

**Critical Trends in Urban Education:
Sixth Survey of America's Great City Schools**

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Critical Trends in Urban Education: Sixth Survey of America's Great City Schools

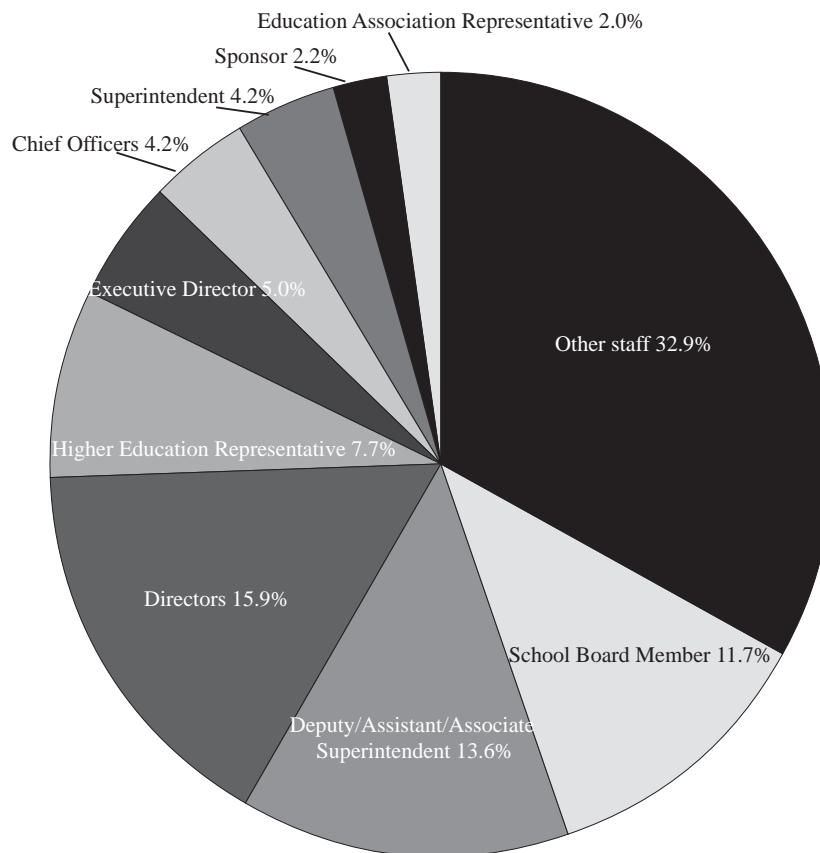
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INTRODUCTION

Americans rely on public schools to educate and prepare almost 50 million students to become productive members of our society. Yet, many of our public schools, particularly those in our Great Cities, face significant challenges: over-crowded classrooms, shortages of highly-qualified teachers, low student achievement, achievement gaps, access to preschool, and aging facilities.

This report is the sixth in a series of polls that survey the leadership and staff of America's major urban public school systems about the challenges they face and their expectations for the future. The poll surveys board members, superintendents, affiliates, senior staff, and other people working in the Council of the Great City Schools' member districts. In March 2006, surveys were emailed to Great City School district leaders, sponsors, affiliated university staff, and other district-level staff. Approximately 5,000 surveys were distributed. Follow-up surveys were faxed to superintendents in June 2006 and paper copies were distributed at two different meetings of Council members. Four-hundred and three people responded to the survey.¹ Figure 1 shows the respondents by profession or role in the school district.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents by role in the school district



¹ 106 of those respondents did not complete every survey item.

The first report, published in 1994, asked a series of questions about the needs of urban schools and compared the results with national trends published by Phi Delta Kappa in 1993. This report does not make any comparisons between urban schools and national averages. It does, however, provide trend data comparing this year's data with the results, where appropriate, from the five previous polls (1993-94, 1995-96, 1997-98, 1999-2000, 2001-02). These comparisons allow us to examine important trends in urban school leadership, needs, and reform strategies.

Critical Trends 2006 asked members and affiliates to respond to seven items:

- How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?
- Rate the overall help the school system receives from specified groups.
- Identify what you believe to be the ten most pressing needs of your urban school district.
- Which measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?
- Rate the top three most effective educational reform strategies.
- Which measures would you like to see implemented in your district?
- Of those measures you would like to implement, rate the top three that you think would be the most effective?

