



**State of Rhode Island's Schools**

Conducted by

**Congressman Jim Langevin (RI-02)**

January 14, 2002

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Congressman Jim Langevin conducted a survey of all the public school administrators and representatives of teachers in his congressional district to elicit the needs of the schools he represents. Following is a list of the key findings from the study:

- Teachers and administrators are seeking more opportunities for professional development, but are significantly time-constrained and often unable to take advantage of the opportunities that exist.
- Substitute teachers are in short supply, exacerbating the lack of time for professional development activities.
- Many schools' infrastructures are in need of repair. Most principals and teachers do not report a need for entirely new buildings, but do endure far too many leaky windows and roofs, cramped classrooms, and rundown office spaces.
- Many teachers' benefits, such as annual salaries and health insurance, are inadequate and leave teachers feeling vulnerable as they head into retirement.
- Teachers and principals are wary of a federally imposed mandate of annual testing of all students in grades 3 through 8. They view such a system as potentially valuable, but expensive to develop, evaluate and maintain.
- Most schools are technologically sophisticated; however, teachers want more training to use this technology effectively and maximize its usefulness to students.
- Schools need more support to provide high-quality education for special needs students.
- Teachers and principals identify a need for greater investments in mental health and school safety resources, and other initiatives that reduce alcohol, tobacco, and drug usage. Students would benefit from greater access to school psychologists, counselors, and initiatives that reduce the use of illicit substances.

As a result of these findings, Congressman Langevin has taken four actions. First, he crafted the **"No Substitute for Quality Teaching Act,"** which creates a grant program that allows school districts to experiment with ways to increase professional development activities for teachers and administrators. By providing funds directly to districts, this program would allow participants to expand the pool of qualified substitute teachers and overcome the roadblocks that prevent educators from taking full advantage of professional development opportunities. Second, Congressman Langevin has continued to fight for legislation he has co-sponsored, which would dramatically **expand Rhode Island's ability to repair schools and invest in their physical structures.** Third, Congressman Langevin **fought for more flexibility in the testing requirement in H.R. 1,** which requires schools to test all students annually in grades 3 through 8 beginning in school year 2005-2006. Congressman Langevin believes that accountability in education is critical, but does not want testing to occur at the expense of learning. Finally, through the **Coalition for Safer Communities,** which Congressman Langevin created in spring of 2001, he worked to increase awareness about school safety, substance abuse, and mental health issues among young people, preserve beneficial initiatives like the Elementary School Counseling Demonstration Program, establish a National Commission on Safe Schools, and expand resources for the YMCA and other programs that enhance academic and life skills for at-risk youth.

## II. INTRODUCTION

### A. Purpose of this Report

Congressman Langevin, the newest member of Rhode Island's Congressional delegation, is in the process of systematically assessing the needs of his constituents on critical issues. Because improving education for all of Rhode Island's students is one of Congressman Langevin's highest priorities, he conducted a survey of all public schools in Rhode Island's Second Congressional District.

This report presents the results of the study administered by Congressman Langevin. It reveals teachers' and principals' opinions about the state of their schools and their views on education policies being considered by the United States Congress. The results of this survey will guide Congressman Langevin's education priorities and enable him to target his efforts towards the most critical areas for the schools he represents.

### B. Education Policy in the U.S. Congress

More so today than in years past, education is a top priority for Congress, the Administration, and American families. Throughout the 2000 presidential campaign, Americans consistently rated education as their most important concern and presidential candidates Gore and Bush offered detailed plans for improving schools around the country. Overwhelmingly, Americans want to improve public schools so that all students have the chance to succeed in life.

Last year, the U.S. Congress passed the most significant education reform bill in almost a decade. H.R. 1, the "No Child Left Behind Act," passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 381 – 41 and the Senate by a vote of 87 – 10 in mid-December. President Bush signed the bill into law last Tuesday, January 8, 2002.

