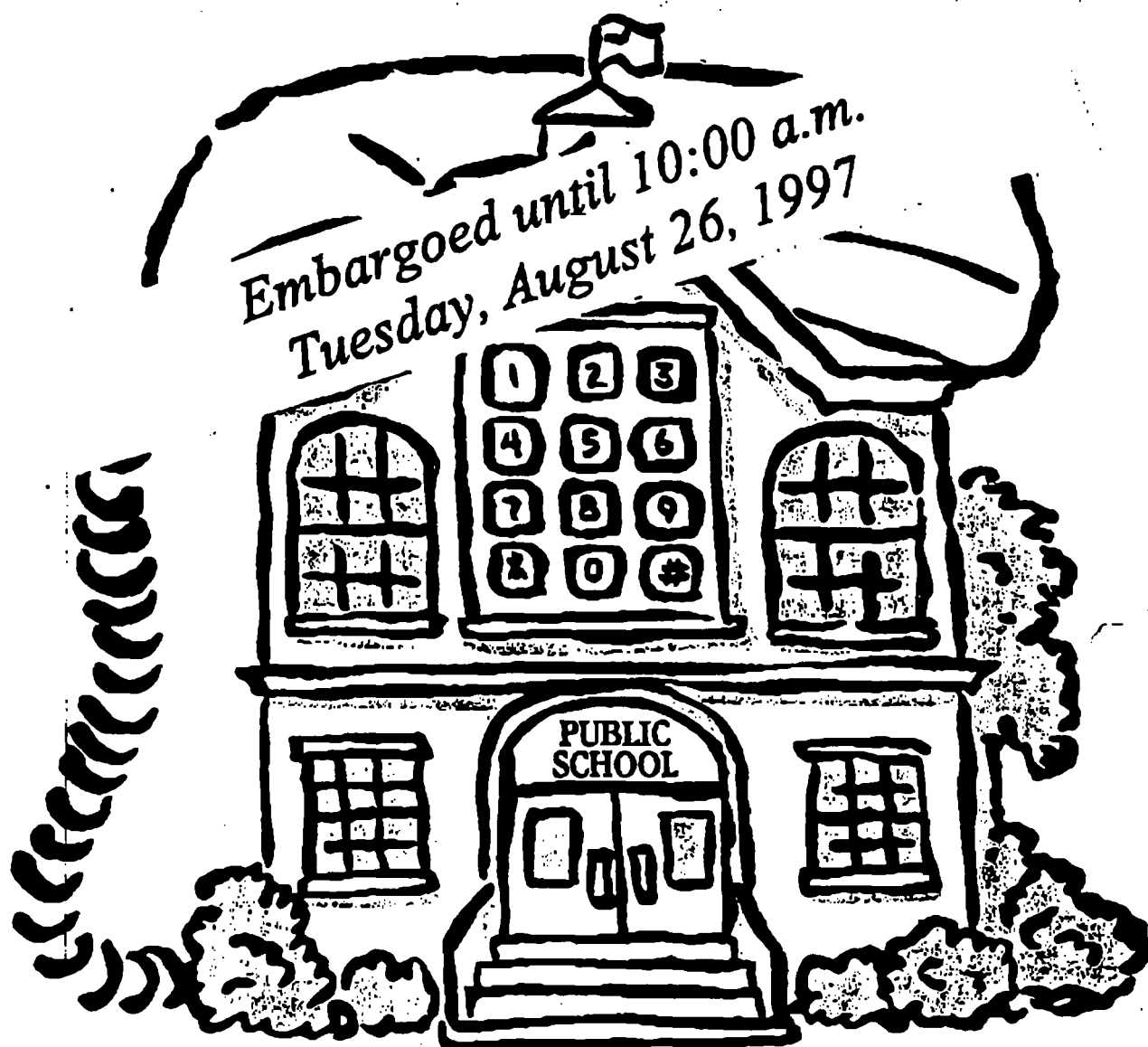


Public Opinion

The 29th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll Of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools

By Lowell C. Rose, Alec M. Gallup, and Stanley M. Elam

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PLACE A computer in every classroom. Move persistent "troublemakers" into alternative schools. Establish national standards for measuring the academic performance of the public schools. Let parents and students choose which public schools the students will attend. Group students in classes according to ability level. Establish a national curriculum. Use standardized national tests to measure the academic achievement of students. Provide health-care services in schools. These are all measures that the public believes would improve student achievement in the public schools. Probing attitudes about improving achievement was a major focus of the 1997 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, conducted by the George H. Gallup International Institute.

Why do some public schools achieve better academic results than others? The public believes that three factors are important: 1) strong support from parents, 2) the amount of money spent, and, to a lesser extent, 3) the kinds of students in attendance.

This year's poll data make it clear that public schools continue to enjoy strong public support. Most respondents give good grades to the schools in their own communities, and parents of public school students express even stronger satisfaction. While there is an obvious desire for improvement, almost three-fourths (71%) of those surveyed believe that this improvement should come through reforming the existing system rather than through seeking an alternative system.

At the same time, however, the public seems more willing than in earlier years to approve government financial support for students who wish to attend nonpublic schools. This continues a trend tracked by these polls for nearly three decades. As recently as 1993, only 24% of respondents favored "allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense." Seventy-four percent were opposed. In 1997, 44% favor this and 52% oppose it. When the words "public expense" are changed to "government expense," the public is exactly divided (48% in favor, 48% opposed).^{*} On the basic "voucher question," asking respondents to indicate whether they would support allowing parents and students to choose a public or nonpublic school to attend with the government paying "all or part of the tuition," this poll shows a virtual deadlock, for the first time, with 49% favoring and 48% opposing. While this is good news to advocates of nonpublic schools, the conditions the public would impose on such support suggest that proposals of this kind are certain to be controversial.

The public expresses the strong belief that any nonpublic school that accepts public funds should be required to enroll students from a wider range of backgrounds and academic ability than is now the case. This popular conviction would seem to invite the kind of government regulation that has led some proponents of nonpublic schools to oppose the voucher idea.

This year's poll reflects a strong public belief in the impor-

tant role parents can and should play in the education of their children. Respondents regard the amount of support provided by parents of public school students as a major factor in determining why some schools are better than others; they also believe strongly that parents should be notified if their children have a substance abuse problem or suffer from a sexually transmitted disease.

