

NCLB Likely to Influence Voters



Sherry Morgan
International President



George Kersey, Jr.
Executive Director

In the run-up to the general election in November, candidates of all stripes are scrambling for the high ground on issues ranging from war in Iraq to health care to tax cuts — a vast number of issues, in fact. One not to be discounted is education.

According to a Public Education Network (PEN) national poll released in April, a majority of American voters say they will vote for candidates who make education a priority. However, the people are not convinced that the No Child Left Behind Act is the right way to go. In fact, according to the PEN poll, the more people learn about NCLB, the less likely they are to support the law.

The results of the PEN poll echo those of last year's annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. That poll, reported in the September *Phi Delta Kappan*, found that a majority of the public knew little about NCLB, supported the idea of school improvement and accountability, but favored strategies other than those found in NCLB for improving education for all children.

Over the past several months, we have suggested that NCLB is flawed but fixable. While authorities at the U.S. Department of Education have tinkered with some provisions of the law to make them more equitable, much of NCLB remains unchanged and unworkable, mandating impractical practices and unreachable goals. Americans committed to public education and concerned about what happens in schools are getting restless. They see states, schools, teachers, and students burdened by the federal government's pursuit of unwise fiscal policies, such as unfunded mandates and deficit spending.

According to the PEN poll, the vast majority of voters believe that their communities are working hard to improve schools on their own. The PDK/Gallup poll said much the same, that the public gives high marks to local schools — and people believe that school improvement will come through the existing schools, rather than through alternatives to public schooling. Grassroots school reform is likely to be far more effective than top-down policies that are out of touch with school realities. The people are already demonstrating their commitment to better schools, community by community.

American voters will have much on their minds this November when they walk into the voting booth. The title of the PEN poll may be prophetic: *Learn. Vote. Act: The Public's Responsibility for Public Education*. Voters should, and likely will, take a hard look at where candidates stand on public education and particularly the No Child Left Behind Act. And they will act accordingly.

Wendy D. Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network (PEN), will be a keynote speaker at the Phi Delta Kappa International 2004 Conference and Exhibit, October 21-24, in Las Vegas, Nevada. For more details, please visit the PDK website.



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Phi Delta Kappa
International
408 N. Union Street
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789

www.pdkintl.org
information@pdkintl.org
Ph. 812/339-1156
Tollfree 800/766-1156
Fax 812/339-0018