

**REPORT ON THE STATUS OF**  
**PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA**  
**2004**

*With Special Emphasis on the Status of  
Equality in Public School Education*

**A Survey of a Cross-Section of Classroom Teachers  
In California Public Schools**

**Prepared For**

**The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation**

**By**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Deeply concerned about both the quality of California public schools and persisting questions of fairness and equality of opportunity for some groups of children, but nevertheless hopeful about efforts underway to remedy these problems, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation commissioned Louis Harris to conduct a survey of a cross-section of California's public school teachers on the status of classroom conditions essential to learning.

Between February 12 and March 7, 2004, the Peter Harris Research Group on behalf of Louis Harris conducted a total of 1056 telephone interviews with teachers in California. The margin of error for a survey of 1056 teachers is approximately  $\pm 3$  percentage points. This follows a similar survey conducted in 2002 by Louis Harris for the Rockefeller Foundation that measured gaps in the basic conditions for learning in schools with high numbers of at-risk students compared to the majority of schools with relatively low numbers of at-risk students.<sup>1</sup> In addition to updating the information from 2002, the 2004 survey asked teachers about a proposal developed by researchers and being considered in Sacramento. Both surveys used a new set of measures that document basic conditions for learning using teachers as *de facto* reporters. These surveys document the observations of more than 1000 witnesses to California education, as it is actually taking place in the classroom. The results are striking:

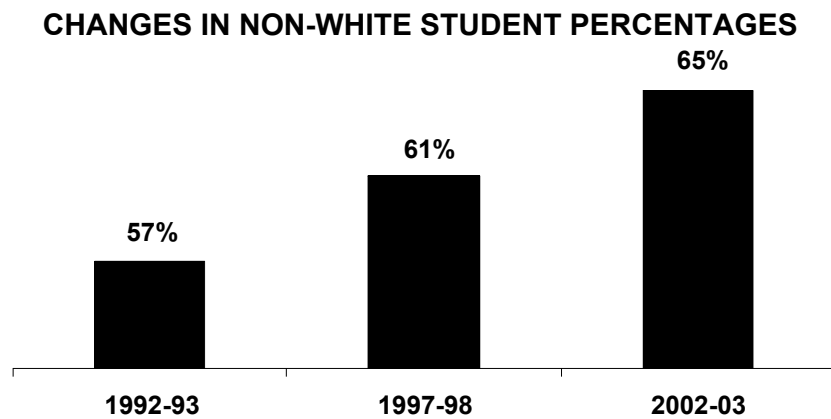
1. Fifty years ago, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* promised an equal education to all of America's children. This survey of California's teachers reveals that this promise is being broken every day: far too many California children are not getting a quality education and African-American and Latino students, in particular, are not given a fair and equal opportunity to learn.
2. Many California students are not getting a quality education. This poll documents in detail that huge numbers of schools fail to hire and keep qualified teachers, far too many students lack textbooks and other essential materials to use in school or at home, many classrooms are severely overcrowded, and large numbers of schools are infested with rats and cockroaches.
3. The survey shows for the *first* time that teachers overwhelmingly support a new proposal to improve public schools by setting budgets based on individual student needs and giving local schools both authority and accountability, not only for student achievement, but also for the opportunities the school provides for teaching and learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Students classified as "at-risk" include students from low-income families and those still learning English. Research establishes that these students are most at risk of failing to succeed in deficient educational settings. The "at risk" index utilized in this report is based on statistics about percentages of students eligible for free or reduced price meals, English language learners, and/or those students whose families are enrolled in CalWorks.

**A. There Is a Dramatically Unfair Concentration of the Worst Conditions in Schools Attended Primarily By Low Income Children, African American and Latino Children, and English Language Learners**

Over the past several years, the California public school system has been undergoing a rapid change in the make-up of its student population. The shift in the general population from a majority of non-Latino whites to a majority of Latinos and racial minorities has had its greatest numerical impact on the student population. A substantial 65% of public school students are now Latinos, Asians, African Americans, and other former minorities. This trend has brought to light the growing challenge of educating increasing numbers of low-income, at-risk students.



Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit - CBEDS

For a long period of time, it has been evident that disadvantaged students perform less well academically than students who are less at-risk. In the past few years, however, new data have documented that the conditions in the schools attended by high-risk children are so seriously inadequate that they do not provide an equal opportunity for a quality education. The 2002 survey found sharp and dramatic differences between schools with the highest percentages of at-risk students and the majority of schools with the fewest at-risk students.

Rather than blaming the children, the 2002 survey documented serious conditions that make an already difficult educational challenge virtually insurmountable at schools with the most at-risk students:

- ❖ Lack of qualified teachers
- ❖ High teacher turnover rates

- ❖ Poor working conditions for teachers
- ❖ Serious shortages of educational materials including textbooks and other instructional materials
- ❖ Rundown physical facilities
- ❖ Ineffective programs involving parents

These gaps, which persist in 2004, constitute major barriers in education that directly affect opportunities for at-risk children to learn and achieve at levels equal to those of the majority of children in California. We compared the responses of teachers at the 20% of schools with the most at-risk children to those who teach at the 51% of schools with the least at-risk children. *The disparities are striking.*

For example:

- ❖ Teachers at the schools with the most at-risk children are nearly twice as likely as teachers at schools with the fewest at-risk students to rate the working conditions for teachers as poor or only fair (40% versus 21%, respectively)
- ❖ Teachers in schools with the most at-risk children are nearly three times as likely as the teachers in the majority schools at the other end of the spectrum to rate the way the school involves parents as poor or only fair (43% versus 15%, respectively)
- ❖ Teachers at schools with the most at-risk students are 1.5 times more likely than the teachers at schools with the fewest at-risk students to rate the adequacy of their school's physical facilities as poor or only fair (50% versus 34%, respectively)
- ❖ Teachers at the 20% of schools with the most at-risk students are 1.5 times more likely than teachers at schools with the fewest at-risk students to report that they have seen evidence of cockroaches, rats, or mice in their school (39% versus 26%, respectively)

The unfair distribution of educational opportunities for African American and Latino children is especially striking, as we near the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. We compared schools with the highest percentages of African American, Latino and Native American students (so-called "underrepresented minority" or "URM" students) with schools with the lowest percentages of students from these groups. Comparing the top and bottom 20% of schools based on the concentration of underrepresented minority students in each school, we found that teachers in the schools with most underrepresented minority students are:

- ❖ 11 times more likely to be in schools with a high percentage (more than 20%) of under-credentialed teachers
- ❖ Twice as likely to rate the working conditions in their school as poor
- ❖ 3.3 times more likely to report that teacher turnover is a serious problem.
- ❖ 70% more likely to report seeing evidence of cockroaches, rats or mice
- ❖ 40% more likely to be negative on textbooks and instructional materials

These findings offer an explanation of the low performance of students of color that is both more likely and potentially more hopeful than some previously offered explanations. Most important, these findings cast serious doubt on a whole school of thought that is based on the assumption that African American or Latino students are incapable of learning as well as their white counterparts. Statistical studies purported to “prove” the inferior capabilities of at-risk children. But the poor performance outcome data in these studies did not take into account that the schools attended by these same students were largely incapable of giving them any semblance of a quality education, as documented in this survey.

**B. Teachers Report Serious Problems with the Quality of California Education in General**

As has just been reported, the most at-risk children are also the students most deprived of the essential tools they need for learning. But this does not mean that the average child among the 6.2 million public school students in California is receiving educational opportunities of which the State should be proud. Too many teachers across California lack what they need to teach the state-mandated curriculum in an appropriate educational setting:

- ❖ 54% of teachers who teach Science report that they do not have enough equipment and materials necessary to do Science lab work, such as lab stations, lab tools and materials
- ❖ 50% of teachers who teach Social Sciences report that they do not have enough maps, atlases, and reference materials for their students to use or take home
- ❖ 32% of teachers who use textbooks report that there are not enough copies of textbooks for all students to take home

Statewide, too many teachers are also expected to teach (and students to learn) in facilities that are not conducive to learning:

- ❖ 36% of teachers report that, during the past year, their classroom was uncomfortably hot or cold

- ❖ 29% of teachers report that they have seen evidence of cockroaches, rats, or mice

Not surprisingly, then, many teachers are not happy about their working conditions: 29% rate their working conditions as “only fair” or “poor.”