Other findings in the 1997 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll include the following.

- Majorities in all demographic groups believe that the problems faced by the public schools in urban areas are more serious than those affecting nonurban schools.

- Lack of discipline and inadequate financing are the local school problems most frequently mentioned by respondents. The use of drugs and "fighting, violence, and gangs" are not far behind.

- Forty-six percent of those surveyed give the public schools in their community an A or a B. Fifty-six percent of public school parents give them a grade of A or B, and almost two-thirds (64%) of public school parents give the school their eldest child attends an A or B.

- The public believes that, if given the opportunity, the students most likely to move from public schools to private schools under a voucher system would be the higher-achieving students. Furthermore, the public believes that the academic achievement of these students would improve as a result of the move, while the academic achievement of the students remaining in the public schools would stay about the same.

- The public believes the home school movement is a bad thing for the nation; however, fewer respondents hold this belief today than when this question was asked in 1988 and 1985. Moreover, the public feels strongly that home schools should be required to guarantee a minimum level of educational quality.

- The public does not believe that state takeover of failing schools will improve academic achievement. Indeed, a strong majority (69%) believes that achievement would remain the same or get worse.

- Do the public schools overemphasize achievement testing? Approximately half (48%) believe the current emphasis is appropriate; the remaining half are divided between "too much" (20%) and "not enough" (28%).

- There is no consensus regarding the effect on academic achievement of lowering a school's starting age for children. However, a majority (75%) of the public would have students start school at age 5 or under.

- People divide almost equally in assessing the way a part-time job outside of school affects students' academic performance; one-third say it lowers performance, one-third say it improves performance, and one-third say it has no effect.

- The public supports President Clinton's main education initiatives. The President would assess performance of the nation's public schools according to how well students score on achievement tests at two different grade levels; he proposes a five-year, two-billion-dollar program to place a computer with access to the Internet in every classroom; and he seeks a tax credit for each first-year college student in a family with an annual income of \$100,000 or less.

- Seven out of 10 respondents (71%) reject the idea that the local public schools are infringing on the right of parents to direct their children's education.

- Children today are getting more parental help with their homework than in earlier years, and Americans in general re-

^{*}Although on the borderline of statistical significance, this difference reminds us of the need for very careful wording of questions that assess opinion on sensitive issues.

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an increased willingness to work as unpaid volunteers in their local public schools.

- A majority of public school parents (57%) say they would be more likely to take the school's side than their child's if a teacher or principal reported the child misbehaving or being disruptive in school.

- A majority of the public (60%) indicates that a C is the lowest grade a child of theirs could bring home on a report card without causing them to be upset or concerned.

- Fifty-four percent of Americans believe that the curriculum in their local schools needs to be changed to meet today's needs, while 39% believe it already does so.

- Majorities define curriculum "basics" as including mathematics and English. Pluralities would add history/U.S. government and science to the list.

- A small majority (52%) of the public believes that gifted and talented students should be placed in separate classes. Moreover, 86% believe that grouping students by ability in classrooms improves student achievement overall.

- Almost two-thirds of Americans (63%) believe that extracurricular activities are very important. Another 27% believe they are fairly important. The importance assigned to these activities is substantially greater today than when the question was last asked in 1985.

- A small majority (53%) of the public believes that the emphasis placed on sports such as football and basketball is about right. However, 39% believe there is too much emphasis.

- Ninety-six percent of respondents would require an average grade of C or better for interscholastic athletic eligibility.

- Americans are divided as to whether public schools should be financed through local property taxes, state taxes, or federal taxes. They are also divided as to whether local property taxes or local income taxes should be the main source of school funding.

- A small majority of the public (53%) is at least somewhat satisfied with the steps being taken to deal with the use of drugs in the local schools. Fifty-two percent of respondents believe an educational approach is the best way to deal with the problem; 42% believe severe penalties are best.

- The public gives strong support to "zero tolerance" policies that call for automatic suspension for drug and alcohol possession in school and for carrying weapons of any kind in school.

Improving the Public Schools And Student Achievement

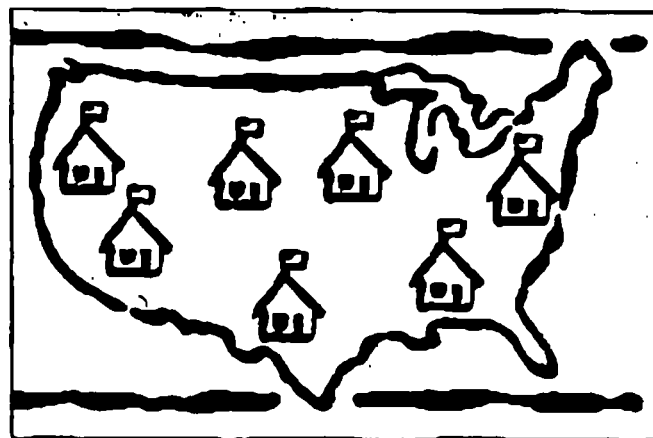
Since some of the proposals being considered for improving student achievement call for alternatives to the public schools, the initial question, in effect, asked whether people would prefer reform or revolution. The answer is clear: 71% of those responding believe that reform should come through the existing system. This response is uniform across demographic categories.

The question:

In order to improve public education in America, some people think the focus should be on reforming the existing public school system. Others believe the focus should be on finding an alternative to the existing public school system. Which approach do you think is preferable — reforming the existing pub-

lic school system or finding an alternative to the existing public school system?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Reforming existing system	71	70	72	67
Finding alternative system	23	23	24	32
Don't know	6	7	4	1



Improving Student Achievement

The question most directly aimed at discovering what the public believes will improve student achievement offered respondents the opportunity to evaluate 10 proposals. A majority of the public assigns either a great deal or quite a lot of importance to eight of them. However, two frequently mentioned reform proposals — lengthening the school year and lengthening the school day — could garner support from only 38% and 25% of respondents respectively.

With relatively few exceptions, there is little difference in the way subgroups in the national population view these measures. However, 75% of blacks (compared to 50% for the national population) feel that placing a computer in every classroom would improve student achievement a great deal. In addition, 59% of blacks and 51% of nonwhites believe that allowing parents and children to attend the public school of their choice would improve student achievement a great deal; the corresponding figure for the nation as a whole is just 39%.

