

**STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION REFORM:  
TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS'  
PERSPECTIVES**

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**Report on Surveys Conducted  
by Peter D. Hart Research Associates  
for the Albert Shanker Institute**

**August–September 1999**

## INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Albert Shanker Institute, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted two surveys of educators, one among public school teachers and one among public school principals. The surveys focus on educators' experience with and assessment of *standards-based education reform*: recent efforts to raise academic achievement through setting and enforcing higher academic standards. This report reviews the main findings of the research.

The teachers' survey was conducted among a representative national sample of K-12 public school teachers who belong to the American Federation of Teachers. In total, 1,075 teachers were interviewed, including oversamples of teachers in Florida, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas. Interviews were conducted by telephone between August 27 and September 2, 1999. The margin of error for the national sample is  $\pm 4.4\%$ , and the margin of error for individual states' results is  $\pm 6.9\%$ .

The principals' survey was conducted in four states—Florida, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas—among a representative sample of public school principals in each state. A total of 825 principals were interviewed, including 225 principals in New York and 200 in each of the other states. In the results for all principals, each state is weighted equally. Interviews were conducted by telephone between August 26 and September 9, 1999. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 6.9\%$ .

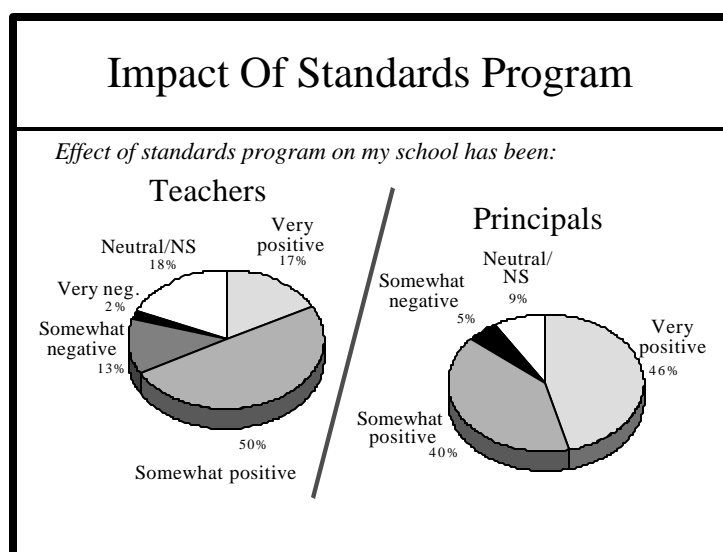
Care should be taken in comparing teachers' results with those from principals, as the two samples differ in important respects. For example, the teachers' sample is national, while the principals' samples include four selected states, and AFT teachers work disproportionately in urban school districts, while the principals' samples reflect the area distributions of their respective states. Nonetheless, these two surveys provide a wealth of valuable information about educators' real experience with, and assessment of, standards-based reform.

## BROAD SUPPORT FOR STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

Public school teachers and principals both express strong support for standards-based education reform. Teachers favor this approach by about four to one (73% favor, 19% oppose), and support among principals is nearly universal (92% favor). Teachers' support is

somewhat more qualified, as they are only half as likely as are principals to express strong support for the approach (32%, versus 62%). This pattern generally holds throughout the two surveys, with principals voicing a virtually uncritical endorsement of standards-based reform and teachers offering support that is qualified by some important concerns.