Hope for the Future

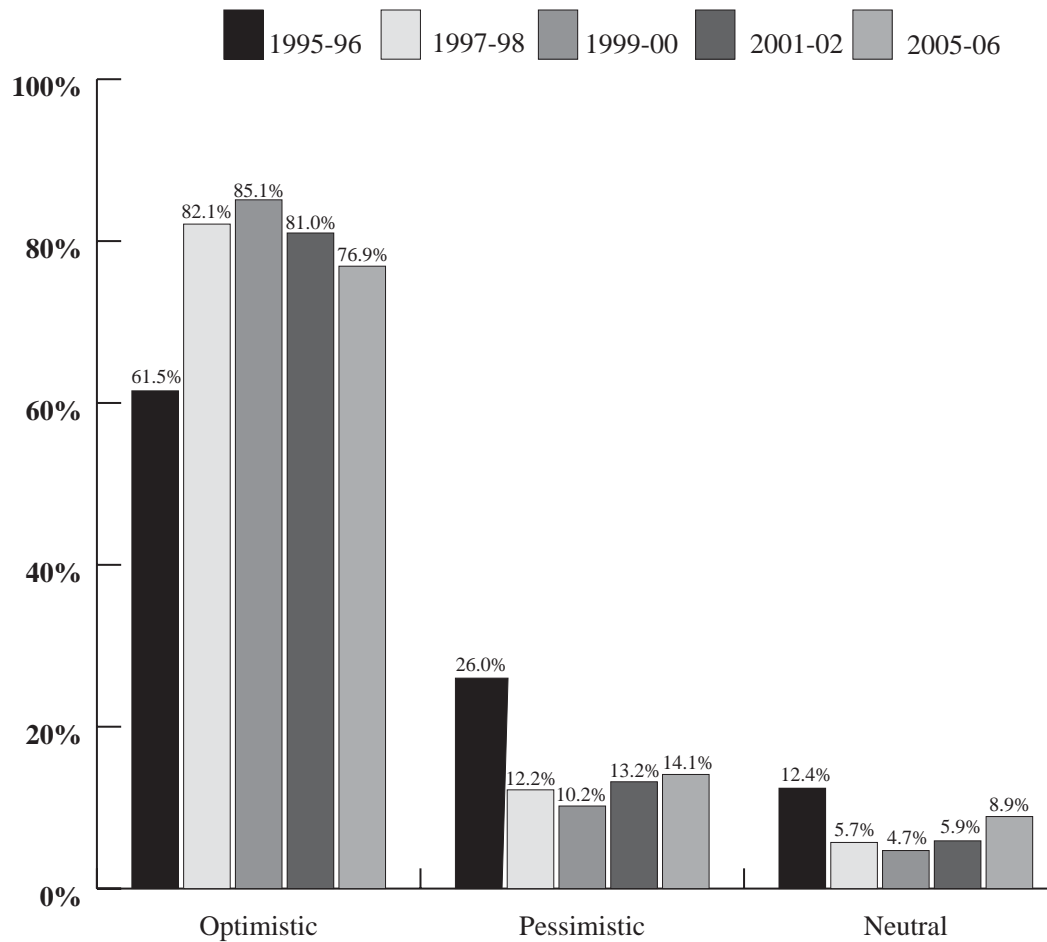
Urban school leaders face an enormous number of challenges in their districts. But are urban leaders hopeful and optimistic about the future of their institution and the work they are doing?

The survey asked: How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools? Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from “optimistic” (5) to “pessimistic” (1). Figure 2 displays the results.

- 77% of respondents indicated that they were either “optimistic” (29%) or “somewhat optimistic” (48%) about the future of urban schools. Since 1995-96, urban leaders had become steadily more optimistic, with these numbers having risen from 62% to a high of 85% in 1999-2000. Since then, the optimism of education leaders has declined somewhat to 77%.²
- Almost 9% indicated that they were “neutral” about the future of urban education, compared with 12% in 1995-96, 6% in 1997-98, and 5% in 1999-2000.
- 14% of members said they were either “pessimistic” (1%) or “somewhat pessimistic” (13%). The percentage of persons indicating pessimism has declined from 26% in 1995-96, but has increased slightly since 1999-2000.

2 All percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figure 2. Hope for the future of urban schools
(1995-96, 1997-98, 1999-00, 2001-02, and 2005-06)



