contract/tenure laws; more than half of the community members and over three-quarters of the elected officials support such action, while only 21% of the teachers do. It is noteworthy that 35% of community members indicated that they "don't know" about this issue.

A lack of awareness concerning the positive effects of teacher collective bargaining is very apparent in all three subgroups; more than half of the community members are unsure about such effects, while more than one-fifth of the elected school officials and teachers report uncertainty on this issue. Of those who expressed an opinion on this survey item, community members appear evenly split on the issue, one-third of the elected school officials agree that collective bargaining has had positive effects, and more than three-fourths of the teachers agree that it has been good for education in their districts.

Opinions of community members, elected school officials and teachers seem less markedly different on several student issues. For example, about half of the community member indicate agreement that there is no problem regarding truancy and dropouts, while only a

Table 4
Teacher Issues

Survey Item	Group	Agree		Disagree		X ²	P
		N	%	N	%		
Beginning teachers' salaries are too low.	Community Members	1101	(70.4)	463	(29.6)	248.3	.001
	Elected Officials	615	(98.1)	12	(1.9)		
	Teachers	198	(95.7)	9	(4.3)		
Teachers' salaries are too low.	Community Members	1141	(73.6)	409	(26.4)	233.6	.001
	Elected Officials	614	(98.6)	9	(1.4)		
	Teachers	205	(99.0)	2	(1.0)		
Additional compensation should be made available for teaching positions that are hard to fill, and where teacher shortages have been identified.	Community Members	1374	(88.1)	185	(11.5)	17.0	.001
	Elected Officials	581	(93.0)	44	(7.0)		
	Teachers	195	(94.7)	11	(5.3)		
Teacher salary increases should be based on merit.	Community Members	1401	(90.2)	152	(9.8)	29.2	.001
	Elected Officials	513	(82.3)	110	(17.7)		
	Teachers	189	(91.7)	17	(8.3)		
Teachers should be required to complete a competency exam.	Community Members	1469	(94.3)	89	(5.7)	0.5	.791
	Elected Officials	587	(93.6)	40	(6.4)		
	Teachers	195	(94.7)	11	(5.3)		
Teacher continuing contract/tenure laws should be eliminated.	Community Members	1004	(65.2)	537	(34.8)	198.6	.001
	Elected Officials	571	(91.9)	50	(8.1)		
	Teachers	187	(90.8)	19	(9.2)		
Collective bargaining has been good for education in our district.	Community Members	706	(46.2)	823	(53.8)	216.5	.001
	Elected Officials	481	(78.0)	136	(22.0)		
	Teachers	158	(76.7)	48	(23.3)		

Table 5
Student Issues

Survey Item	Group	Agree		Disagree		X ²	P
		N	%	N	%		
Truants and school dropouts are not a major problem in our district.	Community Members	856	(68.2)	399	(31.8)	75.5	.001
	Elected Officials	514	(82.2)	111	(17.8)		
	Teachers	189	(90.9)	19	(9.1)		
Students should be required to pass a competency exam before graduating from high school.	Community Members	1464	(93.4)	103	(6.6)	11.1	.004
	Elected Officials	601	(96.9)	19	(3.1)		
	Teachers	196	(95.6)	9	(4.4)		
High school graduation requirements should be strengthened	Community Members	1251	(80.1)	310	(19.9)	120.1	.001
	Elected Officials	607	(97.9)	13	(2.1)		
	Teachers	189	(91.3)	18	(8.7)		
Discipline is a major problem in our district schools.	Community Members	1078	(78.5)	295	(21.5)	45.6	.001
	Elected Officials	538	(86.8)	82	(13.2)		
	Teachers	196	(95.1)	10	(4.9)		
Substance abuse is not a major problem in our district schools.	Community Members	1055	(78.6)	288	(21.4)	4.8	.091
	Elected Officials	511	(82.8)	106	(17.2)		
	Teachers	152	(80.0)	38	(20.0)		

Table 6
Miscellaneous Issues

Survey Item	Group	Agree		Disagree		X ²	P
		N	%	N	%		
Administrative salaries are too low.	Community Members	1025	(65.6)	538	(34.4)	211.1	.001
	Elected Officials	597	(95.1)	31	(4.9)		
	Teachers	169	(81.3)	39	(18.8)		
An extended school year for teachers would improve the quality of instruction.	Community Members	1228	(79.4)	318	(20.6)	19.9	.001
	Elected Officials	506	(81.5)	115	(18.5)		
	Teachers	192	(92.3)	16	(7.7)		
There should be more community involvement in the establishment of local educational goals.	Community Members	1405	(90.1)	154	(9.9)	19.7	.001
	Elected Officials	594	(95.2)	30	(4.8)		
	Teachers	199	(95.7)	9	(4.3)		
Programs of staff development should be required to maintain and improve instructional quality.	Community Members	1413	(90.3)	152	(9.7)	49.1	.001
	Elected Officials	616	(97.9)	13	(2.1)		
	Teachers	203	(98.1)	4	(1.9)		
Tuition tax credits or a voucher system would have a positive effect on the public schools in Maine.	Community Members	702	(45.8)	830	(54.2)	30.2	.001
	Elected Officials	355	(57.8)	259	(42.2)		
	Teachers	116	(57.4)	86	(42.6)		
The school day for students should be lengthened.	Community Members	1458	(92.9)	111	(7.1)	3.0	.220
	Elected Officials	580	(93.4)	41	(6.6)		
	Teachers	199	(96.1)	8	(3.9)		

slightly lower proportion of elected officials and a slightly larger proportion of teachers agree.

Teachers are less enthusiastic than school board members (63% versus 84%) about requiring a competency examination for high school graduates, while approximately three-fourths of the community members support such an idea. There is general agreement among the three subgroups that high school graduation requirements should be strengthened, with more than 75% of each of the three groups supporting such a move.

There appears to be little difference between the three subgroups on the extent to which discipline is a major problem in the schools; approximately 60% of all three subgroups agree that it is. Teachers, however, differ from community members and elected school officials regarding the problem of substance abuse in the schools; more than half of the teachers do not see drugs as a problem, but only one-third of the community members and elected officials agree with them. Approximately 20% of all three subgroups were not sufficiently aware of such circumstances in their schools to respond to that survey item.

While approximately 40% of community members and elected officials agree that extending the school year for teachers would improve the quality of instruction in the schools (with about one-fifth of each group indicating "don't know"), only 17% of the teachers support this con-

cept. Nearly half of the elected school officials favor lengthening the school day, but only 28% of the community members and 12% of the teachers support the idea.

Nearly all community members and elected officials agree that there should be more community involvement in the establishment of school goals (nearly 90% of both subgroups agreeing with this survey item); two-thirds of the teachers are in agreement.

There appears to be consensus among the three groups that staff development should be required to maintain and improve instructional quality. Over 90% of each group agrees with that item.

Finally, approximately one-half of the total respondents indicated uncertainty about the desirability of tuition tax credits or a voucher system for the public schools in Maine. Of those who expressed an opinion on this item, 49% of the community members support such a system, while 39% of elected school officials and 29% of the teachers indicate agreement.

Conclusions

These findings have demonstrated existing differences of attitudes among various constituencies of public education concerning critical educational issues. Public school

administrators, teachers and elected governing boards must establish systems that provide data-based expressions of public opinion. Decisions regarding present and future educational directions will be successfully implemented only if, and after, the opinions of all ap-

propriate publics have been gathered, evaluated and interpreted. The implicit goals of our schools, as manifested in educational practice, must become more demonstrably congruent with public expectations.