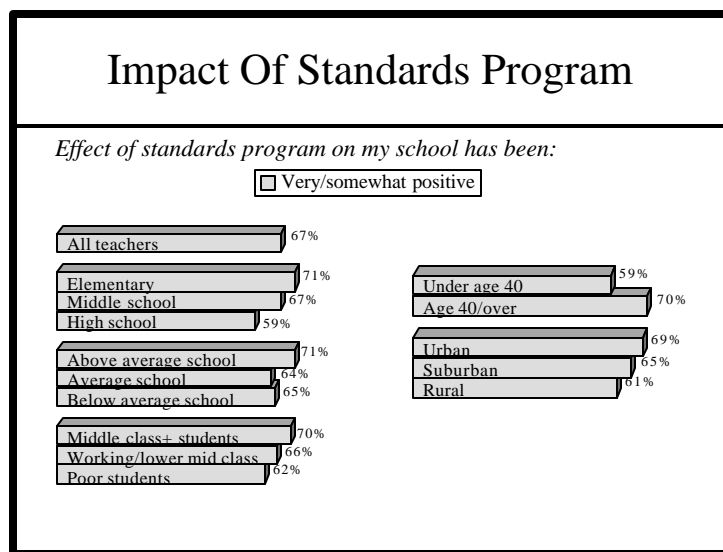
Standards-based reform's broad reach in public schools is indicated by the fact that 80% of teachers surveyed report that their school district has taken this approach, either on its own or as part of a statewide program. This percentage is high in all types of schools examined, including all regions of the country; urban, suburban, and rural areas; and primary and secondary schools. Teachers in schools that primarily serve middle- and upper-middle-class students are somewhat more likely to report reform in their schools (89%) than are teachers in other schools. (Note: the four states selected for the principals' survey all have statewide standards programs, so that questionnaire design assumed that their school had taken a standards approach.)



The large majority of teachers and principals whose schools have experience with standards-based reform (referred to as “standards schools” in this report) perceive an overall positive impact on their school. Fully two-thirds of teachers (67%) offer a positive assessment, only 15% judge the impact of standards reform as negative, and another 16% believe that the impact

has been neither positive nor negative. Principals offer a very enthusiastic endorsement, with 86% reporting a positive effect. While nearly half of principals (46%) think standards have been “very positive,” teachers are far more likely to see standards as “somewhat positive” (50%) rather than “very positive” (17%).

Educators in all types of schools offer a positive assessment of the impact of standards programs. While some might anticipate a less favorable view among teachers in urban schools, schools with many low-income students, or schools with low-performing students, the survey results reveal no such pattern. Teachers in low-income schools are nearly as positive as are their colleagues in middle-class schools, and urban teachers are actually more positive than are suburban and rural teachers. Perhaps most impressive are the high marks (65% positive) given to standards-based reform by teachers in schools that are below average in terms of meeting the standards. The following table shows the similar evaluations offered by teachers in different types of schools.



Minority teachers (blacks and Hispanics) are particularly likely to report that the standards program has had a positive impact on their school (74% positive, including 26% very positive). Standards are viewed somewhat more positively by teachers in primary schools (71%) than by educators in high schools (59%), with junior high/middle school teachers in

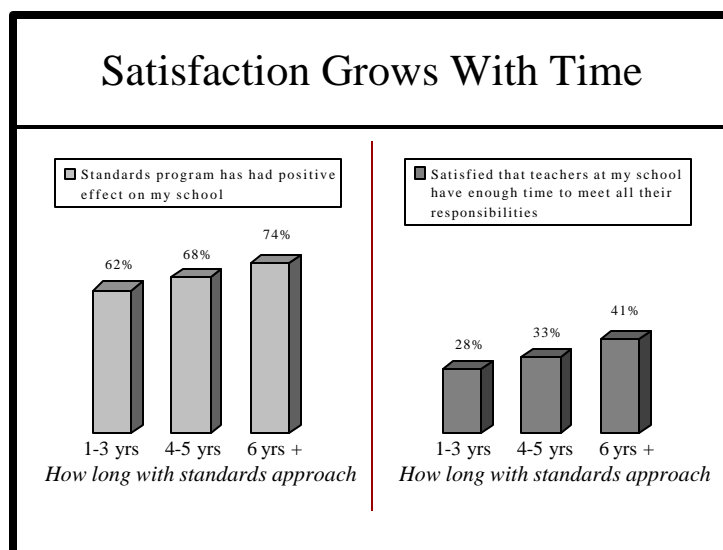
between (67%). Urban primary teachers give especially high marks to standards programs (74%). It is interesting that veteran teachers with more than 20 years' experience rate the impact of standards more positively than do their less experienced counterparts, perhaps because the veterans have a longer perspective from which to judge positive changes brought about by reform.