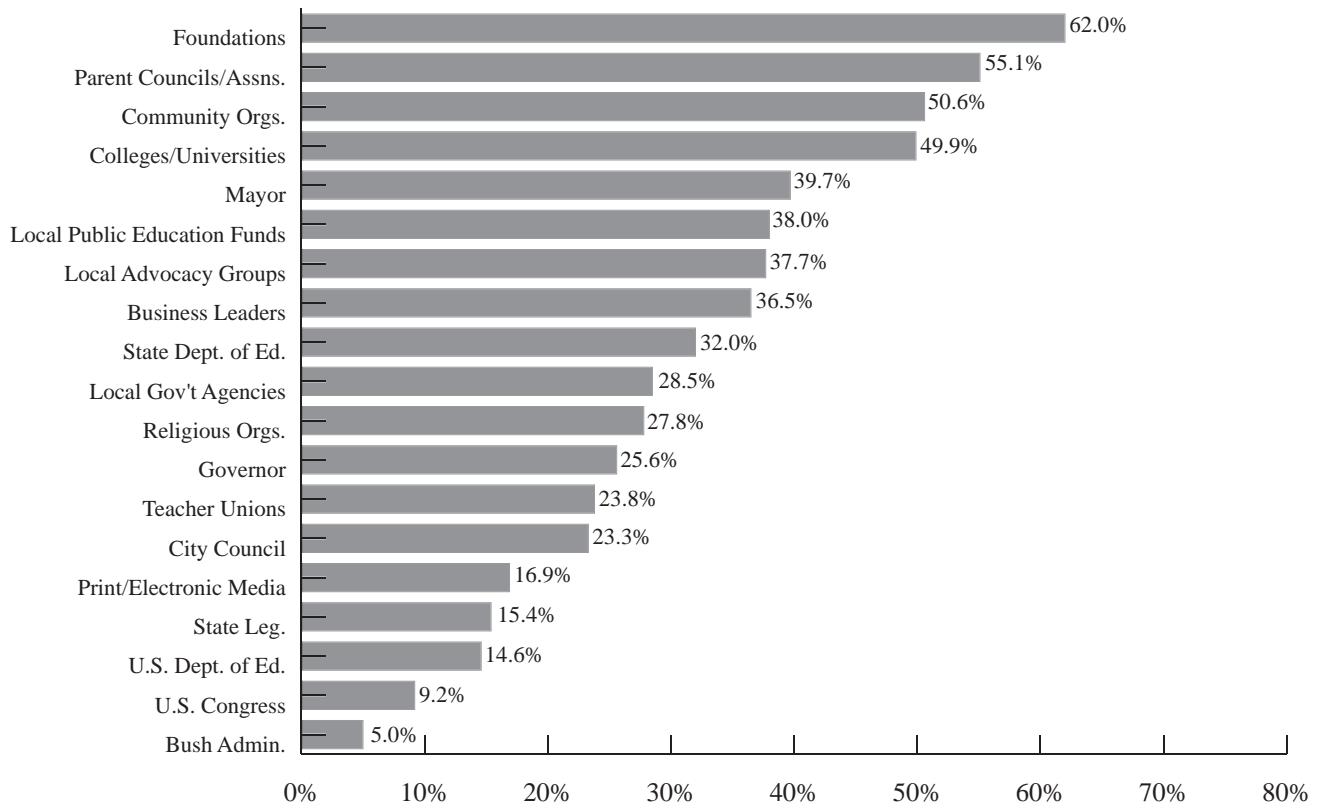
*403 respondents included.

Helpfulness of Others

The challenges faced by urban public schools often necessitate collaboration with others. The federal government, state governments, community groups, businesses, and colleges and universities are just a few of the networks that support urban schools. How do urban school leaders perceive the degree to which these groups are helpful to urban school improvement?

The survey asked urban school leaders: How would you rate the overall help the school system receives in pursuing its mission from the following groups? Respondents rated 19 groups, organizations, and governmental agencies on a five-point scale ranging from “very helpful” (5) to “very unhelpful” (1). Figure 3 displays the percentage of persons who rated each group “very helpful” or “helpful” in the 2005-06 school year survey. Table 1 lists and compares these groups in order from most to least helpful and includes rankings from previous years.

Figure 3. Helpfulness of groups to urban schools (2005-06)



* 403 responses included.

- More than six out of ten respondents felt that foundations (62%) and slightly more half felt that parent councils and associations (55%) were benefiting their schools, giving these two groups the highest rankings in the 2005-06 survey. 2005-06 is the first year of the survey that parent councils and associations appear in the top ten.
- After foundations and parent councils and associations, respondents ranked community organizations (51%), colleges and universities (50%) and the mayor (40%) as the next three most helpful entities to urban schools.
- In all previous surveys, business leaders had been ranked in the top three most helpful to urban districts. The 2005-06 survey of members finds that business leaders have fallen to number eight.
- The Bush Administration, U.S. Congress, and the U.S. Department of Education received the lowest rankings, with five, nine, and 15 percent of all respondents in the 2005-06 survey indicating that these groups were helpful, respectively.