There have been modest improvements in a few areas since 2002. For example:

- ❖ 5% more teachers in 2004 feel better prepared to teach the state-required curriculum
- ❖ 1% fewer teachers in 2004 report that their students do not have textbooks to take home for study

But there have been more significant declines in other areas since the 2002 survey:

- ❖ 20% more social science teachers report lacking enough maps and reference materials
- ❖ 10% more math teachers say they don't have the teaching tools they need
- ❖ 6% more teachers rate their working conditions as "only fair or poor"
- ❖ 7% more teachers rate the facilities at their schools as "only fair or poor"
- ❖ 5% more science teachers say they have lack the proper equipment to teach science

Overall, the quality of education and the conditions for teaching and learning in California public schools are seriously deficient for large numbers of students. **It is worth noting that even if only 16% of teachers report a problem for their students, that problem exists for approximately *one million* of California's 6.2 million K-12 students.** The system as a whole must restore levels of quality education. California once ranked close to the top nationwide.

Clearly, something must be done to address the state's failure to provide fair and equal access to a quality education for low income and racial minority students. As the proportion of low income and minority children in the overall student population continues to grow, it becomes imperative for the state to rectify the lack of equal educational opportunity or risk a more severe statewide decline in education quality for the overall school system.

The survey tested one proposal that would begin to level the playing field for all of California's children.

### **C. There Is Broad Support among Classroom Teachers For a Reform Proposal Developed By Researchers and Being Discussed in Policy Circles**

California is now seeking ways to remedy its serious education problem. One proposal for reshaping how schools are managed, funded, and held accountable has recently emerged from the work of researchers and has been the subject of some attention in Sacramento. Compressed into the time available in a telephone survey, this proposal was described as follows:

*“The School Improvement and Accountability proposal would change the way public funds for schools are allocated and controlled in the following ways. First, control over school budgets and school expenditures would be at the school level instead of the district level so that individual principals would set budgets in consultation with teachers at the school. Local schools would be able to spend funds on needs identified by the principal and teachers at the local level.*

*“Second, the way funding is allocated among schools would change, so that each school would receive an amount weighted to reflect the composition of students at the particular school. For example more money would be allocated to schools with more English language learners, and students with learning and other disabilities.*

*“Third, students would be able to enroll in any public school. If a higher need student moved to a new school, their new school would receive additional funding, reflecting that student's characteristics. Not a voucher program, students would not be able to use public funding to enroll in a private school. Principals would be held accountable for results, meaning not just test scores but also the opportunities the school provides for students to learn and teachers to teach, for example whether instructional materials and school facilities are adequate, as measured against specific benchmarks. The views of teachers, students and parents would be included in this new accountability system.”<sup>2</sup>*

In the 2004 survey, teachers were asked if they supported or opposed the proposal and how they felt about four aspects of the plan:

1. School control over how to allocate and spend its own budget
2. Weighted student funding
3. Public school choice for parents and students
4. Each principal's accountability for opportunities in the school for students to learn and teachers to teach

Then, if they were in support of the plan or neutral about it, they were asked if they would become more or less supportive of the plan if one of its results was that schools with higher-need students would then be able to spend more for teachers and working conditions, whereas schools