H.R.1 strengthens accountability measures to help schools not only improve the performance of all students, but also tailor classroom teaching to the needs of individual students. The bill authorizes significant new resources to carry out these reforms as well as train teachers, improve special

education, and develop and implement programs to teach every child to read by third grade.

Education is of paramount concern to Congressman Langevin. The results of this report are instrumental to Congressman Langevin's understanding of the impact of H.R. 1 and future education reform proposals on one of his most important constituencies, Rhode Island's children.

## III. FINDINGS

### A. Federal Priorities

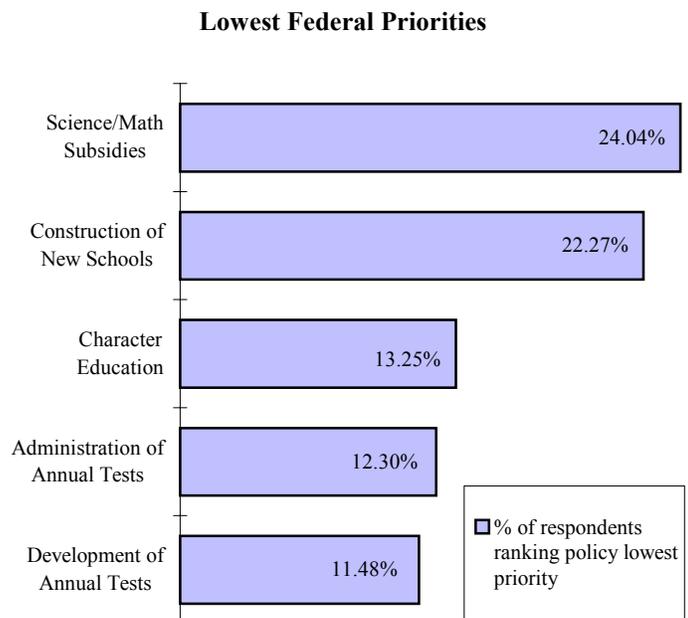
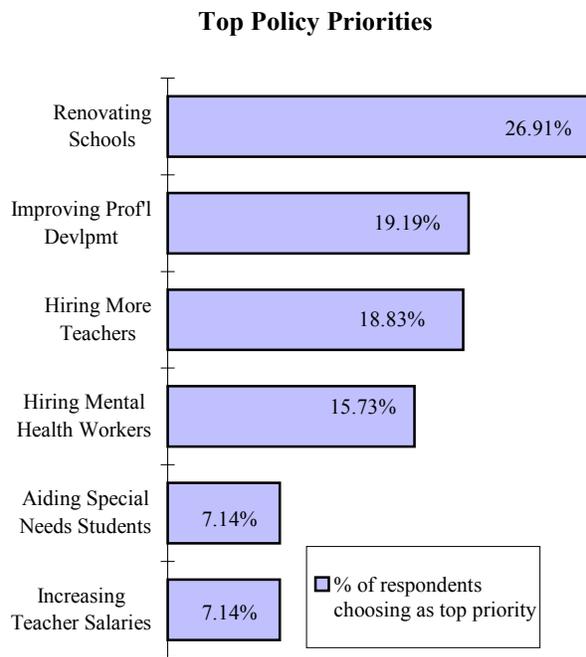
Teachers and principals were asked to rate fourteen education policies pending in Congress for their usefulness and importance to each school. These proposals include:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ✓ construction of new schools                             | ✓ renovation of schools  |
| ✓ evaluation/administration of annual tests               | ✓ development of annual tests  |
| ✓ support for students with special needs                 | ✓ increases in teacher salaries  |
| ✓ subsidies for science and math educators                | ✓ hiring of additional teachers  |
| ✓ professional development for teachers                   | ✓ hiring of additional mental health professionals                       |
| ✓ development of/support for afterschool programs         | ✓ improvements in technological infrastructure                           |
| ✓ development of/support for character education programs | ✓ development of/support for programs aimed at reducing school violence. |

Three policies - renovating school infrastructure improving professional development, and hiring more teachers - stand out as the most important priorities for respondents.