Table 1. Comparison of Group Helpfulness by Rank Order
(1995-96, 1997-98, 1997-98, 1999-00, 2001-02, and 2005-06)

Organization	05-06	01-02	99-00	97-98	95-96
Foundations	1	1	2	1	*
Parent Councils/Associations	2	*	*	*	*
Community Organizations	3	5	5	4	*
Colleges/Universities	4	4	4	5	3
Mayor	5	6	7	6	*
Local Public Education Funds	6	3	3	2	2
Local Advocacy Groups	7	7	8	7	4
Business Leaders	8	2	1	3	1
State Dept. of Education	9	8	10	9	5
Local Government Agencies	10	*	*	*	*

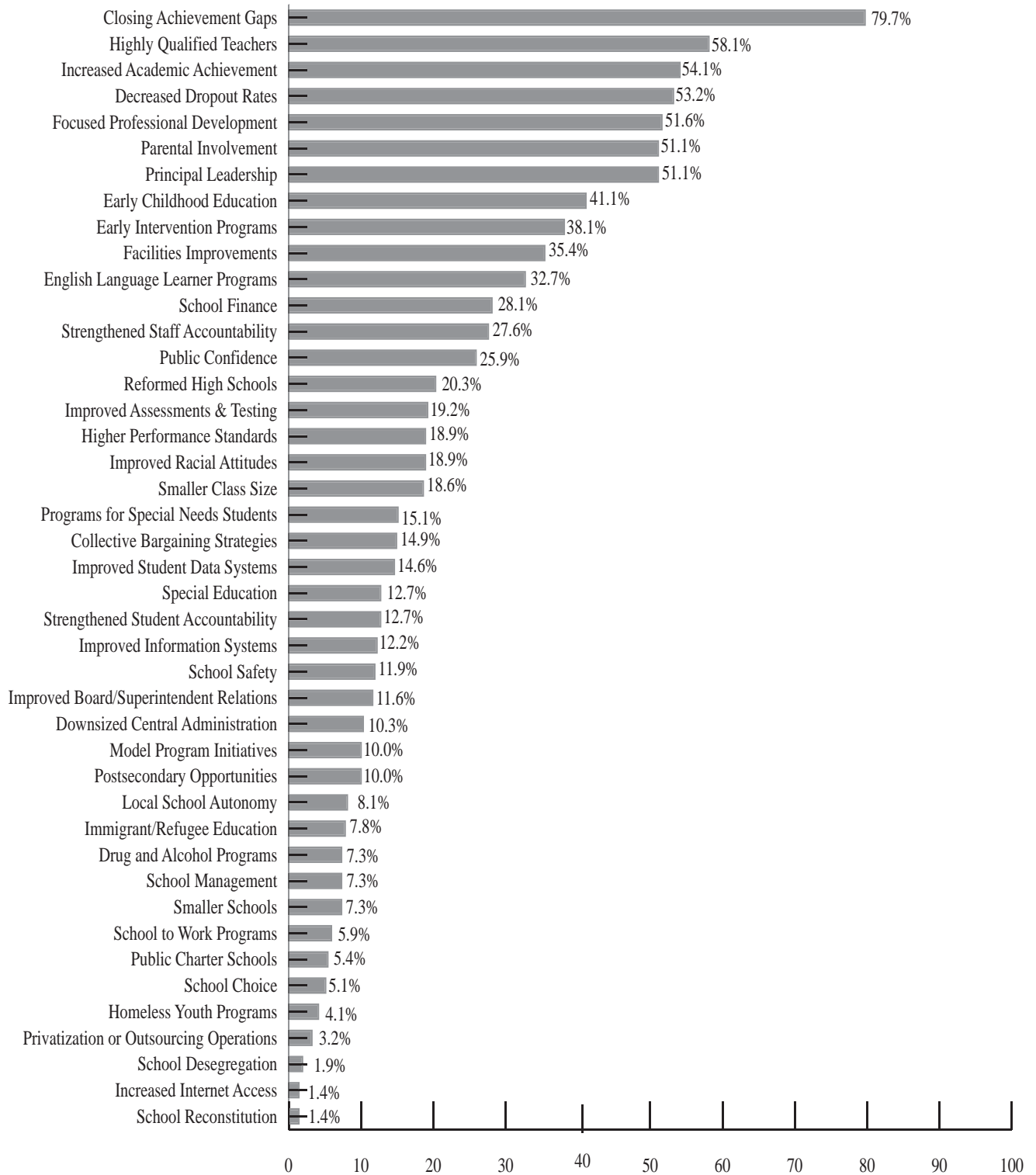
Most Important Needs

Urban school leaders encounter a myriad of issues, including declining tax bases, meeting the needs of English language learners (ELL), transitory student populations, and an increasing shortage of highly-qualified teachers. Which needs, however, do urban school leaders consider to be the most critical?