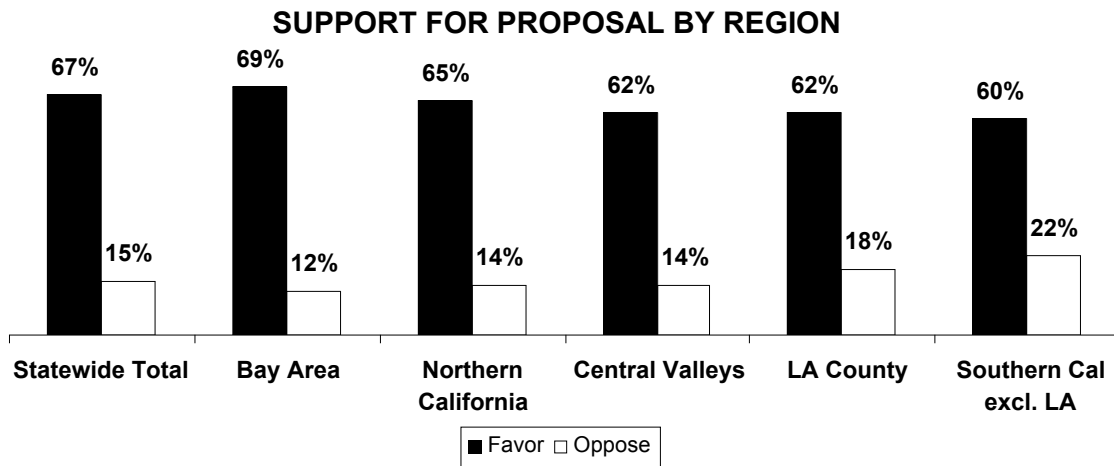
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<sup>2</sup> Interviewers read this description of the School Improvement and Accountability Proposal in the survey to teachers.

with fewer high-need students would lose some of the funds they now receive for teachers and working conditions.

**Basic Proposal.** Statewide, a decisive 4.5-to-1 majority of teachers (67% to 15%) approve the new proposal plan, with 17% of teachers expressing a neutral view. Support is quite solid across the State:

- ❖ In Northern California, a high 9-to-1 majority of teachers approves of the proposal (71% to 8%)
- ❖ In Los Angeles County, a 4.5-to-1 majority approves of the proposal (69% to 15%)
- ❖ A slightly lower 4-1 majority in the Bay Area and in the Central Valley approve of the proposal (65% to 16%)
- ❖ A 3.7-to-1 majority approves of the proposal in Southern California counties other than Los Angeles (66% to 18%)



**School-Based Budgeting.** One of the main provisions of the proposal, accounting for this solid majority support, is “giving schools control over how to allocate their budget.” Educators have long supported the principle of school-based control of key decision-making. Adding the pivotal dimension of budget allocation to a school-based mode clearly pleases an overwhelming 12-to-1 majority of teachers (82% to 7%). Teachers also support, by a 70% to 15% margin, the notion that with authority and control come accountability for student achievement and opportunities to learn.

**Weighted Student Funding.** Another important feature of the proposal is how it would address the funding inequity that has resulted in conditions that seriously impede quality education in schools with high numbers of at-risk students. This is embodied in the suggested weighted student funding provision. Under this part of the plan, each school would receive a level of

funding weighted to the composition of the students in that school. For example, those schools with more children receiving free or reduced price meals, those who are English Language Learners (also known as requiring Limited English Proficiency Learning instruction), those whose families receive CalWorks benefits, and those with learning disabilities might be among the beneficiaries of the new weighted funding.

It is highly significant that a 3.7-to-1 (63% to 17%) majority of teachers statewide favors the weighted student funding formula. While all regions of the state give substantial majority support to the weighted student funding provision, the highest support is found in the Bay Area, where a 6-to-1 (69% to 12%) majority favors it, followed by Northern California at 4.5-to-1 (65% to 14%), Los Angeles County at 3.5-to-1 (62% to 18%), Central Valley at 4.5-to-1 (62% to 14%), and Southern California (excluding Los Angeles County) with a 3-to-1 (60% to 22%) majority.

Some versions of the reform proposal have suggested funding changes that potentially could reduce funding to some schools, while other versions would focus on giving some preferences for future additional funding. Teachers who initially favored or were neutral on the proposal were asked if they would still support the weighted funding feature “if schools with higher need students would be able to spend more for teachers, but schools with fewer student ‘needs’ would lose money?” Support for the weighted school funding aspect of the proposal then drops to a 3-to-2 plurality (47% to 30%, with 22% neutral).

*Notably, there are differences teachers in schools that might expect to be "winners" or "losers" under this version of the proposals. Teachers at the 51% majority of schools with the fewest at-risk students continue to favor the proposal by a narrow 41% to 37%, while teachers in schools with the highest numbers of at-risk students continue to support the proposal by a much wider 3-to-1 margin (55% to 19%).*

Two other aspects of the proposal met with quite different reactions. “Giving children the option of choosing any public school they want to attend” meets with support from a 3-to-2 margin of teachers (48% to 28%). This result can be taken to mean that a majority of teachers want to make all schools better, rather than giving parents and students the option of leaving "bad" schools and choosing "better" ones.