Indeed, blacks favor many of the national reforms proposed in recent years to a much greater extent than does the general population. For example, blacks are more likely to believe that student achievement will be improved a great deal by establishing national standards (58% to 41%), by establishing a national curriculum (58% to 35%), by using standardized tests to measure achievement (52% to 36%), and by providing health-care services in the public schools (65% to 35%).

The question:

Here is a list of measures that have been proposed for improving the academic achievement of public school students. As I read each one, would you tell me whether you believe that measure would improve the achievement of the students in the local public schools a great deal, quite a lot, not very much, or not at all?

	A Great Deal or Quite a Lot %	A Great Deal %	Quite A Lot %	Not Very Much %	Not Much At All %	Don't Know %
Placing a computer in every classroom	81	80	81	13	8	1
Establishing national standards for measuring the academic performance of the public schools	77	41	36	15	6	2
Moving persistent "troublemakers" into alternative schools	75	43	32	14	8	2
Allowing parents and students to attend the public school of their choice	73	39	34	18	7	2
Using standardized national tests to measure the academic achievement of students	67	36	31	23	8	2
Grouping students in classes according to ability level	66	34	32	19	13	2
Establishing a national curriculum	66	35	31	20	10	4
Providing health-care services in schools	61	35	26	25	12	2
Lengthening the school year	38	18	20	33	27	2
Lengthening the school day	25	12	18	38	36	2

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Would improve	25	24	25	46
Would get worse	26	25	27	27
Wouldn't have much effect	43	46	42	25
Don't know	8	6	6	2



School-Starting Age and Part-Time Work

The current poll probed people's beliefs about the effect on student achievement of starting school a year earlier and of holding a part-time job. There is no consensus on either question. Thirty-seven percent of respondents believe that starting school a year earlier would improve student achievement, 24% disagree, and 37% believe it would make no difference. Blacks are more than twice as likely as whites (75% to 31%) to believe that starting school earlier would improve student achievement.

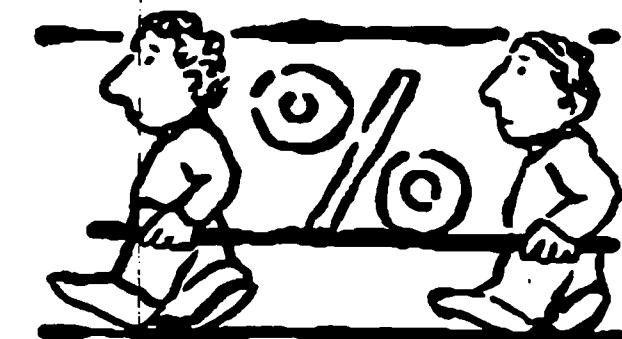
On the question of starting age, three-fourths of Americans would have students start school at age 5 or under. Twenty-six percent would have them start at age 4 or under. Groups in the national population that most strongly support having children start school at age 4 or under include blacks (64%), nonwhites (59%), 18- to 29-year-olds (40%), and urban residents (35%).

Data on public school parents reveal a pattern similar to that for the national population. Sixty-four percent of black parents would prefer a school starting age of 4 or under (compared to 30% for all parents), as would 57% of 18- to 29-year-old parents and 61% of nonwhite parents.

The first question:

In your opinion, what effect would starting a child a year younger than is now generally the case have on the child's academic achievement in elementary and in high school? Do you think starting a year younger would improve the child's achievement, make it worse, or wouldn't it make much difference?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Improve achievement	37	35	40	37
Make it worse	24	22	26	39
Not much difference	37	40	33	23
Don't know	2	3	2	1



State Takeovers

In some states the administration of faltering or failing schools is taken over by the state. People were asked what effect they thought such a move would have on student achievement in the schools in their community. The public is split on this question: 43% believe such a takeover would have no effect, and the rest are evenly divided on whether achievement would improve or get worse.

The question:

Some states have taken over the administration of schools in local school districts where the public schools were considered to be doing a poor job. What effect do you think takeover by the state would have on the academic achievement of students in a public school in your community? Do you think their academic achievement would improve, get worse, or do you think it wouldn't have much effect on their academic achievement?

The second question:

At what age do you think students should start school?

	National Totals		No Children in School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	'97	'98	'97	'98	'97	'98	'97	'98
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
4 years (or under)	28	29	24	20	30	27	27	29
5 years	49	41	50	40	47	44	44	42
6 years	21	18	22	18	19	20	18	23
7 years (or over)	3	2	3	1	3	2	11	0
Don't know	1	10	1	12	1	7	2	6

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The third question:

What effect do you feel having a part-time job outside of school has on the academic achievement of students in the public schools in this community? Generally speaking, do you feel having a part-time job improves their academic achievement, hurts their academic achievement, or do you feel it does not affect their academic achievement one way or the other?

	National Totals	No Children in School	Public School Parents	Nonpublic School Parents
	%	%	%	%
Improves achievement	29	31	28	16
Hurts achievement	32	32	30	44
Does not affect achievement	35	34	37	37
Don't know	4	3	6	3

Improving Schools

People frequently ask, "Why are some schools better than others?" This year poll respondents were asked to rate the importance of three factors sometimes offered to explain such differences. The public considers the amount of support from parents of students in the local public schools to be the most important factor in making a school better. However, the amount of money spent on the local public schools is a close second. The kinds of students attending the local public schools is regarded as either quite important or very important by two-thirds of the public but is not considered as important as the other two factors.

The question:

Here are some factors that are sometimes mentioned to explain why the public schools in some places are better than those in others. As I read off each one, would you tell me whether you think that factor is very important, quite important, not very important, or not at all important in determining the quality of the local public schools?

	Very Important	Quite Important	Not Very Important	Not at All Important	Don't Know
	%	%	%	%	%
Amount of support from parents of students in the local public schools	86	11	3	0	0
Amount of money spent on the local public schools	82	20	6	2	1
Kinds of students attending the local public schools	41	20	20	0	4

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Percent Responding "Very Important"

	National Totals	No Children in School	Public School Parents	Nonpublic School Parents
	%	%	%	%
Amount of support from parents of students in the local public schools	86	84	88	82
Amount of money spent on the local public schools	82	69	87	63
Kinds of students attending the local public schools	41	30	45	62

President Clinton's Proposals

President Clinton has offered three proposals designed to improve schools, enhance student achievement, or provide incentives for students to succeed in school. These proposals are currently before Congress and may or may not become law.