The same pattern of broad support holds for principals as well. For example, principals of schools serving less affluent students feel just as positive (86% positive) toward standards' impact as do their colleagues in schools serving higher socioeconomic status children (85%). Similarly, urban (86% positive), suburban (83%), and rural (88%) principals all offer similar evaluations of the impact of standards on their schools.

## **COMPONENTS OF SUCCESS**

Certain factors appear to be associated with educators' positive evaluation of the impact of standards programs. While such associations do not automatically prove a cause-and-effect relationship, they indicate that such factors may contribute to successful implementation of standards. Three important factors that emerge in these surveys are time, comprehensiveness, and curriculum alignment.

***Time.*** The longer a school has been pursuing standards-based reform, the higher is the level of teacher satisfaction with the program. In schools with three years' or less experience with standards, 62% of teachers give the program a positive evaluation, compared with 74% who do so in schools in which standards programs were implemented six or more years ago. The duration of standards reform also is associated positively with teachers' overall ratings of their school's educational performance and satisfaction with conditions for teachers. It may be that schools benefit from having time to make adjustments to standards-based reform. If this pattern holds in the future, we would expect to see rising levels of teacher satisfaction in districts and states that have implemented standards more recently.



**Comprehensive Reform.** In the survey, teachers in standards schools were asked to indicate which specific features or aspects of standards-based reform are in place in their own school. Some features are virtually universal (94% of teachers have assessments, 87% say their schools are evaluated based on test scores), while others are found only in some schools (59% say there is no social promotion, 61% say low-performing schools receive special assistance).

#### TEACHERS' REPORTED EXPERIENCE WITH COMPONENTS OF STANDARDS PROGRAMS

	<u>Applies</u> %
State or district tests are given to students to assess whether they are meeting the standards	94
The curriculum is closely aligned with the statewide or districtwide standards	88
A school's performance is evaluated by students' test scores	87
Low-performing students are offered after-school and/or summer programs to help them meet the standards	86
Students who are having trouble meeting the standards receive additional assistance and support	86
Teachers are offered professional development programs that are specifically tied to the statewide standards and tests	84
Teachers are involved in developing the school's plans for meeting the standards	81
Students do not graduate if they do not meet graduation standards	72
Low-performing schools receive assistance to help them reach the	61

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**TEACHERS' REPORTED EXPERIENCE WITH  
COMPONENTS OF STANDARDS PROGRAMS**

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	<u>Applies</u> %
standards	
Students are retained if they have not mastered grade-level requirements	59
Teachers have opportunities to visit other schools to share expertise	58
Chronically low-performing schools may be closed down, taken over, or reorganized	57

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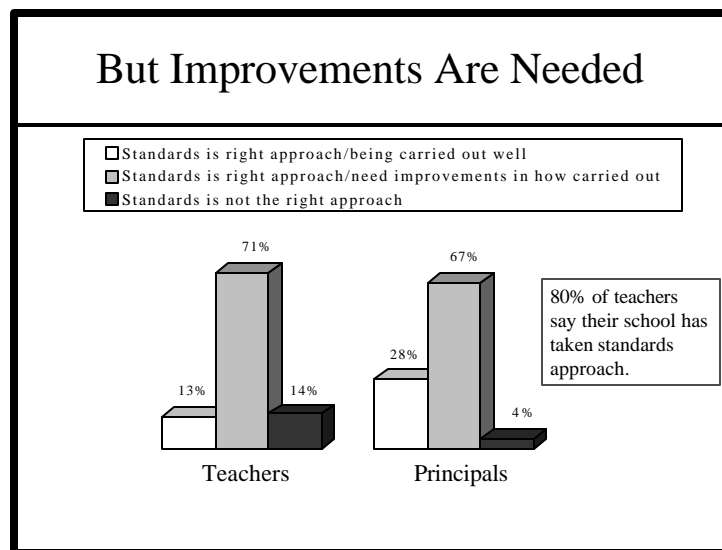
There is a strong positive association between the extent to which a school has implemented a full standards program and teachers' perception of a positive impact on the school. In schools that have adopted at least 11 of the 12 features examined (31% of all standards schools), fully 81% of teachers report that standards have had a positive impact. In contrast, teachers from schools in which eight or fewer features apply (34% of standards schools) provide a much less enthusiastic assessment (53% positive). More specifically, assistance to low-performing schools, ending social promotion, and teacher involvement in developing plans for meeting the standards are highly correlated with a positive assessment.