### **The Bottom Line**

*There is very broad support for the reform proposal presented to California classroom teachers, with some variation depending on how the details of its implementation might work out.*

## D. A Closer Look at Inequities in School Conditions

In this survey, several major gaps emerge between the conditions in schools with the highest numbers of at-risk students and the 51% of all schools with the fewest at-risk students.

Most notable, perhaps, is the **high concentrations of teachers lacking full credentials in schools with many high-risk students**. Students at schools with the most at-risk students are five times more likely than students in the majority of schools with the fewest at-risk students to be in schools with 20% or more under-credentialed teachers (39% vs. 7%). Just over half (52%) of the schools statewide with 20% or more under-credentialed teachers can be found in the 20% of schools with the heaviest concentration of at-risk students.

### **The Bottom Line**

*Until schools with the most at-risk students are staffed with fully qualified teachers, students in those schools will have few opportunities, if any, to receive a quality education.*

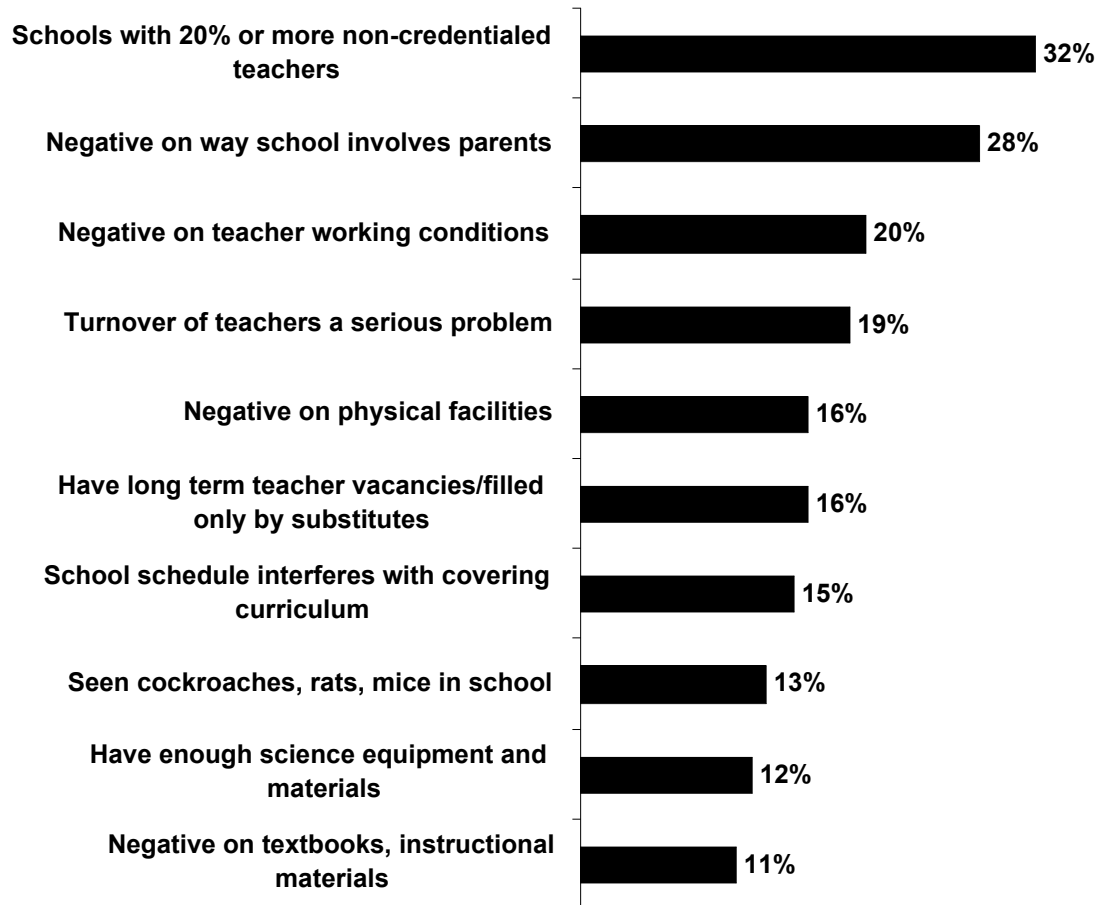
The problem of **turnover of teachers**, as reported by teachers themselves, is almost three times more serious in schools with the most at-risk students than in the 51% of schools with the fewest at-risk students. A substantial 32% of schools with the most at-risk students suffer from seriously high turnover of teachers, compared with a much lower 13% at the majority of schools with the fewest at-risk students.