While all the proposals made by President Clinton attract majority support, the strongest support (82%) is for the proposed tax credit for the parents of first-year college students. This proposal has already been debated in Congress, with the Administration indicating a willingness to compromise on the need for a B average as a condition for second-year aid. Support for the proposal is strong among all groups in the poll.

Two-thirds of the public (66%) favor the proposal for placing a computer with access to the Internet in every public school classroom. Groups strongly in favor of the proposal include blacks (85%), nonwhites (83%), 18- to 29-year-olds (78%), and those in the \$50,000 and over income range (78%).

The President's testing proposal has the least support and, based on past experience, is likely to generate the most controversy.

The first question:

President Clinton has proposed a tax credit for families with an annual income of \$100,000 or less for each first-year college student. The \$1,500 tax credit would also apply to the second year if the student maintained a B average and had no conviction for drugs. In general, do you favor or oppose this proposal?

	National Totals	No Children in School	Public School Parents	Nonpublic School Parents
	%	%	%	%
Favor	82	79	87	88
Oppose	17	20	12	12
Don't know	1	1	1	0

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The second question:

President Clinton has proposed a five-year, two-billion-dollar program that would place a computer with access to the Internet in every public school classroom in the nation. In general, do you favor or oppose this proposal?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	66	64	70	73
Oppose	32	34	29	26
Don't know	2	2	1	1

The third question:

President Clinton has proposed that the performance of the nation's public schools be assessed according to how well students score on achievement tests at two different grade levels. In general, do you favor or oppose this proposal?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	57	56	59	53
Oppose	37	37	37	42
Don't know	6	7	4	5

Achievement Testing

Testing and its role in school improvement is a frequent subject of debate. Respondents this year were asked their opinion of the level of emphasis on testing in their local public schools. Forty-eight percent responded that the emphasis is about right. The rest were divided between too much and too little. These responses were consistent among all demographic groups.

The question:

In your opinion, is there too much emphasis on achievement testing in the public schools in this community, not enough emphasis on testing, or about the right amount?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Too much emphasis	20	20	19	24
Not enough emphasis	28	28	28	42
About the right amount	48	46	54	32
Don't know	4	6	1	2

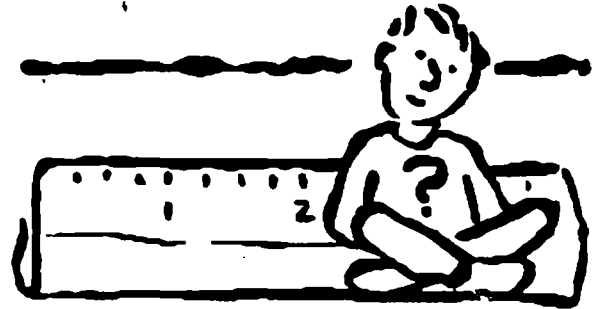
Biggest Problems Facing Local Schools

Efforts at school improvement must, of course, address the problems the public schools face. In all recent polls the public

has been asked to indicate the biggest problem facing the local public schools. This year a follow-up question was asked to determine whether the public feels the problems faced by urban schools are more serious than those faced by their nonurban counterparts. Sixty-nine percent said they believe the problems that urban schools face are either much more serious or somewhat more serious.

This year "lack of discipline" and "lack of financial support" were mentioned by 15% of the respondents respectively as the most serious problems facing local public schools. Use of drugs, designated the number-one problem in last year's poll, was mentioned by 14% of respondents this year, and fighting/violence/gangs was mentioned by 12%. These four problems were the only ones to reach double figures.

One caution needs to be offered relative to the findings reported. The question requires respondents to identify a problem, and they do not have a list from which to choose. That is undoubtedly why so many different problems are mentioned and why the percentage of mentions is so small. (Eleven other problems were mentioned by 2% of respondents.)



The first question:

What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?

	National Totals '97 '96 % %		No Children In School '97 '96 % %		Public School Parents '97 '96 % %		Nonpublic School Parents '97 '96 % %	
Lack of discipline/ more control	15	15	15	16	12	12	22	18
Lack of financial support/funding/ money	15	13	15	14	14	13	4	7
Use of drugs/dope	14	16	14	17	14	14	9	12
Fighting/violence/ gangs	12	14	12	14	12	15	16	17
Overcrowded schools	8	8	6	6	10	11	17	15
Concern about standards/quality of education	8	4	7	4	6	4	10	9
Pupils' lack of in- terest/poor atti- tudes/misconduct	6	5	6	6	6	6	3	4
Difficulty getting good teachers/ quality teachers	3	3	3	3	4	3	-	3
No problems	2	3	2	2	3	7	-	3
Miscellaneous	9	9	9	8	8	10	12	11
Don't know	10	12	13	15	6	9	4	10

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The second question:

Just your impression, are the problems faced by the public schools in urban areas much more serious, somewhat more serious, somewhat less serious, or much less serious than those faced by the public schools in nonurban areas?

	National Totals %	No Children in School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Much more serious	40	40	40	43
Somewhat more serious	29	29	30	32
Somewhat less serious	16	16	17	16
Much less serious	7	6	7	5
Don't know	8	9	6	4

The question:

Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

	National Totals '87 '88 % %	No Children in School '87 '88 % %	Public School Parents '87 '88 % %	Nonpublic School Parents '87 '88 % %
A & B	46 43	42 38	65 57	28 24
A	10 8	8 8	14 16	8 2
B	36 35	34 32	41 42	17 22
C	32 34	35 36	30 29	35 43
D	11 11	11 12	10 9	21 13
FAIL	6 6	7 8	8 4	13 13
Don't know	5 6	7 8	1 1	5 7

Grading the Schools

Since 1974 respondents to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup education polls have been asked to grade the public schools in their communities on a scale of A to F. In 1981, people were first asked to rate the "nation's public schools" on the same scale. Then, beginning in 1985, parents were asked to grade the public school their oldest child was attending.