The survey asked urban school leaders to: Identify what you believe to be the ten (10) most pressing needs of your urban school district. The survey provided 48 items from which the respondents could choose. Figure 4 ranks all the needs listed by urban educators in the 2005-06 survey. Table 2 compares the survey results from 05-06 to previous survey results.

- Closing achievement gaps was ranked as the most pressing need by 80% of CGCS members in the 2005-06 survey. In previous years, increased academic achievement ranked number one as the most pressing need for urban districts.
- Urban school members ranked recruiting highly-qualified teachers (58%) as the second most important need this year. This was not rated in previous surveys.
- Increased academic achievement dropped from the number one ranking in previous years to the third most important need in 2005-06 (54%). The decline may be due to the fact that most urban school districts are seeing increases in student achievement, but are not seeing as much progress in reducing gaps.

Figure 4. Urban school needs (2005-06)



* 403 responses included.

Table 2. Top Ten Needs of Urban Schools
(1995-96, 1997-98, 1997-98, 1999-00, 2001-02, and 2005-06)

Need	05-06	01-02	99-00	97-98	95-96	93-94
Closing Achievement Gaps	1	2	5	9	7	*
Recruiting Highly-qualified Teachers	2	*	*	*	*	*
Increased Academic Achievement	3	1	1	1	1	1
Decreased Dropout Rates**	4	14	16	15	8	*
Focused Professional Development	5	6	3	3	6	*
Parental Involvement	6	8	6.5	2	3	2
Principal Leadership	7	3	*	*	*	*
Early Childhood Education	8	11	9	13	13	*
Early Intervention Programs	9	18	11	*	*	*
Facilities Improvements	10	16	*	*	*	*

*Not rated in a given year or presented in a different manner.

