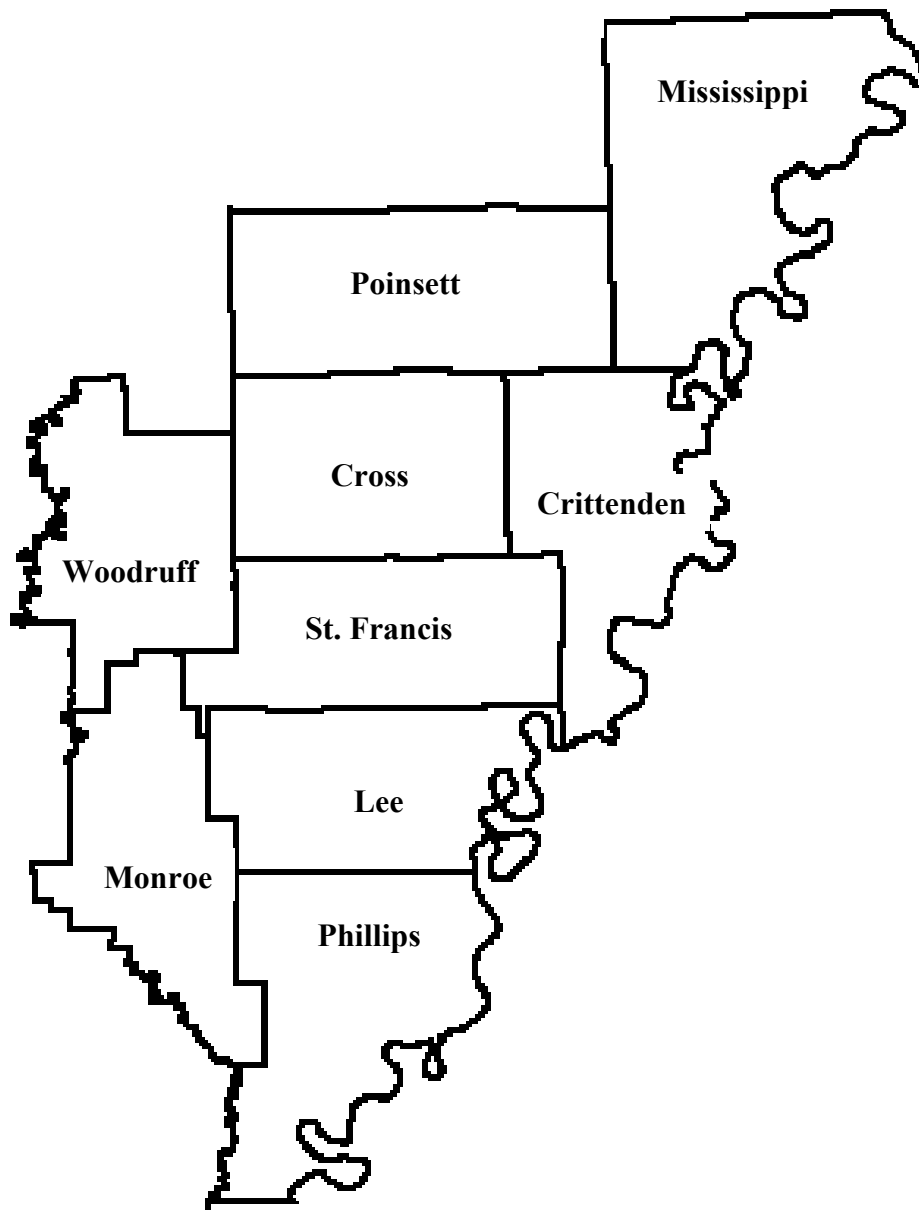


What School Administrators Say About Fixing Public Schools

Opinion Survey of Public School Principals and
Superintendents in Nine Eastern Arkansas Counties



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This report presents a brief highlight of the findings from a survey of principals and superintendents in eastern Arkansas. This survey was modeled after a national survey conducted by Public Agenda, which was designed to identify what public school administrators believe is needed to improve public education across the country. This survey narrows that investigation to administrators in a nine county region in east Arkansas. A number of important topics were covered in the survey. This report presents some of the findings including what administrators believe are the most pressing issues facing their schools, how they feel about the intent and effectiveness of the No Child Left Behind Act, and some of their thoughts on issues like funding and accountability.

