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Poll Finds Increasing Concern Over Public Schools, Especially Among Professors

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Washington

Americans are increasingly worried about the quality of elementary and secondary schools and students' preparedness to compete in the global economy, and college faculty members are among the public-education system's greatest critics, according to findings released on Wednesday from the latest in a series of annual surveys.

Over all, 53 percent of Americans believe that the nation's public schools need major changes or a complete overhaul, says a report on the survey, which was conducted for Educational Testing Service. That figure reflects a five-percentage-point increase from the previous year's version of the survey. But 67 percent of public-high-school teachers feel the system is working well or needs only minor improvements, and 71 percent of high-school administrators agree.

The survey, the sixth in ETS's annual America Speaks series, was conducted by two polling firms, Peter D. Hart Research Associates and the Winston Group, in late May and early June. It surveyed 1,215 adults nationwide, and has a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points. Smaller groups of high-school teachers, high-school administrators, college faculty members, and high-school students were also surveyed.

College professors tended to view the public schools more negatively than did Americans in general. Over all, 44 percent of Americans gave the nation's schools a C grade, while 15 percent thought the schools deserved a D. But 49 percent of the professors gave the schools a C, and 23 percent gave them a D.

Similarly, only 11 percent of adults said they thought the schools had high expectations for students and significantly challenged them, but even fewer college professors (2 percent) thought students were significantly challenged.

And 69 percent of college faculty members said high schools were not doing enough to serve their most gifted students, while only 47 percent of Americans over all shared that concern.

On questions related to maintaining America's competitiveness in the global economy, the survey found that 40 percent of Americans identified mathematics, science, and technology skills as the first or second most important competency for students to acquire. Only 9 percent rated foreign languages as the most important, and only 17 percent put "understanding other people's history and culture" as one of the top two. In fact, 60 percent of Americans -- and 54 percent of college faculty members -- said they wished they "had taken more challenging math and science classes in high school."

"The U.S. is falling behind other countries in terms of math and science achievement," Charles E. Cascio, ETS's vice president for communications and public affairs, said at a news conference announcing the survey's results. "We stand to lose control over our economic future" unless improvements are made, he added.

But while most Americans thought public high schools needed improvement, how well those schools prepared students for college was not one of their top concerns. A total of 49 percent said schools were "falling behind" or "coming up short" in that regard. Greater numbers thought schools were falling behind or coming up short in seven other areas, including not doing enough to support struggling students and prevent them from dropping out (73 percent) or to prepare students "to compete globally for tech jobs" (71 percent).

Respondents overwhelmingly favored all ideas to improve the education system that were presented to them. The most widely approved option for improving teacher quality was to ensure that teachers are experts in the subjects they teach with "more subject matter training" and a "subject certification test." Ninety-two percent strongly or somewhat favored that option.

More information about the survey is available on ETS's [Web site](#).