Almost thirty percent of principals and teachers ranked renovating school buildings as their top priority, while just slightly less than 20 percent of respondents chose both improving professional development opportunities and hiring more teachers. Hiring additional mental health professionals ranked fourth highest among administrators and teachers top priorities.

Improving support systems for special needs students and increasing teacher salaries are also very important concerns to survey respondents.



Expanding the analysis to include respondents' top three priorities reveals a similar pattern. Almost one-quarter of teachers and administrators ranked improving professional development as their first, second, or third choice; 16 percent chose renovation of schools; and 15 percent chose hiring additional teachers. Increasing teacher salaries and improving technological infrastructure are also important to principals; slightly more than 10 percent ranked each policy as one of their top three priorities.

Clear results also emerged at the other end of the spectrum in the principal and teacher responses. Budget-conscious teachers and administrators are wary of the most costly proposals. Subsidies for math and science educators and construction of new schools were most often cited as the lowest priority for respondents. Almost one-quarter of respondents chose each of these policies as their lowest priority. Character education and annual testing of students were also rate near the bottom of principals and teachers lists. Approximately 13 percent of respondents picked administration and evaluation or development of annual tests as their least pressing concern.

There were few significant differences between elementary, middle, and high schools within this section. Principals from all three levels of education rated professional development as their most important priority, and school renovation as their second most important. Additionally, annual testing development, and administration and evaluation ranked lowest among administrators from all three types of schools.

One notable exception is that middle and high school principals rate hiring additional mental health professionals higher than elementary school principals do. This policy ranks fourth among high schools, and third among middle schools, while it falls to seventh among elementary school principals. Elementary school principals, on the other hand, place more importance on increases in teacher salaries than did administrators from other schools.

**B. Professional Development and Teacher Quality**

Teachers in virtually every school in Rhode Island participate in professional development activities of some kind, and assessments of these programs are generally positive. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1

representing excellent, principals rate the quality of professional development activities as 1.67, on average, and teachers rate them 2.83. On the question of whether professional development programs are adequate, principals also answered yes (1.7 on a scale of 1 to 5), and teachers again said 2.83, on average. However, on the question of whether teachers' schedules permit them to participate in these programs, teachers and principals responded with a resounding "no."

In the open-ended response field of the survey, many respondents cited a lack of time to participate in professional development programs. Survey after survey reported that teachers "need more time," "need additional staff development days," want "more time in the district schedule for professional development," and cannot fit professional development in due to the "time factor."

The major reason underlying the teachers' lack of time, principals usually attributed to a "lack of substitutes" to cover the classrooms while teachers obtain more training. As one principal summed up the problem: "when professional development activities are available, we cannot get substitutes. Therefore, we must hold these activities before school or on weekends, and pay hourly stipends, which quickly depletes our funding." Many other principals echoed this complaint with "we have difficulty getting substitutes so we can release teachers," "the biggest concern...is the lack of substitute teachers to replace teachers," and "substitutes are hard to find."

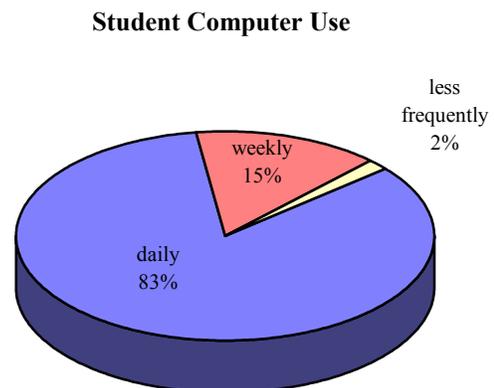
Survey data reinforced the respondents' comments. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing poor, both teachers and principals rate the availability of substitute teachers as 3.9, on average. The lack of substitutes is most acute in high schools (4.2 out of 5), although it is clearly a problem in the majority of schools (elementary school principals rank substitute availability as 3.7, and middle school principals' responses fell at 3.9).