Other comparisons continue the picture of inequality:

- ❖ Twice as many teachers in high-risk schools come up negative on **teacher working conditions** in their schools, compared with the majority schools with the fewest at-risk students (40% vs. 20%).
- ❖ Half of teachers in schools with the most at-risk students report the **physical condition of their schools** as only fair or poor, which is 1.47 times worse than at the majority of schools with the fewest at-risk kids (50% vs. 34%).
- ❖ Teachers at schools with the most at-risk students are 2.4 times more likely than teachers at the 51% majority of schools with the fewest at-risk students to report having **long-term vacancies often filled only by substitutes** (28% vs. 12%).
- ❖ Schools with the most at-risk students are almost three times as likely as the 51% majority of schools with the fewest at-risk students to **adequately involve parents** (43% vs. 15%).
- ❖ By a 3-2 margin, teachers in schools with the most at-risk students are more likely than teachers in schools with the fewest at-risk children to report that the **school schedule interferes with covering the curriculum** (41% vs. 26%).

- ❖ Teachers at schools with the most at-risk students are 1.5 times as likely as teachers in the 51% of schools with the fewest at-risk students to report seeing evidence of **vermin in their school** (39% vs. 26%). By a 3-to-2 margin, schools with the highest number of at-risk students come up more negative on **textbooks and instructional materials** than a majority of the schools with the fewest at-risk students (29% vs. 18%).