**Previously listed as “Dropout Rates.”

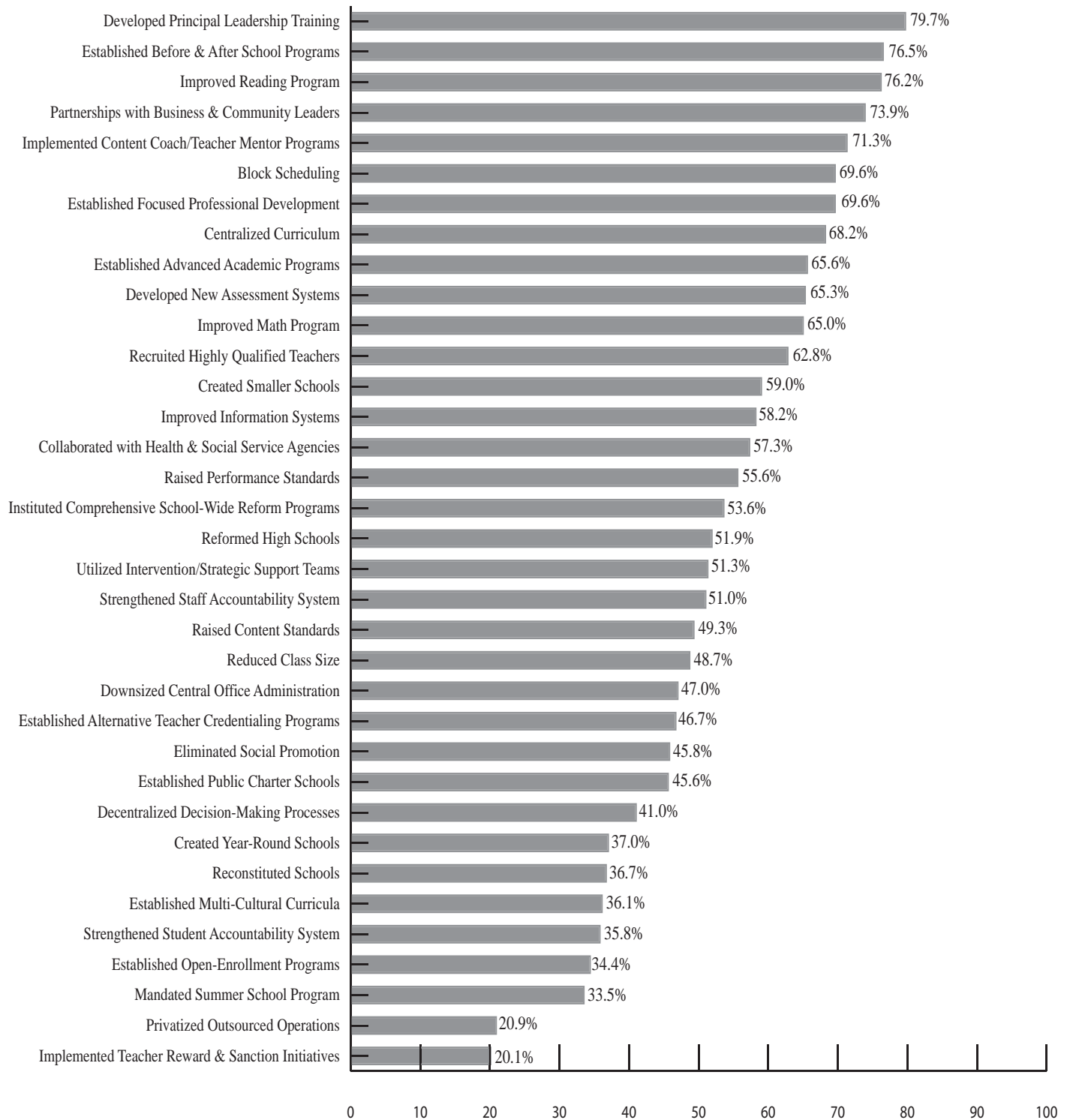
Most Common Approaches to School Reform

Urban educators are often the leaders in school reform. Which reform strategies do urban school leaders use the most?

Respondents were asked: Which of the following approaches has your district taken in its school improvement process? The survey listed 35 education reform strategies and allowed respondents to check as many as apply to their district. Figure 5 displays the results from the 2005-06 poll. Table 3 compares the 2005-06 survey results to results from previous surveys.

- Respondents most frequently reported that their school districts have developed principal leadership training (80%) and established before and after school programs (77%).
- More respondents state that their district has improved its reading program (76%) than report that their district has improved its math program (65%).
- Nearly three quarters of respondents indicated that their district had established partnerships with business and community leaders, ranking it the fourth most common approach to reform.
- In previous years, reforms concerning professional development were the most commonly reported approaches taken by districts. In the 2005-06 poll, 70% of respondents stated that their district had established a focused professional development program, ranking it the seventh most common approach to reform.

Figure 5. Urban school reform strategies (2005-06)



*349 respondents answered this question.

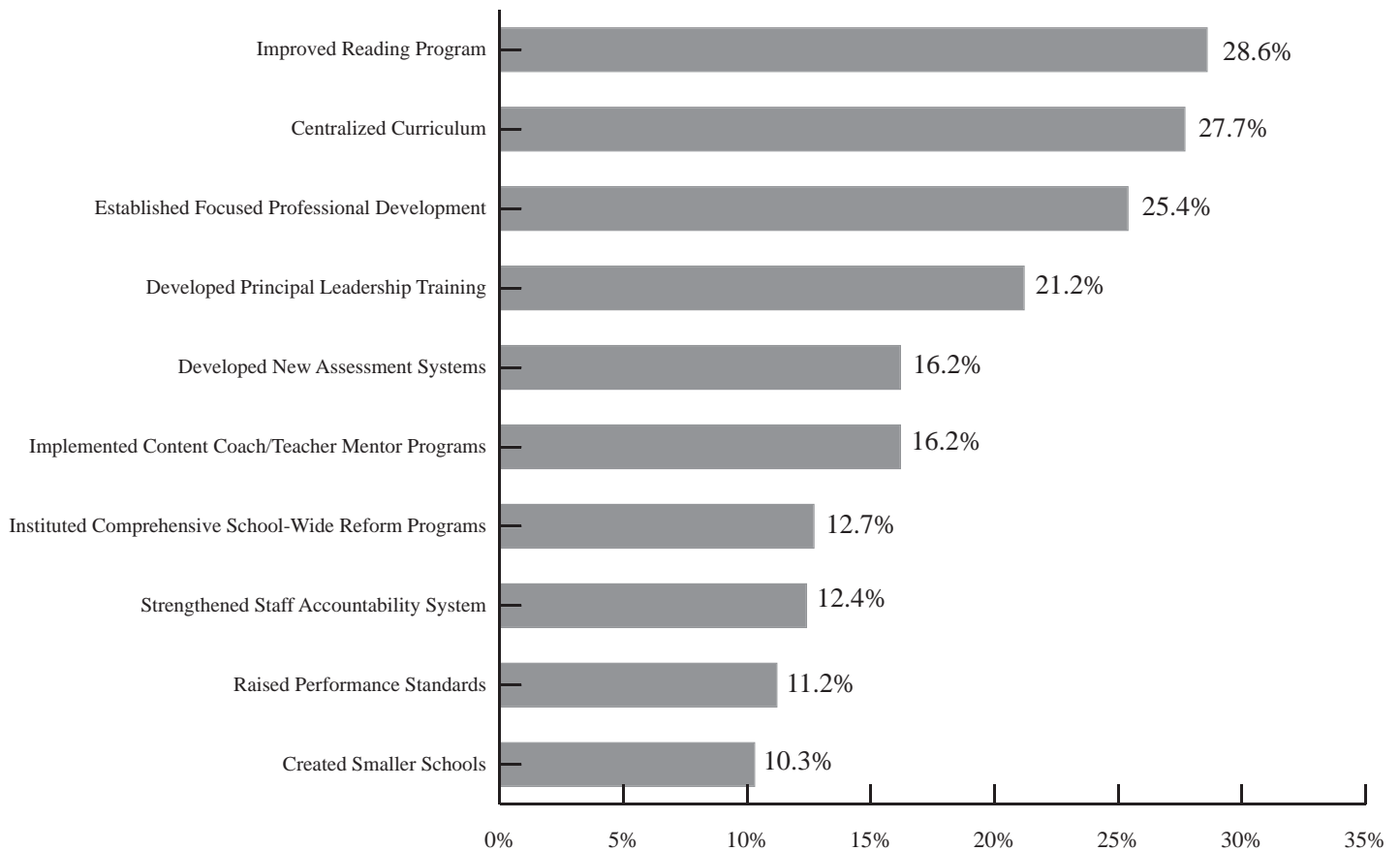
Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies

