

A Summary of Findings From *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*

Section 1 - Why Support for Public Schools Is in Jeopardy

American support for public education is fragile and porous. Although many people voice initial approval of their own local public schools, this support disintegrates at the slightest probing. People think private schools do better than public schools in the areas that are most important to them - safety, order, standards, and smaller classes. Moreover, if they could afford to, the majority of public school parents would send their children to private schools. Despite their disappointment with public schools, however, most Americans are not ready to dismantle the public system. People would like the public system to work - to provide the environment and standards that are conducive to teaching and learning. But people also are clearly frustrated and confused about how to make this happen. Understanding of such alternatives as vouchers and privatization is fragmentary, and people are divided over whether more money will improve schools. Neither the advocates of public education nor the proponents of private alternatives should confidently count the American public on their side.

- Sixty-one percent of Americans say private schools are more likely to provide order and discipline in the classroom; 18% say their local public schools are better at this. Fifty-three percent say private schools have higher academic standards, versus only 24% who think standards are higher in local public schools. Majorities also say private schools provide more safety and security and are better at providing an environment that promotes values such as honesty and responsibility.
- Seventy-five percent of teachers say public schools in their community are better than private ones, but only 33% of the public and 29% of leaders agree.
- Fifty-one percent of teachers say private schools are better at removing routinely disruptive children from classrooms; 60% say private schools are more likely to provide smaller classes.
- Only 33% of Americans think private school teachers are better than public school teachers.
- Among those who say private schools provide the better education, 57% of the public and 74% of leaders say it is because "their approach to educating students is more effective," not because private schools are choosier about which students they admit.
- Almost half of leaders (46%) say their local public schools are doing only a fair or poor job.

Section 2 - Why Americans are so Concerned About Basics

The general public, parents, leaders, teachers, and educational administrators agree - by overwhelming margins - that teaching basics such as reading, writing, and arithmetic is "absolutely essential." At the same time, large numbers of Americans are persuaded that many youngsters get high school diplomas without mastering those basics. People often express frustration at the seeming inability of America's schools to teach all children these rather simple skills. They see the "3 R's" as the centerpiece of a triumvirate of fundamentals that form the foundation of learning. These include the ability to work hard and apply oneself, proficiency in computers, along with reading, writing and arithmetic.

- Nine in ten Americans (92%) say teaching the basics is "absolutely essential," as do 99% of leaders, 98% of teachers and 100% of school administrators.
- Sixty-five percent of leaders say a high school diploma does not guarantee the student has learned the basics; 32% of teachers and 33% of school administrators agree.
- Eighty percent of Americans feel teaching computer skills is "absolutely essential."
- Sixty-three percent believe American history and geography are "absolutely essential;" 59% add biology, physics and chemistry.

Section 3 - Raising Standards - What People Want, What They Fear

Americans strongly and consistently support higher academic standards. While they understand that enforcing higher standards will have consequences, they are convinced that higher standards will improve student motivation, and consequently, increase learning. Although educators often question public support for higher standards, the public thinks it is educators themselves who continually undermine those standards - by giving diplomas to youngsters who can barely read or write and by passing youngsters from grade to grade when they have failed to learn what was expected. People support the creation and enforcement of higher standards for all children, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds, but they don't want children unnecessarily frightened or pressured. In short, people want standards that motivate, not standards that destroy.

- Seventy-one percent of Americans say with higher standards youngsters will "pay more attention to their school work and study harder." Seventy-two percent say youngsters will "actually learn more."
- Only 13% of both teachers and the public think today's public schools expect students to learn too much. Seventy-five percent of leaders say public schools' expectations of academic achievement are too little.
- No more than 10% of any group - the general public, parents, teachers, or leaders - feel today's students are under too much academic pressure. In contrast, 40% of Americans feel students face the most pressure from friends, 27% from troubled families, and 20% from the threat of drugs and crime in their neighborhoods.

Section 4 - What About the Pursuit of Knowledge?

Most Americans do not place a high value on knowledge for its own sake. People's views on knowledge and learning are highly pragmatic. For example, while parents want their youngsters to learn whatever it takes to get jobs, they express little enthusiasm for knowledge that offers no immediate practical use. People are also skeptical about the real-world value of top-notch academic achievement - getting good grades and pulling in high test scores. And for those hoping to persuade Americans that the next generation needs to be much more highly-educated, there is still one more hurdle: Large numbers of Americans think highly educated people are often socially clumsy, impractical, and "book smart," and overall just a little "too big for their britches."