The same shortage does not seem to exist for full-time teachers. Teachers regard the availability of full-time teachers at 2.86 out of 5, where 5 signifies poor; principals averaged 1.8.

Finally, teachers and students are feeling the space crunch as the student body continues to grow. Teachers ranked the availability of classroom space at only 3.7, significantly closer to inadequate than adequate. Fortunately, most schools have not yet resorted to mobile classrooms. Only 15 percent of schools use mobile classrooms. Moreover, the lack of classroom space seems to be concentrated at the elementary school level. Twenty percent of elementary schools use mobile classrooms, compared to only 7 percent of high schools.

### C. Technological Literacy

Technologically, the schools of Rhode Island's Second Congressional District are well positioned to educate the future leaders of our country. The overwhelming majority of teachers and principals report that teachers have access to computers, classrooms contain computers, and schools have computer labs specifically designated for teaching computer skills.

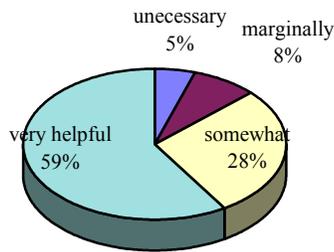


In addition, the wide majority of students are taking advantage of these resources regularly. A full 86 percent of teachers and 83 percent of principals report that students use computers on a daily basis, while only 2 percent of principals say students use computers less than once a week.

The computers in Rhode Island's schools are in good shape. On average, only 6 percent of computers are unusable at any given time, and every respondent said that his or her school is connected to the Internet. In most cases, the majority of the schools' computers are online (86 percent of computers are connected, on average).

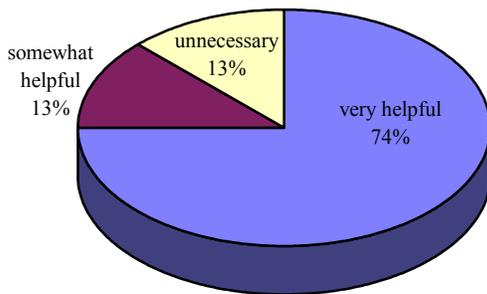
However, teachers and principals do report a need for more computer training for faculty. Almost two-thirds of both report that such training would be very helpful, while an additional 28 percent of principals and 13 percent of teachers say it would be somewhat helpful. Only 13 percent of principals and teachers say computer training would be only marginally helpful or unnecessary.

**Principals' Assessment of the Value of Computer Training**



This desire for technical training is not exclusive to one type of school. Elementary, middle, and high school administrators report wanting such training in approximately equal measures.

**Teacher's Assessment of the Value of Computer Training**



In spite of the of faculty computer training, teachers and principals alike report that students are learning computer skills at a very high rate. Over 86 percent of both teachers and principals said almost all or a majority of students are learning computers. A mere 11 percent of principals estimate the number at fewer than half and only one principal said only a few.

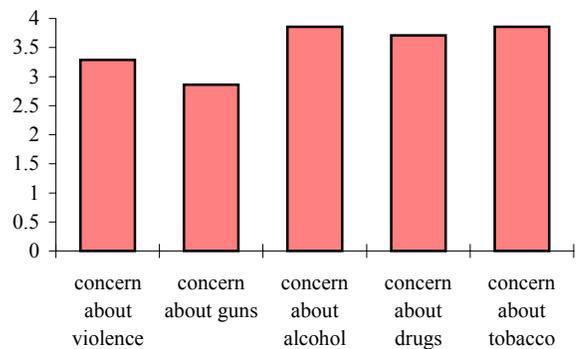
**D. Student Safety and Mental Health Issues**

Student safety concerns are growing among principals and teachers. Both report highly

problematic levels of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug usage among students, and just slightly less intense concerns about violence and gun usage. These issues are most pronounced in middle and high schools.