**TEN MAJOR GAPS BETWEEN 20% MOST AT-RISK SCHOOLS AND 51% MAJORITY OF LEAST AT-RISK SCHOOLS**

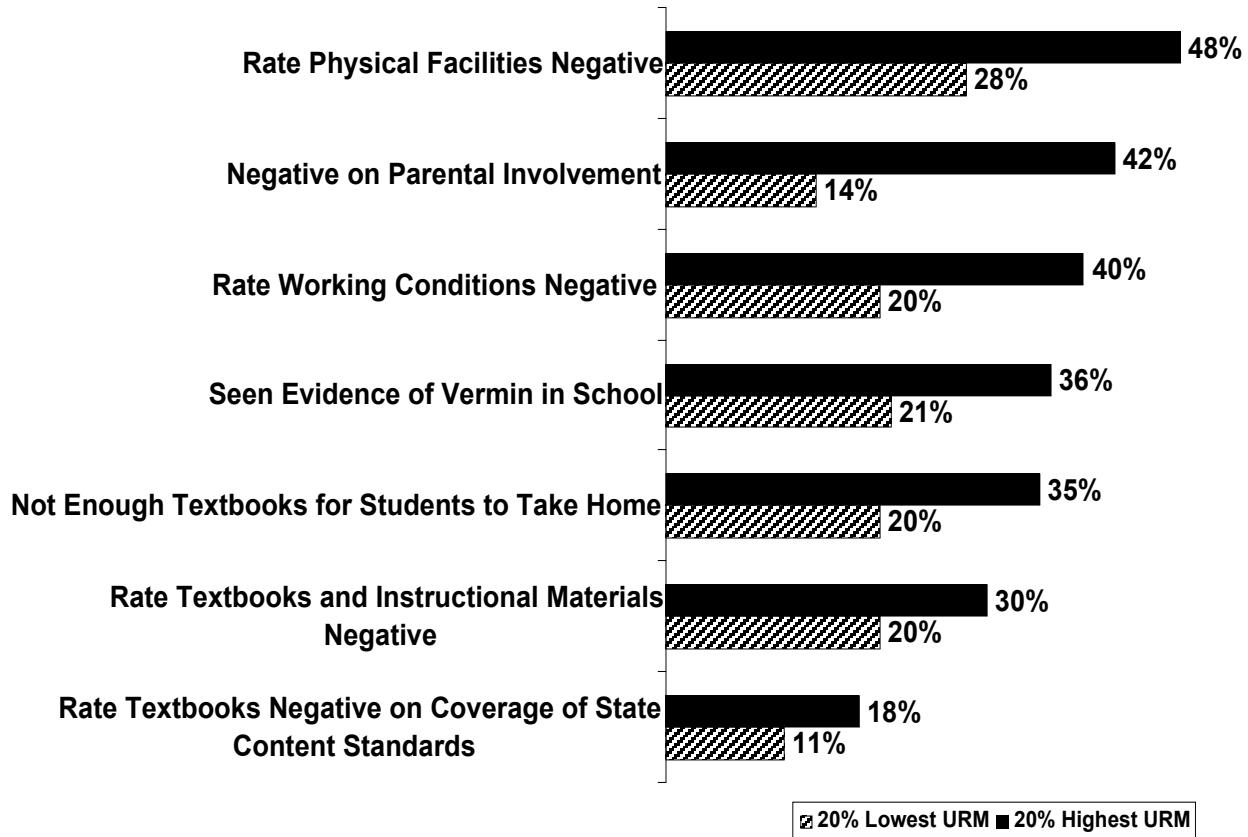


## **E. Underrepresented Minorities**

Highlighted by the upcoming 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education (and the recent anniversary of Mendez v. Westminster, a California case presaging Brown which ended legal segregation of the schools in California), there remain substantial disparities between schools with high and low concentrations of African American, Latino and Native American students (referred to herein as underrepresented minority or URM students). Because a 65% majority of racial and ethnic minorities constitute such a high majority of the student population statewide, in order to obtain a fair representation of schools with few minority students compared with those with high concentrations of the same minorities, the 20% of schools with the highest concentrations of minorities was compared with the 20% with the lowest concentration of racial and ethnic minorities:

- ❖ Teachers in the twenty percent of schools with the highest percentages of underrepresented students (the highest quintile URM schools) are twice as likely to rate the working conditions for teachers as poor or only fair compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (40% versus 20%, respectively).
- ❖ Teachers at the highest quintile URM schools are three times as likely to rate the way the school involves parents as poor or only fair compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (42% versus 14%, respectively).
- ❖ Teachers in the highest quintile URM schools are 43% more likely to rate the textbooks and instructional materials as poor or only fair compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (30% versus 21%, respectively).
- ❖ Teachers in the highest quintile URM schools are 71% more likely to rate the adequacy of the physical facilities as poor or only fair compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (48% versus 28%, respectively).
- ❖ Teachers in the highest quintile URM schools are 69% more likely to rate the textbooks on their coverage of the state content standards as poor or only fair compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (18% versus 11%, respectively).

**SCHOOL CONDITIONS: 20% HIGHEST AND LOWEST URM**



- ❖ Teachers in the highest quintile URM schools are 74% more likely to report there are not enough copies of textbooks for all students to take home compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (35% versus 20% respectively).
- ❖ Teachers in the highest quintile URM schools are 73% more likely to report that they have seen evidence of cockroaches, rats, or mice in their school compared to the teachers in the lowest quintile URM schools (36% versus 21%, respectively).

## Conclusion

California has a two-tiered school system: one for more affluent, largely white students who enjoy the privilege of a relatively healthy educational environment, and the other, for the least privileged, predominately non-white students who suffer an educational environment that virtually forecloses their chance of learning at a comparable level.

Children most at-risk, who come from poor families, simply are not being given an opportunity to learn that is equal to that offered children from privileged families. *The obvious cause of this inequality lies in the finding that the most disadvantaged children attend schools that do not have the basic facilities and conditions conducive to providing them with a quality education.* Without such facilities and conditions, both the teachers and the students will be hard-put to achieve any semblance of quality education.