- Fifty-nine percent of the general public and 57% of teachers say a diploma is important because employers are reluctant to hire people without one, rather than because it represents knowledge and skills. In contrast, 60% of leaders say a diploma is important because it represents skills and knowledge that are useful on the job.
- Only 11% of teachers say academics are the most important factor in career success; 50% say inner drive is most important; and 33% say "knowing how to deal with people well."
- Seventy-one percent of Americans agree with the statement, "people who are highly educated often turn out to be 'book smart' but lack the common sense and understanding of regular folks."

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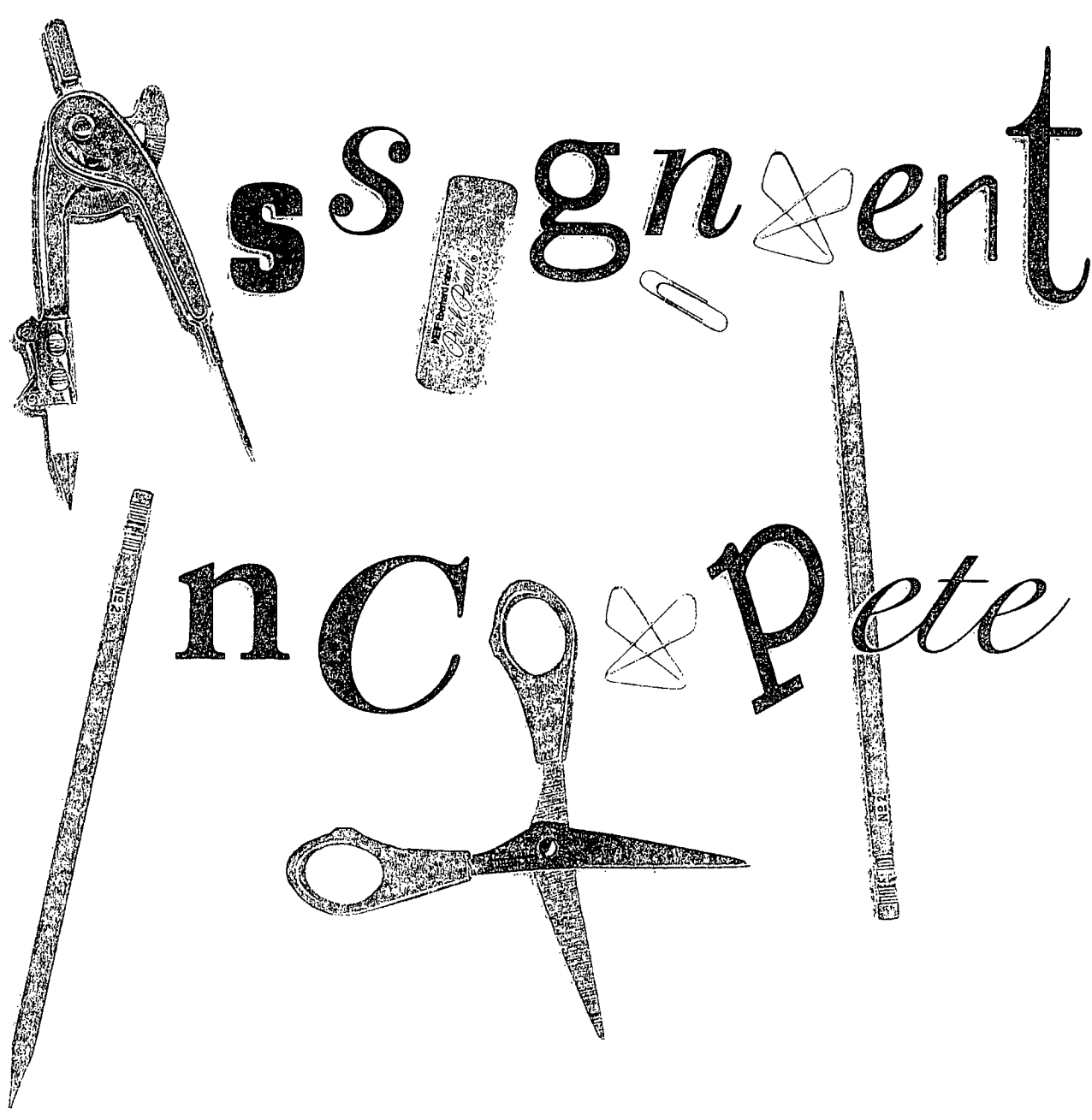
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