High school principals are concerned about alcohol, drug and tobacco usage at roughly the same level (3.5 out of 5, with 5 representing serious concern), although tobacco ranks slightly higher than alcohol or drugs. Teachers, who normally work in closer contact with students than principals, place their concern about alcohol and tobacco usage at 3.9 and their concern about drug usage at 3.7, just slightly lower than alcohol and tobacco. Virtually every teacher who responded said use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs are increasing among students, an alarming finding.

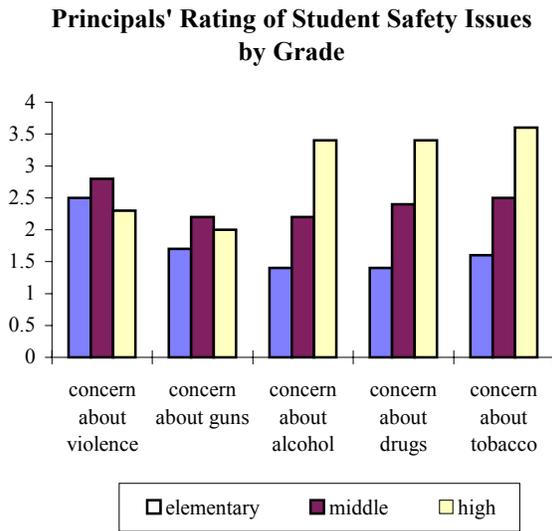
**Teachers' Rating of Student Safety Issues**



Concern about violence and guns is only slightly less severe than that about illegal substances among administrators and teachers, and teachers report higher levels of anxiety about these issues than administrators. While teachers, on average, rate their concern about violence at 3.3 out of 5, principals' responses average 2.8. This trend also exists with respect to guns. Teachers, on average, chose 2.9; principals generally answered around 2.

Middle school principals report slightly greater concerns about violence and possession of guns than either high school or elementary school principals, while high school principals were much more concerned about alcohol, tobacco, and drug use than principals of younger children (ranking concern about alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, on average, at 3.6). High school administrators report an average of 2 out of 5 on this question,

with 1 representing not very concerned, and 5 representing very concerned.



Rhode Island's schools employ remarkably similar and adaptable methods when dealing with violent behavior. The most commonly used forms include discipline, individual counseling, and classroom discussion. Many schools also involve parents and conduct general assemblies, although these methods are somewhat less common. One hundred percent of middle and high school principals use discipline to deal with violent activity, while 99 percent of elementary schools do. Equally high numbers of schools use individual counseling when they are confronted with these problems. Parental involvement is also very common, particularly in the lower grades. Almost 90 percent of middle schools and 80 percent of elementary schools use this method, while only 67 percent of high schools do. General assemblies are the least commonly employed method for elementary schools, although a full 58 percent report using them.

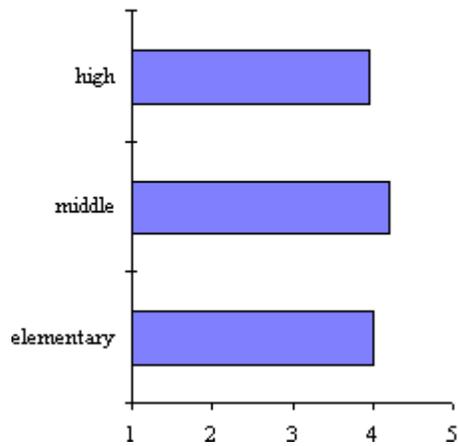
High schools are more likely to deal with substance abuse by discipline, individual counseling, and classroom discussion than parental involvement or general assemblies. Elementary schools are much more likely to use classroom discussion than any of the other methods; almost 80 percent of elementary school principals report using classroom discussion. Middle school efforts to deal with substance abuse focus most heavily on discipline and individual counseling. Almost 90 percent of schools use

each method, while only 72 percent use parental involvement, the next most widely used technique.