The short-lived nature of some educational reforms indicates that these practices have varying degrees of success. Which strategies do urban school leaders perceive as the most effective in their districts?

The survey asked respondents to: Rate the top three strategies that you perceive as the most effective in improving schools. Thirty-five strategies that match the options in the previous question concerning strategies were presented. Figure 6 displays the results. The ranking was developed by computing the number of “top three” votes each reform strategy received.

- An “Improved Reading Program” was ranked as the most effective urban school reform strategy with 29% of respondents ranking it in the top three.
- A centralized curriculum and focused professional development were ranked as the second and third most effective with 28% and 25% of respondents ranking those interventions in the top three.

Figure 6. Most effective improvement strategies (2005-06)



*339 respondents answered this question.

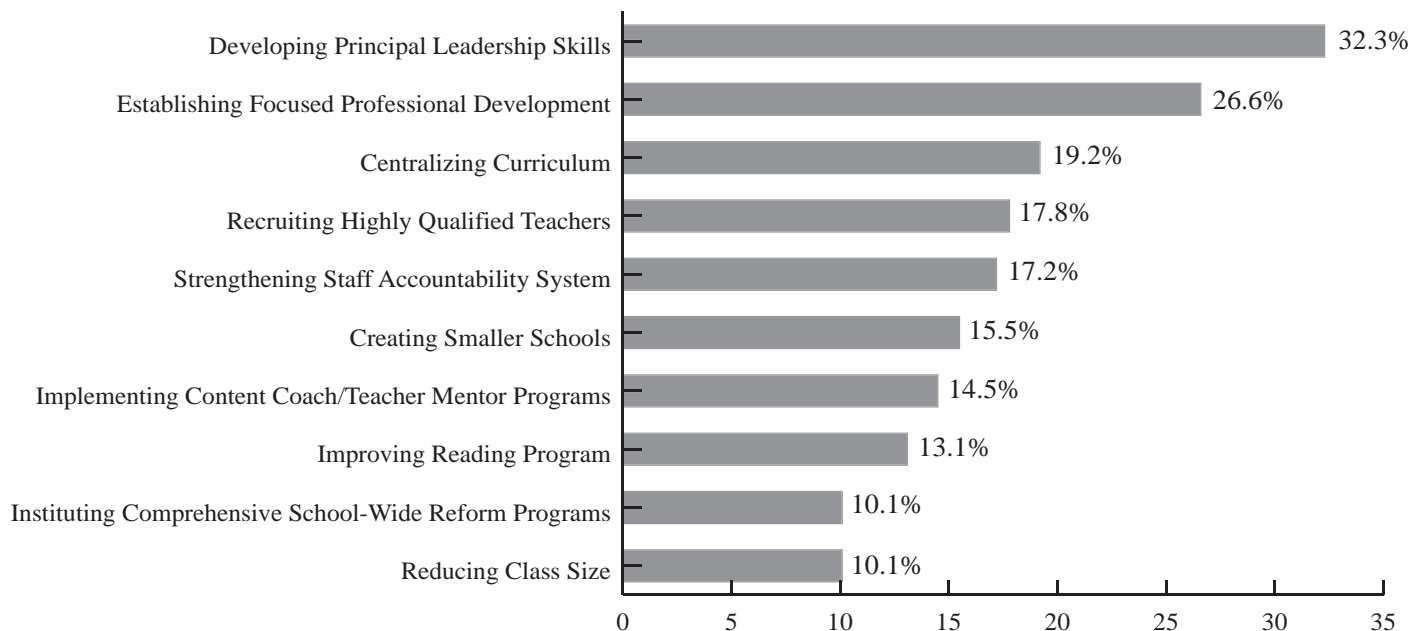
Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies Respondents Would Like to Try

School leaders and staff not only consider approaches for improving schools that are currently in place, but they also think ahead to possible approaches that they might implement in the future. Of those interventions, district staff must consider which strategies might be the most effective, given limited resources and time.

