

Key Findings On Attitudes Toward Education and Learning

**Research Conducted On Behalf Of
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation**

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

On behalf of and in collaboration with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., conducted a multi-phase public opinion research project from June through November 2007 to explore attitudes toward various educational reform measures among key stakeholders. The research included both qualitative and quantitative components, and found significant support for reforming how, when, and where our children learn.

- 10 focus groups conducted June 12 to 19, 2007, in Detroit, MI, Columbia, MO, Washington, DC, and Dallas, TX. These included four sessions among local community leaders, and six sessions among parents of middle and high school students, including low-income parents.
- A national telephone survey among 806 parents of K-12 students conducted September 24 to 28, 2007. The survey's overall margin of error is ± 3.5 percentage points.
- Two telephone focus groups conducted November 29 and 30: one session among city and county board of education members, and one session among state education policymakers, including state legislators and state school superintendents.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Parents and opinion leaders articulate a wide variety of educational goals for our children that go beyond core academics and college preparation. In our national survey, parents rate several educational goals as equally or nearly as important as "providing a strong academic education that will lead to success in college." Nearly half (49%) of parents rate a strong academic education as an absolutely critical goal, along with 49% who say "developing strong morals and ethics" should be a critical goal. But parents also point to other objectives, such as "learning practical skills that will help in the real world" (47% absolutely critical), "developing skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork" (46%), and "becoming truly engaged and interested in the learning process" (45%) as top-tier goals as well. Providing a well-rounded education that includes music and arts (37%) and learning job or career skills (31%), though certainly important to parents, fall in to a second tier.

"We just developed brand new goals for our school system that move well beyond academics and include, on the academic side, things like appreciation for fine and performing arts, fluency in at least two languages, stewardship of the environment, and then we also have life-skill goals that we just adopted that include responsibility to the community, teamwork, persevering through adversity, all the character education goals and then we also have a series of citizen goals that talk about the responsibilities of people in a democratic society."

—County school board member

Parents' Ratings Of Importance Of Educational Goals

	Absolutely Critical Goal %	Very Important Goal %	Total Critical/Very Important Goal %
Providing a strong academic education that will lead to success in college	49	45	94
Developing strong morals and ethics	49	44	93
Learning practical skills that will help in the real world, such as managing personal finances or how to interview for a job	47	45	92
Developing skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork	46	48	94
Becoming truly engaged and interested in the learning process	45	46	91
Providing a well-rounded education, not just in traditional academic subjects, but also in art, music, and other subjects	37	47	84
Learning skills that are specific to a job or career they might want	31	49	80

2 Parents believe there is room to improve in virtually every aspect of educating our children. Parents see the biggest room for improvement when it comes to teaching practical, real-world skills, job skills, and teaching strong morals and ethics. And although core academics and college preparation are seen as the area in which we are *best* preparing our children, nearly two in five (38%) parents still say we are *best* preparing our children, nearly two in five (38%) parents still say we are *best* preparing our children, nearly two in five (38%) parents still say we are doing just a fair (29%) or poor (9%) job in meeting even that objective.

Parents' Ratings Of Available Education Opportunities To Help Children Meet Educational Goals

	Excellent/Good Job %	Fair/Poor Job %
Learning practical skills that will help in the real world, such as managing personal finances or how to interview for a job	37	52
Learning skills that are specific to a job or career they might want	44	48
Developing strong morals and ethics	46	51
Developing skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork	56	42
Providing a well-rounded education, not just in traditional academic subjects, but also in art, music, and other subjects	56	43
Becoming truly engaged and interested in the learning process	52	47
Providing a strong academic education that will lead to success in college	58	38

3 Parents and education policy leaders alike express significant concerns about how we are teaching children these days, and worry that test preparation has crowded out other important approaches to learning. The vast majority (73%) of parents believe that schools are forced to spend too much time “teaching to the test” these days, while half *disagree* that No Child Left Behind has improved education in the United States. The school board members and state educational policy leaders in our focus groups express particularly pointed concerns about the fact that test preparation to meet NCLB requirements had supplanted many other beneficial teaching methods.

Specifically, parents overwhelmingly believe that our education system should make problem solving, teamwork, and critical thinking as high a priority as reading, writing, math, and science (91% agree, including 69% who strongly agree). Similarly, nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents believe that students should be assigned more group projects to teach teamwork.

