



AP Poll: Most believe integration has improved education of black students

WASHINGTON, DC (AP) -- Most Americans say school integration has improved education for black students and indicate they prefer schools with an ethnic and racial mix, an Associated Press poll reports.

The Associated Press Poll is conducted by Ipsos-Public Affairs. Between April 16-18, 2004, the AP/Ipsos poll interviewed a representative sample of 1,000 adults nationwide, including 764 registered voters. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 for all adults, +/- 3.5 for registered voters. Margin of error for subgroups may be higher.

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WASHINGTON, DC (AP) -- Most Americans say school integration has improved education for black students and indicate they prefer schools with an ethnic and racial mix, an Associated Press poll reports.

Still, four in five oppose sending students out of their community to achieve racial balance.

Nearly three-fourths said integration of the nation's schools has improved the quality of education for black students, though whites were more likely than blacks to hold that view, according to the poll conducted for The AP by Ipsos-Public Affairs.

The public perception about improved education for black children comes at a time when black students continue to trail whites in performance on tests for reading and math.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act, passed in 2001, aimed to close that gap by requiring top teachers in all core classes, higher annual achievement by students in all major groups and other improvements.

Critics argue that the law requires expensive changes without supplying enough money to pay for them. Four in five parents of school-age children prefer schools with black, white and Hispanic students over ones with students of the same race or mostly from another race, the poll found.

"People like the idea of racially mixed schools," said Charles Clotfelter, author of "After Brown," a new book about the historic court decision that desegregated schools. "They don't like the idea of children being bused across town."

That Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared 50 years ago next month that "separate but equal" public school segregation was unconstitutional.

By a 2-1 margin, whites said public schools are doing a good job of serving all children equally, regardless of race. Blacks were evenly split on that question.

People have grown more convinced over the past three decades that public school integration has increased the quality of education for both black and white students.

Almost three-fourths now say integration has improved the quality of education received by black students. Only four in 10 felt that way in a 1971 Gallup poll.

Three-fourths of whites said in the AP-Ipsos poll that integration has improved the education of black students, and more than half of blacks felt that way.

Half said it has improved the quality of education for white students, while almost that many said it had not. In 1971, about a fourth said integration has improved the quality of education for white students.

For 21-year-old Lena Pons, a junior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the biggest diversity problem she noticed in her Maryland high school involved language, not race.

A third of the students at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, Md., were Hispanic, which created a language barrier, said Pons. "As far as problems like violence or racial tension," she said, "we didn't experience that."

She now attends a university with a much smaller minority population and says some white classmates "don't know what they're supposed to do. They compensate by being overly politically correct."

Robert Bivona, the white father of two elementary school children in Richardson, Texas, says attending an integrated school is good for them because "all kinds of races are given the opportunity to learn as much as possible about each other."

Cheryl Coffman, a black 41-year-old mother of six from Columbus, Ohio, said keeping children in their neighborhood is a top priority for her because sending them to a school far away cuts down on her school involvement. "I don't think it's worth it," she said.

The level of racial separation in public schools dropped sharply between 1970 and 1990, but researchers say that trend has receded somewhat in the last decade because of court decisions relaxing standards and shifting authority back to school districts.

"We've definitely made progress since the late 1960s," said Chungmei Lee, a researcher at the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. "But we're seeing a lot of the progress being reversed."

Schools are doing a better job of treating children equally now, even with the recent decline in desegregation, said Clotfelter, adding, "There is reason to see the glass half-full."

The poll of 1,000 adults was conducted April 16-18 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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