***Curriculum Alignment.*** Most educators perceive a fairly high level of alignment between their school's curriculum and the standards students are being asked to meet. A great deal of alignment is reported by 62% of teachers, another 24% say a fair amount of alignment exists, and just 12% perceive a low level of alignment. Among principals, the corresponding figures are 72% great deal, 23% fair amount, and 5% less than that. Teachers who report a high level of curriculum alignment rate the standards program more positively (72%) than do other teachers (56%). A similar pattern also is seen in the principals' survey.

## **NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT**

While most educators favor the standards-based approach to education reform and believe that the effect of such reform has been on balance positive, they also see room for improvement in the actual implementation of these programs. A majority of both teachers (71%) and principals (67%) in standards schools agree that standards "is the right approach for improving education,

but there must be improvements in the way it is carried out.” Relatively few educators think the standards program is already “being carried out well” (28% of principals, 13% of teachers) or that it is not the right approach for education (4% of principals, 14% of teachers).



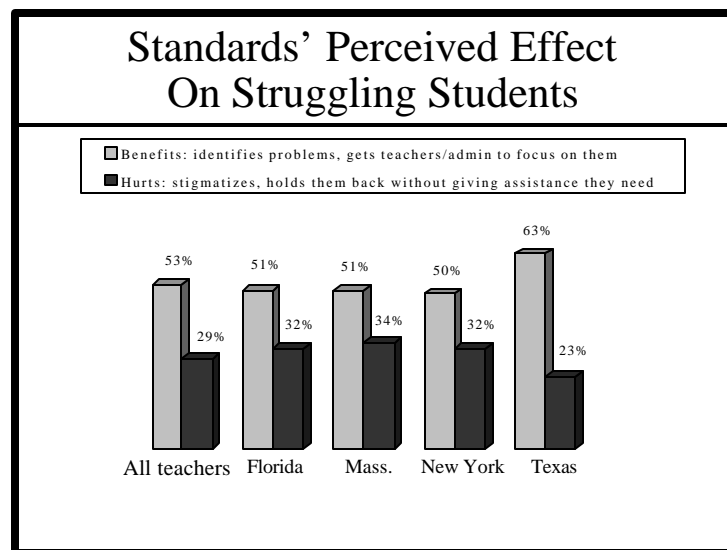
Teachers’ support for standards is more conditional than that of principals, and teachers distinguish more clearly between the programs’ strengths and weaknesses. When principals are asked to describe in their own words the positive and negative aspects of their school’s standards program, more than eight in ten offer favorable assessments, while just 26% have any criticisms. Teachers, on the other hand, are equally likely to articulate advantages (69%) and disadvantages (68%) of the standards program (40% volunteer a mix of positive and negative comments).



Positive And Negative Features Of Standards Program			
<i>Teachers' Volunteered Impressions</i>			
<u>Positive Features</u>	<u>69%</u>	<u>Negative Features</u>	<u>68%</u>
Students benefit, are motivated, do better	19%	Pushes some kids too hard; pressure	12%
Teachers benefit, more focused, work harder	12%	Too many changes too fast	11%
Focus on raising standard of education	11%	Criticisms of testing, not fair gauge	9%
Test scores improving	10%	More time/paperwork	7%
Created awareness, explore new ideas	7%	No set standards, too much interpretation	6%

Teachers' volunteered comments, along with their other responses in the survey, indicate that teachers have five main areas of concern regarding standards-based reform: excessive pressure on low-achieving students, too rapid a pace of change, too much emphasis on testing, time pressures for teachers, and lack of parental involvement. Some principals seem to share these concerns, but as a group, principals are less likely to see these areas as serious problems.