Parents’ Attitudes Toward Educational Content And Teaching Methods

	<u>Agree</u> %	<u>Disagree</u> %
The education system should make problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking as high a priority as reading, writing, math, science	91	8
Schools are forced to spend too much time teaching to the test these days	73	22
Students aren’t assigned enough group projects that teach them teamwork	64	30
The No Child Left Behind Act has generally improved education in the U.S.	38	50

“There are a lot of times, as we're going through the whole testing with the No Child Left Behind—what we go through in Massachusetts, the MCAS Examinations, there tends to be greater focus during the day on the core subject areas. We offer art classes and music as well, and foreign languages in our school system, but it's not to the large extent that I would like to see it. We do offer it in an extensive way, but there's really much more that can be done, that's really competing with the core subjects that are really being pressed as part of the testing.”

— County school board member

“And all they're really doing is teaching to test, which to me is unfortunate because then the agenda really becomes about getting test scores up so you can show whatever powers that be in state government that this is what your levels are as opposed to really teaching children what they should be learning.”

— Detroit business leader

4 Many parents and educational policy leaders believe an important need exists to increase the availability of high-quality learning opportunities outside of the regular school day. Our survey findings show that while 68% of parents are satisfied with the educational and enrichment opportunities available for their children *in school*, only 49% are satisfied with the learning opportunities available for their children *outside* of the regular school day and year, such as after-school, weekend, and summer programs. Perhaps more pointedly, in a separate question, only 14% of parents say “there are plenty of educational and enrichment programs for young people in my community,” while nearly three times (39%) as many say “there is a serious lack of educational and enrichment programs for young people in my community.”

5 Beyond sports and physical education, parents see most other types of out-of-school programs as unaffordable or unavailable for their children. In the focus groups, parents and policy leaders identify many potential educational benefits to out-of-school learning. At a time when many subjects and types of learning are being crowded out of the regular school day to accommodate test preparation, parents and policy leaders see out-of-school education as holding great potential to round out the things they are missing by offering art, theater, and music programs, as well as programs that teach critical thinking, teamwork, and practical job skills.

Availability/Affordability Of Out-of-School Programs

	Available & Free/ Affordable %	Available, Difficult To Afford %	Not Available %
Sports programs or physical education	64	23	9
Educational programs designed to reinforce the things children are learning in school, such as reading, writing, and math	46	13	31
Service-learning programs, which is volunteering in the community that is connected to in-school learning	42	5	37
Programs that teach kids about computers and other technology	37	11	40
Music programs	35	21	34
Theater or performing arts programs	33	16	41
Programs to build skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork, such as goal-oriented group projects	30	8	46
Internship programs to place young people in part-time jobs	27	5	41
Art programs such as painting, sculpture, or photography	26	16	45

The survey results make clear that most parents believe that many of these types of programs are not accessible to their children, largely because of a lack of availability. However, our focus groups suggest there is a perception gap between parents and policymakers—most school board members and state educational policy leaders *reject* the notion that their own cities, counties, or states lack out-of-school programs.

“I think that’s what we were talking about with the after-school activities. You know, there are a lot of low-income families and working families. We can’t afford them, and it does leave them at a disadvantage.”

— Low-income parent, Columbia, MO

6 Parents and policy leaders react very favorably toward many of the “New Day for Learning” ideas for reforming how, when, and where our children learn. Parents identify three reform measures as holding the most potential to improve kids’ educational and enrichment opportunities: (1) expanding project-based and hands-on learning; (2) giving students more real-world learning opportunities, such as internships and out-of-classroom learning; and (3) increasing access to after-school and summer learning programs. Parents also express significant support for expanding collaborative learning, and better integrating in-school and after-school programs.

Would _____ improve things a great deal, quite a bit, just some, or very little for children in your area?

	Great Deal %	Quite A Bit %	Total Great Deal/ Quite A Bit %
Providing kids with more opportunities for project-based or hands-on learning.	55	26	81
Providing students with more real-world learning opportunities such as internships and out-of-classroom learning.	53	23	76
Providing more opportunities for kids to be in learning environments beyond what is currently offered, such as more after-school and summer programs	53	22	75
Offering more collaborative learning where students work in groups.	40	22	62
Integrating school-based education with after-school programs so that after-school programs reinforce what kids are learning in school.	42	19	61
Focusing more on interdisciplinary learning that highlights how different subjects overlap.	32	22	54

"If every kid finds some kind of niche, something that turns him or her on, and it's an activity which they recognize a connection between that and the work they do at school, the studies have shown that folks that are involved in those kinds of activities do better in school even though that activity may not be directly connected to school."

— School board member

"I would describe that as being 'contextualized' learning, where what it is you have been told about is what you are seeing. It's what you are touching. It's what you are being taught is being hands-on or being seen in the third dimension right here with you. So that actually then reinforces the learning of whatever lesson because you contextualize it, you've seen it, you've held it, you touched it, whatever it may be, you tasted it. And it's very effective."

— Dallas community leader