The Most Pressing Issues

East Arkansas public school administrators believe that insufficient school funding and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) are the most pressing issues facing their schools today, which is in line with the beliefs of many administrators nationwide. As **Figure 1** indicates, 70% of superintendents participating in the national survey feel that funding is the most pressing issue facing their schools districts.

Administrators in the nine county region feel that implementing the NCLBA is a larger problem than funding issues. While insufficient funding appears to be a major obstacle, most administrators, 68% nationally and 56% regionally, feel confident in their ability to make progress with their current resources. However, their positions on NCLBA are not as positive, and responses show that administrators often feel that NCLBA demands are unreasonable.

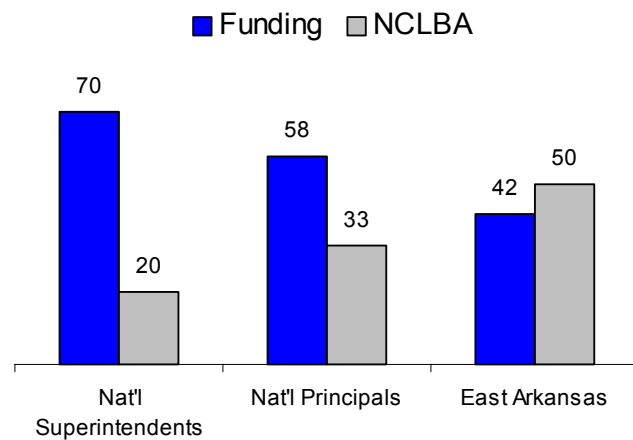


Figure 1

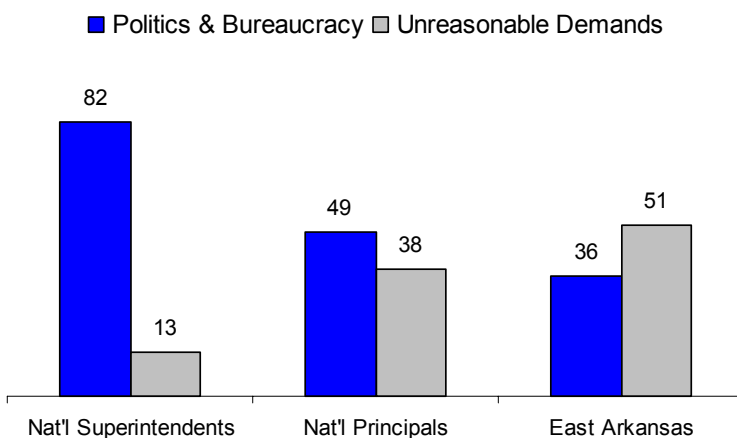


Figure 2

A majority of those surveyed believe that unreasonable standards and accountability drive talented and committed administrators out of the field, and that it is these unreasonable standards as well as increased politics and bureaucracy that generate a great deal of frustration for administrators. However, there are some interesting differences between the national and regional

results. For example, 82% of superintendents nationwide, versus only 36% of those surveyed in the nine county region, feel that politics and bureaucracy is the primary reason why talented people leave the field of education.

Consistently throughout the survey, administrators emphasized that the federal government continues to hand down mandates without sending the funding required to implement those mandates. Obviously, this problem worsens the impact of existing funding crises. Additionally, administrators feel they spend too much time keeping up with local, state, and federal mandates and state that the volume and complexity of state and federal regulations for special education in particular have gotten worse. When specifically questioned about NCLBA, 76% listed the fact that it is an unfunded mandate as a major concern.