***Pressure on Low-achieving Students.*** A significant proportion of teachers volunteer concern that standards are putting too much pressure on some students. When asked directly about the impact of their school's standards program on academically struggling students, a narrow majority of teachers (53%) say that the program has benefited such students by helping to identify their problems and focusing educators' attention on these problems. However, nearly half of teachers either feel that the program has hurt struggling students by stigmatizing them or holding them back without needed assistance (29%), or offer a mixed response (18%). Newer teachers (10 years' or less experience) are particularly unsure about whether the standards program works well for low-achieving students (47% benefit, 38% hurt). Principals are more convinced that standards programs are benefiting (63%) rather than hurting (18%) struggling students.



***Pace of Change.*** A frequently volunteered teacher concern about standards is that it has brought too many changes too quickly. When asked to assess the pace of change, a sizable minority of teachers (36%) believe that standards-based reform is being implemented too quickly in their school, whereas 49% think that implementation is proceeding at the right pace (and 8% say it is going too slowly). Teachers in schools serving low-income students are particularly concerned about the rapid pace of change (43% too quickly). This sentiment appears to ease over time, however, dropping to just 20% among teachers in schools that have pursued standards reform for six years or longer. Principals feel more comfortable with the speed of implementation (67% right speed), but 28% believe that it has been too quick.

***Testing.*** Teachers raise a number of concerns and objections regarding the testing of students. There is some sentiment that students are being tested too much today, and that the tests are not a fair or accurate gauge of student performance. About four in ten teachers (39%) believe that students in their school are now being tested too frequently, while half (49%) think testing occurs at the right frequency. Majorities of teachers agree that “the focus on test results has resulted in a curriculum that is too narrow and omits important areas” (55%) and that “too much time is spent on test preparation, and that cuts into other classroom teaching” (63%).

Principals generally express less concern about the level of testing, although 47% agree that too much time is spent on preparation.

While teachers express concern about the volume, and perhaps the quality, of the tests, they do not seem to believe the tests are too difficult. Only 23% of teachers think the assessments are set at too high a level, whereas most believe that the tests are at the right level (49%) or still too low (12%). Only among elementary school teachers do we find considerable sentiment that the tests are asking too much of students (32%, compared with 17% among secondary school teachers).

***Time Pressures.*** One of the few areas in which standards schools get a lower rating from teachers than do non-standards schools is teachers' having enough time to meet their professional responsibilities. In non-standards schools, 26% of teachers are not satisfied with this aspect of their job; in standards schools the figure is 40%. Implementation of standards-based reform clearly imposes new responsibilities on already overloaded teachers. Fortunately, this is another area in which experience appears to be a powerful cure: in schools that have more experience with a standards program, teachers report higher levels of satisfaction with the amount of time they have to fulfill professional responsibilities.

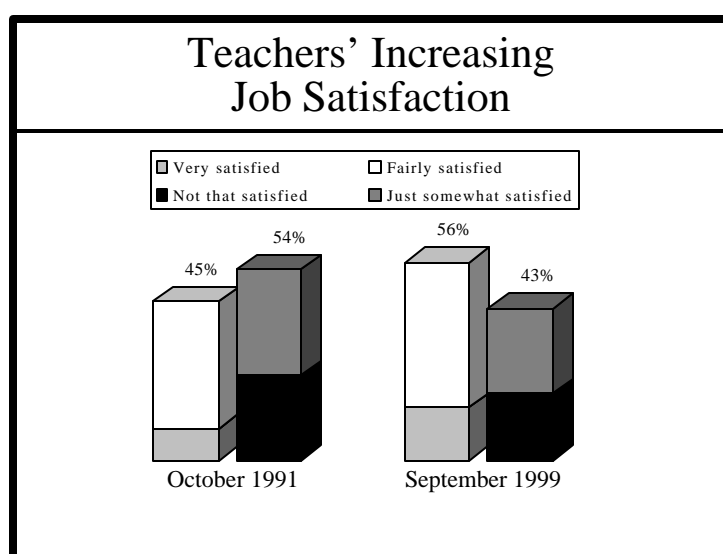
***Parental Involvement.*** Low levels of parental involvement in students' education continues to be a major concern for educators. Just four in ten teachers (39%) are satisfied with parents' involvement at their school, and dissatisfaction is just as high in standards schools as it is in other schools. Both teachers and principals identify parental involvement as the specific area in which standards have had the least positive impact. In addition, when principals evaluate how well the standards program is being implemented in their school, the area in which they see the least success is parents' taking seriously their children's performance on the tests. While standards programs clearly have not created the problem of low parental involvement, neither would it appear that they have succeeded in engaging parents to the degree that educators deem necessary.