One significant generalization derived from responses to these questions over the years is the fact that the closer respondents are to the public schools, the higher the grades they give them. Thus people give the schools in their own community much higher grades than they give the nation's schools. Parents give the schools in the community much higher grades than do those who do not have children in the public schools. By the same token, public school parents, when asked to grade the school their oldest child attends, give that school higher grades than they give to schools in the community as a whole. Current poll findings reinforce the basic generalization: familiarity with the public schools breeds respect for them.

The differences are impressive. Over the last nine years the differences between the percentage of A's and B's given to the nation's public schools and to the local schools have averaged about 23 points. Even more startling is the difference between the percentage of A's and B's parents give to the school their oldest child attends and the percentage of A's and B's given to the nation's schools. Here the difference over the last nine years has averaged 47 percentage points.

Taken together, these items suggest a second generalization: the low grades given the nation's public schools are primarily media-induced. Whereas people learn firsthand about their children's schools, they learn about the nation's schools primarily from the media.

Local Public Schools

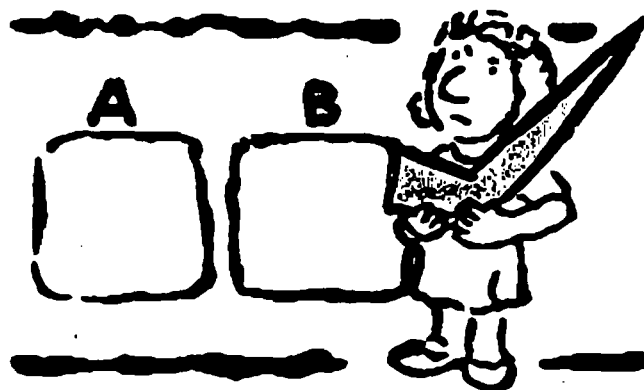
As has been the case for two decades, over four Americans in 10 — 46% this year — award a grade of A or B to the public schools in their own communities. And almost eight in 10 — 78% this year — award them at least a grade of C. An even higher percentage of public school parents (56%) assign an A or a B to the schools in their community.

Public Schools Nationally

As has been the case since this question was first asked in 1981, about half as many Americans give a grade of A or B to the nation's public schools as give these grades to the local public schools. This year the figures are 22% and 46% respectively. The groups assigning unusually high percentages of A's and B's to the nation's public schools include blacks (44%) and nonwhites (35%).

The question:

How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?



	National Totals '87 '88 % %	No Children in School '87 '88 % %	Public School Parents '87 '88 % %	Nonpublic School Parents '87 '88 % %
A & B	22 21	23 20	23 28	24 8
A	2 1	3 1	2 2	2 1
B	20 20	20 19	21 24	22 7
C	48 46	48 47	46 43	38 57
D	15 18	15 19	16 14	15 21
FAIL	6 5	6 6	4 7	8 3
Don't know	9 10	7 8	11 10	17 11

Public School Oldest Child Attends

The parents of public school children are likely to be among the best-informed citizens about the public schools. Since 1985, this poll has asked parents to grade the school their oldest child attends. This year almost two-thirds (64%) of public school parents assign the school their oldest child attends an A or a B. Another 23% assign this school a C, bringing to 87% the proportion of parents giving the school their oldest child attends at least a passing grade of C. The parents who are most likely to give the school their oldest child attends an A or a B include college graduates (75%), parents who live in the East (74%), and those parents whose children are at the top of their class or above-average academically (74%).

The question:

Using the A, B, C, D, FAIL scale again, what grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?

	Public School Parents	
	'87 %	'86 %
A & B	64	66
A	26	23
B	38	43
C	23	22
D	7	6
FAIL	4	6
Don't know	2	1

Public Versus Nonpublic Schools

The current poll featured the usual questions regarding attendance at public, private, or church-related schools with the government paying all or part of the costs. The first question dealt with choosing a private school to attend at public expense. In the past, when this question has been asked, some critics have suggested that the results would be different if the words "government expense" were used in place of "public expense." With this in mind, a split-sample design was used in this year's poll. That is, the sample was divided, and the question was asked both ways. The customary question dealing with the use of vouchers was also asked, along with a question designed to determine whether the public believes any changes in admission policies should be required for nonpublic schools that accept public funds.

Providing for parents and students to attend nonpublic schools at public expense has been strongly opposed in past years. In 1993, for example, the percentage opposing allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense was 74%, with only 24% in favor. In 1994 allowing parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school of their choice with the government paying "all or part of the tuition" was opposed 54% to 45%. However, with each succeeding year, the opposition has lessened. This year the public can be described as almost equally divided on this issue.

Choosing Private Schools at Public Expense

The current poll is the fourth (starting in 1993) to ask the public its attitude toward allowing parents to choose a private

school to attend at public expense. The opposition has been consistent, though it dropped from 74% in 1993 to 65% in 1995 to 61% in 1996. This year the poll shows that 52% oppose such choice while 44% approve it.

The group most likely to oppose this form of choice is the 18- to 29-year-olds (62% opposed, 38% in favor). Groups most likely to support this form of choice include nonwhites (51% in favor, 46% opposed) and urban residents (53% in favor, 45% opposed).

A second form of the question was also asked this year with the words "government expense" substituted for "public expense." When asked in this way, the public is equally divided, with 48% in favor and 48% opposed. Those most likely to support this choice include blacks (72%), nonwhites (68%), 18- to 29-year-olds (70%), professional and business persons (53%), and urban residents (59%).

The first question:

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?

	National Totals				No Children In School				Public School Parents				Nonpublic School Parents			
	'87	'88	'95	'93	'87	'88	'95	'93	'87	'88	'95	'93	'87	'88	'95	'93
Favor	44	36	33	24	44	33	30	21	45	39	36	27	52	60	44	43
Oppose	52	61	65	74	54	63	68	76	50	59	59	72	44	38	51	55
Don't know	4	3	2	2	2	4	2	3	5	2	3	1	4	2	5	2

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The second question:

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at government expense?