High schools are most likely to have mental health professionals on staff to help students in need before their problems require disciplinary action. On average, high schools have greater than 4 full-time mental health professionals on staff. Elementary schools on the other hand, who generally serve far fewer students, usually only have one mental health professional on staff part-time. Middle schools fall in between, with an average of 2.6 professionals per school.

Schools rely on counselors much more than other mental health professionals to meet students' needs. On average, high schools employ counselors for 150 hours per week; middle schools for almost 90; and elementary schools for approximately 15. School psychologists and student assistance workers fill in the gaps in

**Need for Greater Investment in Mental Health Resources (1-5 scale)**



meeting students' mental health needs. Psychologists are accessible for 26 hours a week at the high school level, on average; 25 at the middle school level and 11 at elementary schools. The surveys shows that peer counselors are not widely used, serving for only 3 hours per week, on average, in middle schools.

But surveys indicate that these resources are not adequate. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing "need more resources," teachers rate the need for greater mental health resources at 4.6, on average, and principals say 4.0. Teachers estimate that almost 15 percent of students suffer

from depression or mental illness, a strong indication that the resources in place are inadequate to meet students' needs.

Bullying, which is often the first step towards violent or disruptive behavior, is a significant, though not overwhelming, problem in Rhode Island's schools. Overall, teachers place the issue at 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing a significant problem. Middle school principals rate the problem of bullying as a 3, while elementary and high schools cite the problem as somewhat less significant (2.8 and 2.4 respectively).

### E. Annual Testing

Rhode Island's teachers and principals are skeptical about the prospect of testing students annually. While their feelings are, on average, luke-warm about the value of the tests (3 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing very valuable), they are certain that additional tests would be disruptive and expensive.

High school administrators are particularly likely to see annual tests as difficult to implement, rating the difficulty at 3.7 out of 5, versus only 2.6 for elementary schools and 2.9 for middle schools. High school principals are also more likely to view annual tests as disruptive (4.5 out of 5), although principals from all grade levels see annual tests as disruptive (3.8 on average).

Teachers are equally, if not more, likely to see annual tests as disruptive (4.2 out of 5) and difficult to implement (3.7 out of 5).

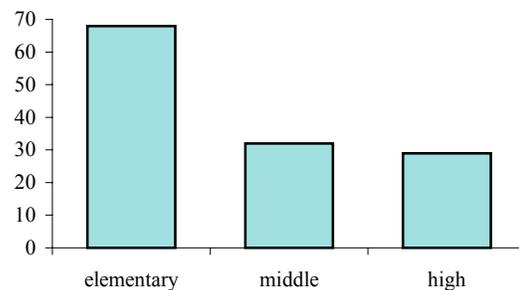
Teachers and principals also agree about the costs of developing, implementing, evaluating, and refining annual assessments. Overwhelmingly, both said such efforts would be very costly. On average, teachers rated the development costs at 4.7 (with 5 representing very costly) while principals rated the development cost at 4.3. Teachers were equally pessimistic about the prospect of maintaining an annual testing system that is cost-effective. They rated evaluation and administration costs at 4.7 out of 5, while principals ranked those costs at 4.2. There is very

little variation between administrators of different education levels in their appraisal of the costs associated with annual tests.

### F. Parental Involvement

Ninety percent of schools in Rhode Island's Second Congressional District have formal parent-teacher organizations in operation. One hundred percent of elementary schools have such organizations, while 84 percent of both middle and high schools do.