## TEACHERS' GENERAL SCHOOL RATINGS IMPROVE

Another way to evaluate the impact of standards-based reform, beyond asking educators to evaluate it directly, is to examine whether overall levels of satisfaction with school performance have changed over the time period during which these programs have been implemented. The availability of historical time-series data from AFT K-12 teachers makes it possible to do this type of analysis. However, no prior data exists for principals.

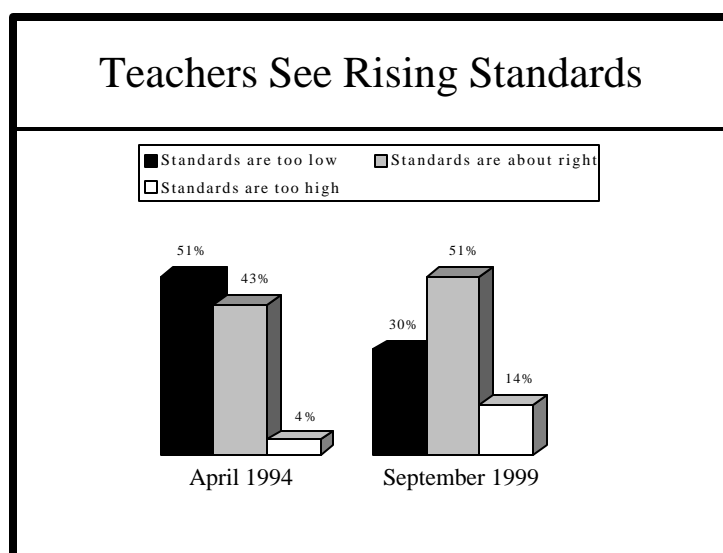
If standards programs are in fact making the positive difference that teachers report, we should see higher levels of teacher satisfaction today than we did in the past (unless some countervailing change has undermined standards' impact). The survey findings show just such an increase in teachers' satisfaction; on many key measures, teachers offer a more positive assessment of their schools today than they did in the past.

In 1991, 45% of teachers said they were very or fairly satisfied with "conditions facing people who work in the field of education these days," and 54% said they were just somewhat or not that satisfied. Today, a 56% majority are very or fairly satisfied with conditions. Newer teachers (10 years' or less experience) are much more satisfied than they were in 1991, with satisfaction up 16 points.



Teachers also give their school a high grade today for meeting the educational needs of students. More than three-fourths say that their school is doing an excellent (30%) or good (47%) job in this area; in 1991, just 57% of teachers praised their school system at this level. Satisfaction levels have risen noticeably since 1994 in the areas of student motivation (up 16 points), student discipline (up 11 points), and professional development opportunities for teachers (up nine points).

The survey data reveal an especially dramatic change in teachers' perception of their schools' current academic standards. In 1994, a majority of teachers (51%) felt that academic standards were too low, 43% said they were about right, and 4% thought they were too high. Now, a majority of teachers believe that standards are at the right level (51%), another 14% say they are too high, and just 30% think they are still too low.