	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	Gov't Exp. %	Public Exp. %	Gov't Exp. %	Public Exp. %	Gov't Exp. %	Public Exp. %	Gov't Exp. %	Public Exp. %
Favor	48	44	51	44	43	46	50	52
Oppose	48	62	45	54	54	50	44	44
Don't know	4	4	4	2	3	3	6	4

The question most directly associated with vouchers was asked in 1994 and repeated in 1996. When it was first asked in 1994, 45% favored the idea. Support was virtually the same (43%) in 1996; however, this year's poll shows the public equally divided, with 49% in favor and 48% opposed. Both public school parents (55%) and nonpublic school parents (68%) favor allowing parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose, with the government paying part or all of the cost.

This issue divides men and women. Women favor permitting the choice by 52% to 45%; men oppose it by 51% to 47%. Other groups in support include blacks (62% to 34%), nonwhites (61% to 36%), 18- to 29-year-olds (55% to 43%), 30- to

49-year-olds (53% to 45%), those who live in the South (56% to 42%), those in the \$20,000 to \$30,000 income group (55% to 43%), those in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 income group (53% to 42%), and manual laborers (53% to 44%). Groups in opposition include those 50 years of age and older (56% to 40%), those living in the West (54% to 45%), those in the \$50,000 and over income group (57% to 41%), and suburban residents (51% to 45%).

The question:

A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Favor	49	43	46	48	38	42	55	49	48	68	70	69
Oppose	48	54	54	51	59	57	43	49	51	31	28	29
Don't know	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	2	1	1	2	2

Obligations of Private Schools Accepting Public Funds

One of the issues that comes up in any debate over public funds going to nonpublic schools is the extent to which those schools should be bound by the same obligations that fall on public schools. This year's poll asked whether such schools should be required to accept students from a wider range of backgrounds and levels of academic ability than is now generally the case. The public is strongly in agreement that they should. Seventy-eight percent of the public holds this view. This response is consistent across all demographic groups.

The question:

Do you think nonpublic schools that receive public funding should or should not be required to accept students from a wider range of backgrounds and academic ability than is now generally the case?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Should be required to accept a wider range	78			78			80			76		
Should not	18			17			17			22		
Don't know	4			5			3			2		

Effects of a Shift to Nonpublic Schools

Another concern raised by those opposing the use of public funds for nonpublic schools is that the students and parents with the financial means to do so might opt for private schools, leaving the public schools to serve the poor and underprivileged. Three of the questions in this year's poll addressed this concern. The responses offer some indication that the concern is warranted.

Almost two-thirds of those surveyed (65%) believe that it would be the higher-achieving students who would take the opportunity to attend private schools. The same percentage believes the result for these students would be improved academic achievement. As for the students remaining in the public schools, 70% of the public believes that their achievement would remain about the same.

Responses to these three questions vary little across the subgroups in the poll.

The first question:

Suppose a large number of students in your local public schools moved to private schools. Just your opinion, who would be most likely to move to the private schools — the higher-achieving students, the lower-achieving students, or the average-achieving students?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Higher-achieving students	65			67			62			56		
Lower-achieving students	8			8			8			10		
Average-achieving students	20			19			21			28		
No difference	3			3			5			2		
Don't know	4			3			4			4		

The second question:

Again, just your opinion, how would the academic achievement of those public school students who had moved to the private schools be affected? Do you think their academic achievement would improve, get worse, or remain about the same after moving to private schools?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Improve	66			68			68			80		
Get worse	4			4			4			0		
Remain about the same	28			25			35			19		
Don't know	3			3			3			1		

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The third question:

How about the students who remained in the local public schools? Do you think their academic achievement would improve, get worse, or remain about the same?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94	'97	'96	'94
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Improved	17			16			19			10		
Get worse	11			11			11			10		
Remain about the same	70			70			68			80		
Don't know	2			3			2			0		

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Home Schooling

The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll first addressed the home-school movement in 1985, asking respondents whether the fledgling move toward home schooling was a good thing or a bad thing for the nation. At that time, 73% said they thought it was a bad thing, while 16% said they thought it was a good thing. When the question was repeated in 1988, the proportion who said it was a bad thing had fallen to 59%, and the proportion who said it was a good thing had risen to 28%. Given a continuing increase in the number of students being schooled at home, poll planners deemed it important to revisit the issue this year. While the public still feels that the home-school movement is a bad thing, the margin has now shrunk to just 21 percentage points.

It is interesting to note that nonpublic school parents, who thought the home-school movement was a bad thing in 1985 (by a margin of 71% to 22%), now favor it by 52% to 41%. This is the only group sampled that believes the movement to home schooling is a good thing.

This year's poll also asked respondents whether home schools should or should not be required to guarantee a minimum level of educational quality. Almost nine in 10 respondents (88%) felt that they should. This response is consistent among all groups.

The first question:

Recently, there has been a movement toward home schools — that is, situations in which parents keep their children at home to teach the children themselves. Do you think this movement is a good thing or a bad thing for the nation?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'97	'88	'85	'97	'88	'85	'97	'88	'85	'97	'88	'85
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Good thing	36	28	16	34	27	16	38	29	14	62	29	22
Bad thing	57	60	73	59	63	72	58	61	75	41	56	71
Don't know	7	13	11	7	14	12	6	10	11	7	15	7

The second question:

Do you think that home schools should or should not be required to guarantee a minimum level of educational quality?

	National Totals	No Children In School	Public School Parents	Nonpublic School Parents
	%	%	%	%
Should be required	88	88	91	80
Should not be required	10	10	8	19
Don't know	2	2	1	1

Parents and Their Relationship To the Public Schools

This poll went further than most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls in exploring the relationship between the public schools and the parents who send students to those schools.

That seems to have been an appropriate decision, given the fact that 86% of the public cites the amount of support from parents of students in the local public schools as the most important factor in determining why schools in some places are better than others.

Infringing on Rights of Parents

One of the charges heard from some critics is that the public schools are infringing on the right of parents to direct their children's education. This seems to be part of a more general feeling among some Americans that the government has too much control over their lives. However, more than seven in 10 respondents (71%) said they do not believe that the public schools are infringing on the rights of parents. Only nonpublic school parents differ.

The question:

People in some communities say the local public schools are infringing on the rights of parents to direct their children's education. In your opinion, are the public schools in your community infringing on the rights of local parents to direct their children's education?