NCLBA

When questioned about the intent of the NCLBA, administrator opinions in the nine county region were split between those who feel the law is motivated solely by politics and is a disguised effort to attack and destroy public education and those who feel it is a law motivated by good intentions to help improve public schools. However, there was some variation between male and female administrators. Male administrators were more likely to classify the NCLBA as politically motivated or an attack on public education (56%), while female administrators are more likely to believe the law is motivated by good intentions to help improve public education (54%).

Although split on the intention of the law, administrators agree that in order for the law to be effective, it needs many adjustments, but they believe that ultimately the law will raise state standards. Administrators in the nine county region are much more positive about the ultimate impact of NCLBA than their counterparts nationwide. A majority of administrators in the nine counties believe standards will be raised by NCLBA, while less than 40% of administrators across the nation share this optimism. However, this optimism is balanced with a touch of cynicism. For example, 52% of administrators in the region believe standards will be raised by NCLBA, but 31% believe the state would lower standards to make it easier to show progress. Administrators in the nine county region expressed many other concerns about NCLBA shown in **Figure 3**.

Concerns Regarding NCLB	Major Concern	Minor Concern	Not a Concern	Not Sure
The consequences and sanctions for schools are unfair	73	27	0	0
NCLB is an intrusion by the federal government	41	48	9	2
NCLB relies too much on standardized testing	67	29	2	2
NCLB is an unfunded mandate	76	15	5	4

Figure 3

Over the last couple of years various groups and individuals have voiced a number of concerns about the NCLBAA including the fact that the consequences and sanctions were unfair, that the law represents an intrusion by the federal government, that it relies too much on standardized testing, and that it is an unfunded mandate. With the exception of seeing the law as an intrusion by the federal government, when asked to rank these concerns as major, minor, or no concern, administrators reported each of these as major concerns.

While administrators state that the NCLBA relies too much on testing, they also understand that testing is a useful way to show where improvements are necessary and that standardized tests are a necessary evil because some standard of measurement is needed. Administrators largely agree that publicizing test scores by race and other groupings is counter-productive, and that requiring adequate yearly progress on test scores for special education students or “English as a second language” students is unreasonable and not doable. There is substantial variation between the regional survey and national survey in these areas as shown in **Figures 4 and 5**.

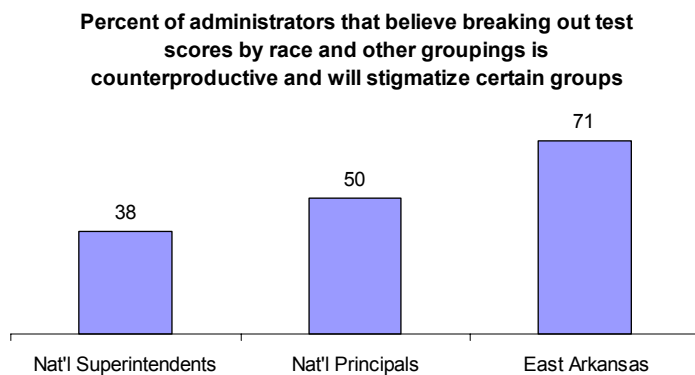


Figure 4

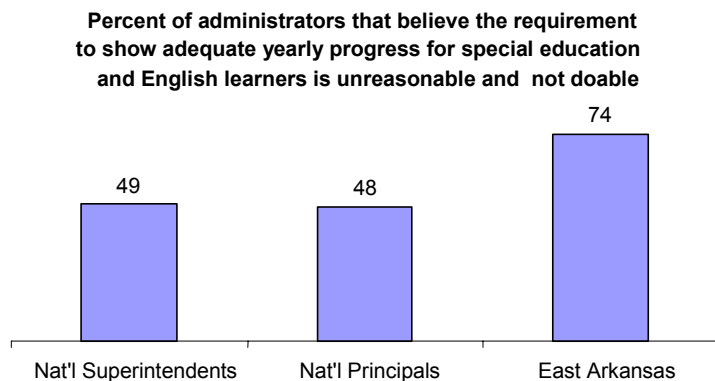


Figure 5

Who's to Blame?