## STATE RESULTS

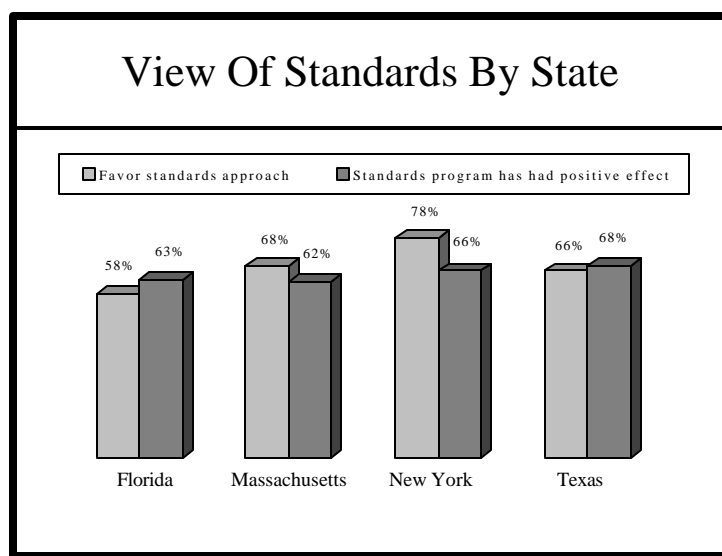
In general, the two surveys reveal similar experiences and opinions held by educators in the four states that were examined in depth (Florida, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas). Some interesting differences emerge, however, and they are examined in this concluding section of the report. Recall that AFT members do not necessarily comprise a representative cross-section of all teachers in these states (although the majority of public school teachers in New York are in the AFT). State differences in teacher responses may therefore be a function of demographic

differences, rather than differences in how standards-based reform is working. (For example, 69% of Massachusetts teachers and 75% of Texas teachers work in urban schools, while the corresponding figures for Florida and New York are 34% and 40%, respectively.) The principals' survey was conducted among a representative sample of principals in each state, allowing for clearer comparisons.

## **Florida**

**Teachers.** Florida's teachers are less satisfied than average with conditions facing education professionals (46%). This likely reflects the fact that Florida teachers disproportionately work in large schools, which frequently means large class sizes: 59% of Florida teachers are in schools with more than 1,000 students (compared with 35% of teachers nationally). Despite this personal dissatisfaction, Florida teachers believe that their schools are doing a good job of educating students, and are improving.

Florida teachers are notably less in favor of standards-based reform than are their colleagues nationwide (58%, compared with 73% nationwide), and those in standards schools have a somewhat less positive view of the impact on their own schools (63%, versus 67% nationally). Florida teachers are about twice as likely as teachers nationwide to believe that standards are the wrong approach to improving education (26%, versus 14% nationally).



Compared with standards programs around the country, Florida's standards programs appear to emphasize tough consequences. High proportions of Florida teachers report that low-performing schools can be closed (74%, compared with 57% nationally), that students are retained if they haven't mastered grade-level requirements (66%, 59% nationally), and that students do not graduate if they do not meet graduation standards (82%, 72% nationally). On a related question, a majority of Florida teachers think that students are being tested too frequently (53%, versus 39% nationally). Florida teachers also are less likely than average to say that they are involved in developing the school's plans for meeting the standards (73%, compared with 81% nationally), which could be an important factor in the low ratings they give to standards.

**Principals.** As with teachers, principals in Florida express lower than average support for standards-based reform (84% favor, versus 92% overall). Florida principals also are less likely to report a positive effect of standards than are principals overall (77% positive, versus 86% overall), and many believe that standards are being implemented too quickly (39%, versus 28%). Testing is a major concern among Florida principals: a majority believe that students are tested too frequently (53%), far more than in any other state (36% overall), and 55% agree that too much time is spent on test preparation (compared with 47% overall). Florida is the state in

which principals are least likely to think that standards have increased public support for schools (52%, versus 66% overall). It is interesting that Florida principals also are the least likely to feel that the standards program has changed their role as principal.

## **Massachusetts**

**Teachers.** Massachusetts teachers have a very low level of satisfaction with the conditions facing educators today (38% satisfied, versus 56% among teachers nationwide). Satisfaction with teacher morale is also low (45% satisfied, versus 59% nationally). This is not surprising, however, when we consider the schools in which these teachers work: 69% are urban, 43% are “low-performing,” 55% are predominantly minority, and 76% serve poor or working-class students. Despite these challenges, teachers in Massachusetts give their schools strong grades for meeting the educational needs of students (82% excellent or good).

Massachusetts teachers’ support for standards is slightly below the national average (68%, versus 73% nationwide), as is the positive rating among teachers in standards schools (62%, versus 67% nationally). The number-one problem with standards in Massachusetts, according to teachers, is that testing is too demanding and too frequent. A 55% majority believe that students are tested too frequently, 59% think the tests are set at too high a level (compared with 23% nationally), and fully 75% agree that too much time is spent on test preparation at the expense of other teaching. Many teachers also think the program has been implemented too quickly (45%, versus 36% nationally).