	National Totals	No Children In School	Public School Parents	Nonpublic School Parents
	%	%	%	%
Yes, infringing	24	20	28	60
No, not infringing	71	73	70	44
Don't know	5	7	2	6

Help with Homework

The 1986 poll asked parents how much help they gave their oldest child with his or her homework. At that time, 34% said that they provided no help — a figure that fell to 13% when the question was repeated in this year's poll. It also appears that parents who help their children are spending more hours doing so than they did in 1986. Forty-seven percent of this year's respondents say that they help with homework four or more hours a week, compared to 14% who said they spent that much time in the earlier poll. Thirty-nine percent of all public school parents report that they help their children five or more hours per week.

The question:

During the school year, on average, about how many hours a week do you help your oldest child with his or her homework?

	'97	'86
	%	%
None	13	34
Up to 1 hour	6	13
1 - 1:59 hours	12	17
2 - 2:59 hours	12	10
3 - 3:59 hours	9	7
4 - 4:59 hours	8	5
5 - 5:59 hours	14	4
6 hours or more	25	6
Undesignated	2	5

Willingness to Volunteer

Much has been made recently of the importance of persons being willing to serve as unpaid volunteers in addressing problems the nation faces. Television recently featured pictures of past U.S. Presidents working at sprucing up inner-city areas. Gen. Colin Powell heads up a Presidential task force to promote volunteerism. Given this backdrop, poll planners thought it important to repeat the 1992 question in which participants were asked about their willingness to serve as unpaid volunteers in the public schools. At that time 59% said that they would be willing to do so. In this year's poll that figure rose to 69%.



The question:

If you were asked, would you be willing to work as an unpaid volunteer in any of the public schools in this community or not?

	Willing to Work as Unpaid Volunteer	
	'97 %	'92 %
NATIONAL TOTALS	69	59
Sex		
Men	64	54
Women	73	64
Race		
White	68	61
Nonwhite	74	49
Age		
18-29 years	72	65
30-49 years	76	66
50-64 years	66	64
65 and over	57	36
Education		
College graduates	73	70
High school graduates	63	57
High school incomplete	63	46
Children in School		
No children in school	65	51
Public school parents	79	72
Nonpublic school parents	50	46

Parental Support for Teachers and Principals

One of the complaints heard from teachers and principals is that they no longer have the parental support they once enjoyed. Two questions were asked in this poll to explore the support parents give to school personnel.

The first question:

Suppose a teacher or principal reported that your oldest child was misbehaving and being disruptive in school. Whose side do you think you would be more likely to take — the school's or your child's?

	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
The school's side	57	73
Your child's side	25	16
Don't know	18	11

The second question:

What if a teacher or principal reported that your oldest child was not working hard enough at school-work? Whose side do you think you would be more likely to take — the school's or your child's?

	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
The school's side	70	70
Your child's side	22	25
Don't know	8	5

Parental Expectations Regarding Achievement

By a 2-1 margin (60% to 28%) respondents in the 1996 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll said that, if forced to choose, they would prefer their sons or daughters to make C grades and be active in extracurricular activities rather than make A grades and not be active. This response led poll planners to ask on this year's poll about the lowest grade a student could bring home without causing the parent to be upset or concerned. A majority (60%) said their child could bring home a report card with a C without raising concern. This response is consistent among all groups in the poll.

The question:

Regardless of whether you have children in public school, what would be the lowest grade a child of yours could bring home on a report card without upsetting or concerning you?

	National Totals %	No Children in School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A	1	1	0	2
B	21	20	21	22
C	60	58	63	54
D	13	15	11	9
FAIL	3	8	4	1
Don't know	2	3	1	2

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Parental Expectations on Communication

Given today's concern for privacy, one of the important dilemmas for school personnel is how much information regarding student problems should be reported to parents. This is an area, however, where parental expectations are quite

clear. Ninety-eight percent of all respondents believe that public schools should be required to notify the parents if their child is found to have a substance abuse problem, and 90% feel that parents should be notified if their child is found to have a sexually transmitted disease. These responses are consistent across all groups surveyed.

The first question:

Do you think that the public schools in your community should or should not be required to notify the parents of a student who is found by school authorities to have a substance abuse problem?

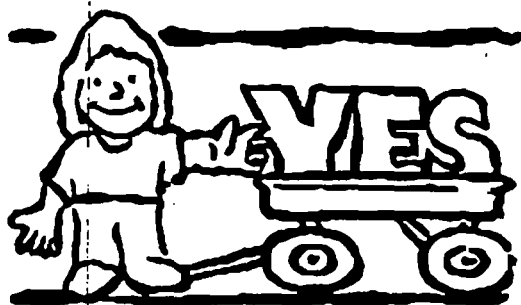
	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Should be required	98	98	98	100
Should not be required	1	1	2	0
Don't know	1	1	0	0

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The second question:

How about a sexually transmitted disease? Do you think the public schools in your community should or should not be required to notify the parents of a student who is found by school authorities to have a sexually transmitted disease?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Should be required	90	88	92	89
Should not be required	9	10	7	10
Don't know	1	1	1	1



The Curriculum

One question that quickly surfaces in any discussion of school reform is the extent to which the curriculum needs to be changed to meet today's needs. This question was explored in the 1982 poll. At that time a plurality (42%) expressed the view that the curriculum did meet the needs of the day. Fifty percent of public school parents agreed. In this year's poll, however, 54% of respondents say they think the curriculum needs to be changed. Public school parents now call for change by a 53% to 46% margin. Groups most likely to feel the need for change include nonwhites (65%), 18- to 29-year-olds (64%), and clerical and sales personnel (65%).

The question:

Do you think the curriculum in the public schools in your community needs to be changed to meet today's needs, or do you think it already meets today's needs?

	National Totals '87 '82 % %	No Children In School '87 '82 % %	Public School Parents '87 '82 % %	Nonpublic School Parents '87 '82 % %
Needs to be changed	54 38	54 39	53 42	65 46
Already meets needs	39 42	36 38	45 60	30 44
Don't know	7 22	10 29	1 8	5 10

Curriculum 'Basics'

In every public school forum conducted by Phi Delta Kappa during the 1986-87 academic year, there was agreement that the schools should teach the "basics." The ensuing discussions, however, suggested that there might be a difference of opinion as to what the "basics" included. This year's poll asked respondents to define the term. The responses indicate that mathematics (named by 80%) and English (named by 84%) constitute the heart of the "basics." This seems close to the traditional three R's. Large percentages of respondents would also add science (44%) and history/U.S. government (38%).