Of a list of 35 strategies, survey respondents were asked to identify which school improvement strategies they would like to implement. Of those strategies they would like to implement, they were subsequently asked to identify the three strategies that they think would be the most effective in improving schools. Figure 7 displays the results. The ranking was developed by computing the number of “top three” votes each reform strategy received.

- Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) ranked developing principal leadership skills as the top three most effective strategies they would like to try.
- The second and third most effective strategies that respondents would like to try were establishing focused professional development (27%) and centralizing curriculum (19%).
- Even though improving the math program was not ranked in the top ten most effective strategies, 55% of respondents said they would like to try improving the math program in their district.
- Although respondents ranked centralizing curriculum as the third most effective strategy for school reform, only 38% of respondents said they would like to try that strategy in their district. This may be due to the fact that so many urban school districts have already standardized their curriculum.

Figure 7. Most effective improvement strategies respondents would like to try (2005-06)



*297 respondents answered this question.

DISCUSSION

This administration of the *Critical Trends* survey has marked a departure from some of the long held opinions and practices of urban districts. In the time since the last administration of the survey, the policies and procedures related to “No Child Left Behind” have been implemented and, as a result, school districts have experienced a great deal of change.

This poll, much like those before it, asked how urban school leaders and staff feel about such important issues as the future of urban education, the degree of helpfulness their schools receive from outside groups, the most pressing urban school needs, the most effective school improvement strategies, the perceived effectiveness of these efforts, and the approaches the respondents would like to take. The results reveal some of the changes that have occurred in Great City Schools.

1. Urban school leaders continue to feel strongly optimistic about the future of urban schools. Although there was a slight decline in this year’s poll, the overall results show that urban leaders are optimistic about the future. This survey does not examine why these respondents maintain a strong sense of hope about the future of urban education. However, these results may reflect a continued confidence that urban schools are making steady improvements. Urban school leaders appear to believe that the current reforms and improvement strategies are making a difference for their school systems.
2. Foundations, parent councils and associations, and community organizations were viewed as the most helpful partners in education reform. This is the first time in the administration of the survey that parent councils and associations appeared in the survey. It is also the first time that community organizations have been ranked in the top three.

The Bush administration, U.S. Congress, and the U.S. Department of Education received the lowest ratings. The respondents’ perceptions of the federal government may reflect some of the challenges that schools and districts have faced in the implementation of federal policies related to “No Child Left Behind.”

3. For the first time since the inception of the survey in 1994, closing the achievement gap was cited as the number one need in urban public schools. Increasing academic achievement fell from the number one ranking to number three. Recruiting highly-qualified teachers was ranked second in this, its first, appearance in the survey. Each of these three needs are crucial to meeting the standards of “No Child Left Behind.”
4. Urban schools are often engaged in numerous school improvement efforts, including many that are not listed in this survey. For the first time, most members indicated that their district had developed principal leadership training.
5. The most dramatic change in the popularity of improvement efforts is reflected in the move of centralized curriculum up from a rank of 19 in 2001-2002 to 8 in 2005-2006. The move may be the result of regular recommendations from the Council to ensure the quality of instruction by centralizing curriculum and curricular materials and making sure that there is clear alignment with state standards and assessments.
6. Respondents indicated that the most effective school improvement efforts revolved around improving the reading program.

7. The 2005-06 survey is also the first time respondents were asked to indicate which school improvement reforms they would like to try and perceive as the most effective. Developing principal leadership skills ranked first, followed by establishing focused professional development, and centralizing the curriculum.

The results of the 2005-2006 survey indicate that urban school districts have experienced a great deal of change since the last administration of the survey in 2001-02. The needs and approaches of urban leaders have shifted and their perceptions of helpfulness have moved away from business leaders and local education funds to parent and community organizations and associations. There is an increased focus on staff skills and training, which coincides with the federal policies requiring highly-qualified teachers. As education policy continues to evolve, particularly at the federal level, it can be expected that future *Critical Trends* survey results will change as well.

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