**Principals.** Massachusetts principals express high levels of support for standards-based reform, generally consistent with the overall survey results. One aspect on which principals in this state differ from others is social promotion: they are much less likely than average to report that their school retains students who have not mastered grade-level requirements (58%, versus 72% overall). Massachusetts principals seem to share some of teachers’ concern about tests: 38% say the tests are set at too high a level, and 49% feel that too much time is spent on test



preparation. However, principals in Massachusetts are much less likely to think that students are tested too frequently (29%) than are teachers (55%).

## New York

**Teachers.** The responses of New York teachers generally are closer to the survey's national results than are those in any other state (in part, this is a result of New York's comprising such a large proportion of the AFT membership). New York teachers voice an unusually high level of support for the idea of standards-based reform, with 78% in favor (versus 73% nationally) and just 13% opposed. In schools that have standards programs, two-thirds of teachers (66%) report a positive effect, about the same as nationally. On the more specific issue of teachers' ability to set and maintain high standards in their classes, many New York teachers say there has been a positive impact (79%, versus 68% nationally).

**Principals.** New York principals express strong support for standards, consistent with the other states surveyed. They are less enthusiastic than other principals, however, in evaluating standards' effect in most specific areas, and in some cases much less enthusiastic. The following table shows the proportions of all principals surveyed and those in New York who believe that the standards program has had a "very positive" effect in several areas.

IMPACT OF STANDARDS IN SPECIFIC AREAS (proportion who say "very positive")		
	All Principals %	New York Principals %
Professional cooperation	64	53
Curricula	58	41
Teachers' ability to set/maintain standards	51	37
Teacher morale	45	29
Students' academic achievement	44	30
Student motivation	37	25

About one-third of New York principals (34%) find that the implementation of standards is progressing too quickly, which may account for some of the lower ratings. In

addition, just 63% report that low-performing schools receive assistance to help them meet the standards (versus 82% overall).

## **Texas**

**Teachers.** Texas teachers have a very low level of satisfaction with teaching conditions today (38%, versus 56% nationally). As in Massachusetts, this may reflect in part the nature of the schools in which Texas AFT members teach: 75% urban, 75% predominantly minority, and 75% poor or working class. Teachers in Texas generally give their schools high marks (76% excellent or good), although they are far below average in assessing the quality of teaching (70% satisfied, versus 87% nationally).

Texas appears to have an especially robust version of standards-based reform, with 78% of teachers saying that their school has nine or more of the 12 features examined in the survey (compared with 66% of teachers nationally who say the same). Texans are particularly likely to say that chronically low-performing schools may be closed down, taken over, or reorganized (76%, versus 57% nationally), that a school's performance is evaluated by students' test scores (95%, versus 87% nationally), and that students do not graduate without meeting graduation standards (84%, versus 72% nationally). Texas teachers also see a high level of curriculum alignment (79%, versus 62% nationally). This picture of a more highly developed standards program is probably a result of these schools' having more standards experience than average—58% of teachers say that their school has been taking the standards approach for four years or longer (versus 46% nationally).

Perhaps because of their years of experience with standards, relatively few Texas teachers think that implementation is proceeding too quickly (25%, versus 36% nationally). They also are very positive regarding standards' impact on struggling students (63% positive, versus 53% nationwide). Texas teachers offer a mixed verdict on testing: only 11% believe that the tests are set at too high a level (31% think the level is too low), but 51% say there is too much testing.

***Principals.*** Texas principals have an extremely positive perspective on standards-based reform, consistently registering more favorable responses than their colleagues in the other three states. Fully 71% strongly favor the standards approach (versus 62% overall), and 55% say the effect on their own school is very positive (versus 46% overall). Texas principals overwhelmingly believe that the tests are set at the right level (82%, versus 66% overall), that the program is being implemented at the right speed (83%, versus 67% overall), that struggling students are being helped (77%, versus 63% overall), and that students are being tested at the right frequency (65%, versus 57% overall). They also believe that the standards approach is increasing public support for schools (80%, versus 66% overall).