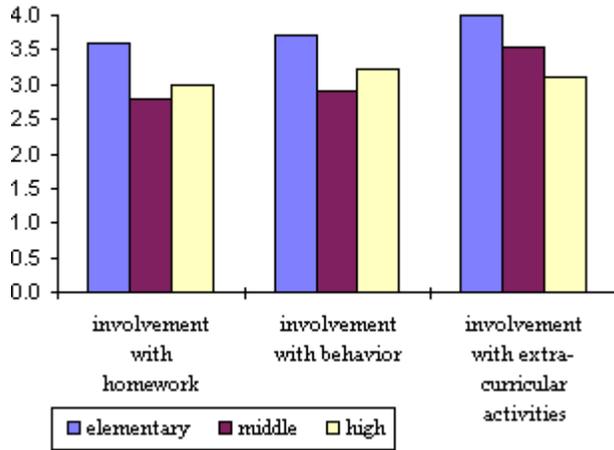
**Percent of Parents Attending Parent-Teacher Conferences**



On average, these organizations have 100 active members, representing one-third of the student population at each school. Elementary schools generally have larger PTOs (113 members) than middle (100 members) or high schools (56 members), and those organizations represent a larger share of the students at the lower levels. At the elementary school level, PTOs speak for 40 percent of students, while at the high school level only 16 percent of students are represented. PTOs in middle schools represent one-quarter of the students.

Parents are also much more likely to attend parent-teacher conferences if their children go to elementary school. Almost 70 percent of the parents of elementary school students attend these conferences, while only 30 percent do so at the middle and high school levels. Overall, principals and teachers report that slightly more than 50 percent of parents attend parent-teacher conferences.

**Parental Involvement**



Likewise, in response to questions about parent involvement with children’s homework, behavior, and extracurricular activities, elementary school principals report greater levels of engagement than do middle and high school principals.

**IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The most compelling conclusions emerging from the survey are the need for:

- ✓ accessible professional development for teachers and administrators;
- ✓ school infrastructure renovation;
- ✓ increased compensation packages for teachers;
- ✓ programs and resources to address mental health problems and student use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco; and
- ✓ flexibility and financial support for schools to implement the annual testing of students in grades 3 through 8.

Currently educators are pressed for time. Teachers want to broaden their skills by delivering standards-based instruction and devoting more time to planning. Administrators want to improve their leadership abilities and create environments where teachers and students are encouraged to perform at their best. But far too often teachers and administrators are forced to give up their planning time to cover classrooms of absent teachers or guide extracurricular activities. And substitutes, who districts rely on to fill those

temporary vacancies, are hard to find and hard to keep.

Renovating school infrastructures is also an important priority for school administrators. Too many of Rhode Island’s schools are in need of minor repairs or complete renovations. Crowded classrooms, leaky roofs, crumbling infrastructure, and lack of high-tech wiring will prevent our students from obtaining the top-notch education they need today to compete effectively in the workplaces of tomorrow.

In addition, many teachers are frustrated with their salaries and benefit packages and worried about paying for their health care upon retirement. Between 1990 and 2000, Rhode Island teacher salaries increased three percentage points less than the national average, and teachers across the country remain some of the lowest paid professionals in the workforce.

Furthermore, Rhode Island’s high school students’ use of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol, and the lack of resources to deal with mental health and school safety issues, is problematic for many school administrators. Since students’ needs are likely to increase as a result of the terrorist attacks in September and the ongoing war, this is a particularly vital problem.

Finally, the surveys revealed that principals and teachers are skeptical of more standardized tests. Very few respondents rated annual testing as a high priority and many ranked it as one of the least important priorities. Moreover, principals and teachers are not enthusiastic about the prospect of more tests because they believe the tests will be extremely expensive to develop, administer and evaluate.

**V. LEGISLATIVE REMEDIES**

In response to the overwhelming need for more access to professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators, Congressman Langevin developed the “**No Substitute for Quality Teaching Act**” which creates a demonstration program to allow school districts to tackle the substitute teacher shortage in innovative ways. This competitive grant would be administered by the Department of Education and

distributed directly to school districts. Each district receiving a grant would be encouraged to design and implement a unique program suitable for the specific needs of its community.