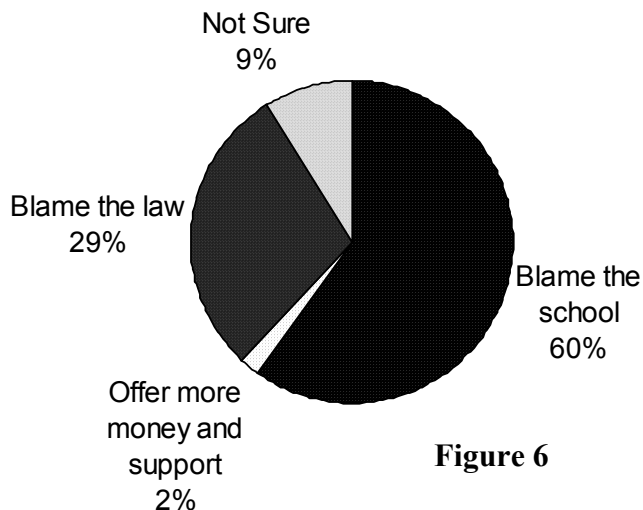


Figure 6

With regard to schools failing to show adequate yearly progress, most administrators in the nine county region believe parents and community members would be more likely to blame the schools for failing to improve (60%) or blame the policy for wrongly labeling the school (29). Indeed, only 2% of the administrators in the region believe that parents would respond by providing the schools with extra funding and support to help them improve.

Improving Teacher Quality

The NCLBA requires that by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, teachers in core subjects must be highly qualified, and administrators see this as a realistic goal for their schools and districts. Interestingly, administrators feel that being a fully certified teacher only guarantees a set of minimum skills and does not indicate that an individual has what it takes to be a good teacher. This may be why 89% of administrators report spending more time on the substance of teaching, e.g. curriculum, teaching techniques, mentoring, and professional development and 56% wish they were spending even more time on those activities. However, all administrators are not convinced of the benefits of professional development activities with only 50% believing that these activities produce better teachers. When asked about reforms that might improve the quality of teaching, 36% suggested increasing pay, 31% opted for improving working conditions by reducing class size, and 26% noted that it might be useful to make it easier for districts to financially reward outstanding teachers.

Accountability

When questioned about who should be held responsible for students standardized test scores more than 46% believe that is a bad idea to hold principals or superintendents accountable, and 61% state that student scores are not part of teacher evaluations. However, student scores were reported as being an “informal” part of principal as well as superintendent evaluations, and 35% stated that increasing student achievement is the largest part of a principal evaluations.

One of the more interesting sets of results regarding accountability came from the following question:

If you heard that many students in your school district did poorly on a standardized test, which of the following would be your most likely reaction?

- *Students simply lack the ability to do well.*
- *Something was wrong with how the test was designed*
- *The schools failed to adequately prepare the students*
- *Not sure*

On the national survey, over 71% of superintendents and over 50% of principals held the schools accountable for failing to prepare the students. However, administrators in the nine county region were not clear on who or what would be responsible.

