

Parents don't see a crisis over science and math

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Science and math have zoomed to the top of the nation's education agenda. Yet Amanda Cook, a parent of two school-age girls, can't quite see the urgency.

"In Maine, there aren't many jobs that scream out 'math and science,'" said Cook, who lives in Etna, in the central part of the state. Yes, both topics are important, but "most parents are saying you're better off going to school for something there's a big need for."

Nationwide, a new poll shows, many parents are content with the science and math education their children get -- a starkly different view than that held by national leaders.

Fifty-seven percent of parents say "things are fine" with the amount of math and science being taught in their child's public school. High school parents seem particularly content -- 70 percent say their child gets the right amount of science and math.

Students aren't too worried, either, according to the poll released Tuesday by Public Agenda, a public opinion research group that tracks education trends.

Only half of children in grades six to 12 say that understanding sciences and having strong math skills are essential for them to succeed after high school.

This comes as congressional leaders, governors, corporate executives and top scientists have called for schools to raise the rigor and amount of math and science in school. In his State of the Union address, President Bush made the matter a national priority.

Yet where public officials and employers see slipping production in the sciences as a threat to the nation's economy, parents and students don't share that urgency.

"There's energy and leadership at the top, but there is a task to be done in getting parents and kids to understand some of the ideas," said Jean Johnson, executive president of Public Agenda. "You can do a lot from the top, but you can't do everything. Schools are local. The leadership needs to reach out and help the public understand the challenge."

This week, Bush said, "We can't be the leading country in the world in science and technology unless we educate scientists and young mathematicians." A panel of top scientists and business leaders has warned "the scientific and technical building blocks of our economic leadership are eroding at a time when many other nations are gaining strength."

As for parents and students? In theory, they say, more math and science would be good.

For example, 62 percent of parents say it is crucial for most of today's students to learn high-level math, like advanced algebra and calculus.

The story changes, though, when parents talk specifically about their kids' schools, and when the children relay their own experiences.

Students put a lack of science and math near the bottom of problems they see at school. They are much more worried about bad language, cheating or the pressure for good grades.

Most parents, meanwhile, say their kids are getting a better education than they did. Only 32 percent of parents say their child's school should teach more math and science.

If anything, parents are less worried about math and science these days -- not more.

In 1994, 52 percent of parents considered a lack of math and science in their local schools to be a serious problem. Now, only 32 percent say the same thing. During that time, states ramped up standards and testing, which seems to have affected parents' views.

The findings are based on telephone interviews with a nationally random sample of 1,342 public school students in grades six to 12, and of 1,379 parents of children in public school. The interviews were done between Oct. 30 and Dec. 29. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 3.5 percentage points for the students and 4 percentage points for the parents.