Alleviating the substitute teacher shortage will allow teachers time to develop their skills and knowledge of new areas, such as technology, so they can provide the best possible education for Rhode Island's students.

To address the need for school renovation, Congressman Langevin is an active co-sponsor of the "**America's Better Classrooms Act.**" In sum, this bill authorizes \$24 billion for new bonds, including \$22.4 billion for school modernization, and \$2.4 billion in additional Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZAB). Under this bill, Rhode Island would become eligible for \$90,648,000 in bond authority. Democrats within the House of Representatives are in the process of gathering signatures on a petition that would allow lawmakers to vote on this important legislation on the House floor in spite of the conflicting wishes of the Republican leadership. Only a handful of signatures are still needed, fueling the hope that this bill may be considered soon.

Congressman Langevin is also a proud co-sponsor of H.R. 687, the "**Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act.**" This bill would expand access to federal loan forgiveness for teachers, and increase the amount of student loans that may be forgiven through the program. By providing a financial incentive to go into the field of teaching, the government can attract top-quality people of all ages and backgrounds to the critical business of educating tomorrow's generation.

Because guaranteeing student safety and mental health resources for students has long been a top priority of Congressman Langevin's, he founded

the **Coalition for Safer Communities (CSC)** last spring. Through his leadership of the CSC, Congressman Langevin has highlighted the need to increase funding for mental health and student safety initiatives. In testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Congressman Langevin fought to save the Elementary School Counseling Demonstration program, which provides essential support for the development and expansion of counseling activities, from being eliminated by the Republican leadership in May 2001. He has also worked to establish a National Commission on Safe Schools, and expand resources for the YMCA and other programs that enhance academic and life skills for at-risk youth.

Finally, throughout deliberations on H.R. 1, the No Child Left Behind Act, Congressman Langevin **championed the issue of increasing flexibility in testing** by organizing a bi-partisan coalition of Members of Congress to influence conference negotiations. Congressman Langevin believes that Rhode Island, which has invested significant resources, time and energy into developing an assessment system that comprehensively tracks the progress of all its students, should not be forced to revamp its system and subject students to still more standardized tests. H.R. 1, which Congress passed in late December and President Bush signed into law on January 8, allows five years for states to implement annual testing for all students in grades 3 through 8, and 12 years for them to achieve annual yearly progress on the annual assessments. This broad implementation period, coupled with significant funding for test development, evaluation, and administration, will help Rhode Island enhance its existing assessment system and provide comprehensive tracking of all students' progress in the future.

## **APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY**

To learn as much as possible about the needs of Rhode Island's schools, Congressman Langevin surveyed the people who deal with these issues on a daily basis. Surveys were sent to every public school principal and the president of each teacher union in Rhode Island's Second District. These surveys asked for feedback on the following issues: school infrastructure, federal legislative priorities, professional development for teachers, class size, technological literacy, student safety, mental health resources, annual testing, and parental involvement.

Principal response rates were good; 116 out of 191 (61 percent) surveys were returned via fax or mail. Response rates varied by community: 100 percent of Cranston's schools returned surveys, compared with 50 percent of Providence's, and one-third of Warwick's. Forty-one percent of teacher union presidents responded to the survey (7 of the 17 school districts) representing 56 percent of the teachers within Congressman Langevin's congressional district.

Analysis of the findings was conducted throughout the fall and winter. Questions that required responses on a scale of 1 to 5 are averaged. Questions that required yes or no responses are reported as a percentage of respondents who said "yes." Open-ended responses are used to elaborate on or clarify the statistical data, and are paraphrased selectively throughout this report. Most data is disaggregated to reflect the opinions of principals and teachers separately. Where teacher and principals responses are presented collectively, the data is weighted to compensate for differences in sample sizes.