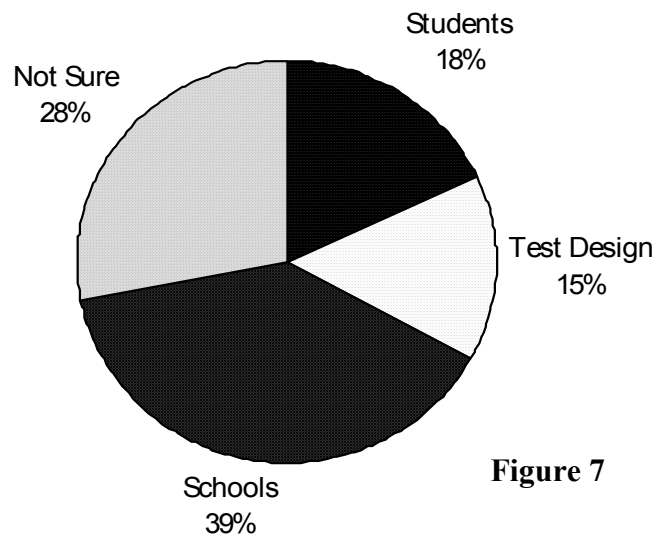


Figure 7

Other Problems Administrators Face

Given a list of problems, administrators were asked to indicate how closely the problem described matched what was happening in his/her school/district. Of the nine problems listed, administrators related quite closely to the following:

- 74% - Daily emergencies rob me of time better spent in the classroom or on teaching issues
- 83% - My district has experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them
- 87% - Keeping up with all the local, state, and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up too much time.
- 83% - The requirements for certifying administrators should be changed to include more focus on practical, hands-on experience
- 76% - When it comes to talented educators, wealthier districts invariably get the cream of the crop.

Respondent Profile

Location		Race		Gender	
Urban	8	Black	25	Male	53
Suburban	2	White	75	Female	47
Small Town	28				
Rural	62				

Years of Experience		# Schools in District		School Type	
4 or Less	20	2	44	Elementary	52
5-14	25	3	11	Middle/Junior	18
14 or More	55	4	33	High School	24
		No Response	11	Other	2
				No Response	4

Research Notes

Of the 150 (116 principals; 34 superintendents) surveys mailed, 55 (46 principals; 9 superintendents) representing a 36.67% return rate. The results reported here are not representative of all superintendents and principals in the state or the region. Instead, they simply represent the opinions of 46 principals and 9 superintendents in eastern Arkansas. The surveys were mailed in December 2003, and collected throughout January and February 2004. Complete question by question results are available on the web at drdc.uark.edu or by email request: stthomas@uark.edu. The results of the national survey are available online at www.publicagenda.org.

School Districts in Nine County Region

Crittenden County

Crawfordsville
Earle
Marion
Turrell
West Memphis

Cross County

Cross County
Parkin
Wynne

Lee County

Lee County

Mississippi County

Armored
Blytheville
Gosnell
Manilla
Osceola
So. Mississippi County

Monroe County

Brinkley
Clarendon
Holly Grove

Phillips County

Barton-Lexa
Elaine
Helena-W. Helena
Lake View
Marvell

Poinsett County

East Poinsett County
Harrisburg
Marked Tree
Trumann
Weiner

St. Francis County

Forrest City
Hughes
Palestine-Wheatley

Woodruff County

Augusta
Cotton Plant
McCrary

Delta Research & Design Center

The Delta Research and Design Center (DRDC) is a community and economic development outreach center affiliated with the University of Arkansas School of Architecture and Community Design Center. The DRDC serves twenty-two delta counties by providing research and capacity support to local government, non-profit groups, and individuals. The center is funded by a generous grant from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. For more information concerning this research report or any other DRDC projects or programs please contact Susan Thomas, DRDC Director.

Economic Development Seminar

Through the annual Economic Development Seminar, the DRDC brings together state and local governmental officials, community and civic groups, and concerned citizens in an effort to provide Arkansas Delta communities with research and economic development ideas and practices.

Delta Research Bulletin

With contributions from DRDC staff, Winthrop Rockefeller Fellowship recipients, state agencies, and local business, industry, and education personnel, the annual *Delta Research Bulletin* will provide a collection of relevant research essays and articles regarding policy issues in Arkansas Delta communities.

Summer Workshop

In collaboration with UACDC staff/faculty and UA architecture and public policy students, the DRDC conducts a summer workshop in a selected Arkansas Delta community every summer. UA staff and students live in the selected community for an eight-week period during the summer semester. In these workshops, students, staff and community members work together in creating and preparing community-wide development and revitalization plans including phased development and design recommendations as well as analyses of many of the policy issues involved in such projects.



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