

A public clamor for real improvement

By Michael Casserly

August 29, 2016

The results of this year's PDK poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools are as interesting and provocative as ever. In particular, the thought-provoking finding that the public is not quite sure of what it *wants* from its schools is one that I expect will trigger considerable debate.

Still, I want to focus on another set of findings that caught my eye: The public would prefer to see a failing school replace its teachers and staff rather than close. The results weren't even close. In what was described by PDK as the most lopsided answers in the survey, some 84% of respondents indicated that when a public school has been failing for a number of years, the best approach is to keep the school open but replace the teachers or administrators in the building. Only 14% disagreed.

This seems like a perfectly reasonable response on the part of the public. And it certainly seems reasonable compared with the proscribed strategies developed by the federal government and a number of states over the years, particularly those that have experienced the varying versions of the school improvement grant program.

Schools — even bad ones — anchor neighborhoods, define community culture, and demarcate locality. Closing a school is no less wrenching than closing a military base. Livelihoods are upended, often untenable choices are presented, and the entire economy of a city or a neighborhood can be toppled. Closing a school ought to be the last resort of any school district.

And there's the rub. School districts often wait too long before intervening in a troubled school and sometimes leave themselves no other options.

The ability of many school districts to turn around failing schools is quite uneven, and the research on effective strategies leaves much to be desired. Unfortunately, what some school districts do is exactly what the polls suggest that the public wants: Replace teachers or administrators. But what happens too often is that one set of ineffectual staff is replaced by another until enrollment sags to a point where keeping the building open is not financially feasible. At that juncture, segments of the community rise up and claim that taxpayer money is being wasted. Or the climate of the building improves, disruption subsides, but students aren't necessarily learning much more than they did before. What is a district to do?

Instances where turnarounds have been relatively effective are often those that bear down on the quality of instruction while bolstering nonpunitive behavioral supports — not simply swapping out the people in the building. The public is right to prefer that people be replaced rather than

closing their neighborhood crown jewel, however tarnished. But school districts need to hear in the public's cry, articulated in this poll, a clamor for real improvement in the schools in my community that are left open. I think that's what the public is saying, and we should hear loud and clear.

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