A word of caution is required here. The fact that the public wants the basics taught and defines them narrowly should not be interpreted to mean that people do not value other subjects and other parts of the curriculum. In fact, the public assigns great importance even to extracurricular activities (as a later question shows). What seems clear is that, while the public sees teaching the so-called basics as a central mission, it has many other expectations of its public schools as well.

The question:

People have different ideas as to what constitutes the so-called basic subjects in school. Would you name the school subjects that you consider to be the basics?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Mathematics	80	80	81	89
English	84	84	84	91
Science	44	41	49	63
History/U.S. government	38	36	40	50
Geography	6	9	8	4
Computer training	8	8	8	12
Physical education	7	7	9	11
Art	5	6	5	8
Social studies	5	4	7	4
Foreign language	5	4	6	13
Music	3	3	3	1
Health education	2	2	4	4
Vocational training	1	2	1	0
Career education	1	1	1	0
Business	1	1	1	2
Other	8	6	7	7
Don't know	1	2	1	2

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Placement of the Gifted and Talented

Whether students who are judged to be gifted and talented should be placed in separate classes is an issue that has implications beyond what is good for gifted and talented students. There are those who argue that removing the gifted and talented from the regular classroom eliminates important role models and results in lower performance on the part of those remaining in the regular classroom. With this in mind, poll planners included a question on the topic in this year's poll. A small majority (52%) of the public supports the placement of gifted and talented students in separate classes. This response takes added significance from the fact that 66% of poll respondents also said they believe that grouping students according to ability will improve student achievement a great deal or quite a lot (see pages 43-44).

The question:

How do you feel about the placement of gifted and talented students in the local public schools? In your opinion, should gifted and talented students be placed in the same classes as other students, or should they be placed in separate classes?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Placed in the same classes	44	44	44	44
Placed in separate classes	52	51	52	51
Don't know	4	5	4	5

Importance of Extracurricular Activities

The importance of extracurricular activities has been explored in previous polls. In 1978, 45% of the public judged extracurricular activities to be very important. That figure fell to 31% in 1984, rose to 39% in 1985, and then jumped to 63% in this year's poll. Percentages vary only a little among the groups sampled.

The question:

I'd like your opinion about extracurricular activities such as the school band, dramatics, sports, and the school newspaper. How important are these to a young person's education — very important, fairly important, not too important, or not at all important?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Very important	63	64	62	58
Fairly important	27	25	29	37
Not too important	8	8	7	5
Not at all important	2	2	2	-
Don't know	-	-	-	-

*Less than one-half of 1%.

National Totals	1987 %	1985 %	1984 %	1978 %
Very important	63	39	31	45
Fairly important	27	41	46	40
Not too important	8	14	18	9
Not at all important	2	3	4	4
Don't know	-	3	1	2

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The Role of Interscholastic Sports

Previous polls have not dealt extensively with the role of interscholastic sports in the school program. However, this year's poll included three questions. The first asked about the emphasis placed on such sports as football and basketball. A small majority (53%) of the public believes that the current emphasis is about right. However, 39% feel there is too much emphasis. Public school parents (58%) are a little more inclined than the average to think the present emphasis is appropriate.

In a follow-up question, there was virtual unanimity (96%) on the question of requiring minimum grades and school attendance for participation in sports. When asked how high that minimum should be, 96% would require a grade-point average of C or higher. Men and women tend to take a slightly different view, with only 35% of men suggesting a minimum of an A or a B while 51% of women would require these higher grades.

The first question:

What is your opinion about the way sports, such as football and basketball, are handled in the public schools in your community? Do you feel that there is too much emphasis on sports, not enough emphasis on sports, or about the right amount of emphasis in the local schools?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Too much emphasis	39	43	33	36
Not enough emphasis	5	4	7	6
About right amount	53	50	58	54
Don't know	3	3	2	2

The second question:

Do you feel that high school students who participate in sports should or should not be required to maintain a minimum grade-point average and school attendance record in order to participate in interscholastic sports?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Should be required	96	96	96	99
Should not be required	3	3	4	1
Don't know	1	1	-	-

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The third question:

What average grade do you think should be required for participation in interscholastic sports?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A	3	3	2	4
B	41	42	41	30
C	52	51	55	59
D	2	2	1	5
FAIL	-	-	-	-
Don't know	2	2	1	2

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Dealing with Drugs and Weapons in School

The public continues to believe that drugs and weapons in school are major problems for the public schools. Although school personnel in most situations do not believe these problems are as severe as the public does, schoolpeople must nonetheless deal with the public's concern. The first of three drug-related questions in this poll sought to find out how satisfied people are with steps being taken to deal with the drug problem in their local schools. Perhaps surprisingly, 63% indicate they are either very or somewhat satisfied. The level of satisfaction rises to 65% for public school parents and to 60% for rural residents. However, it falls to 45% for urban residents.

The second question dealt with "zero tolerance" policies calling for automatic suspension of students carrying drugs or alcohol into school. Support for such policies is strong. Eighty-six percent say they support such policies, and this level of support is consistent among all groups.

Respondents were also asked whether they feel an educational approach or severe penalties offer the best means of



dealing with the drug problem. A small majority (52%) prefers an educational approach, while 42% favor severe penalties. These percentages vary little across groups.

Many schools also have "zero tolerance" policies that call for automatic suspension of students who bring weapons to school. Such policies garnered media attention when authorities suspended a student for bring a nail file to school. Regardless of difficulties in application, support for such policies is very strong. Ninety-three percent of poll respondents express support, and that support is consistent among all groups.

The first question:

How satisfied are you yourself with the steps being taken to deal with the use of drugs in the public schools in your community — very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Very satisfied	17	13	25	11
Somewhat satisfied	36	35	40	35
Not very satisfied	22	24	17	32
Not at all satisfied	20	21	17	17
Don't know	5	7	1	6

The second question:

Some public schools have a so-called zero-tolerance drug and alcohol policy, which means that possession of any illegal drugs or alcohol by students will result in automatic suspension. Would you favor or oppose such a policy in the public schools in your community?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	86	84	89	83
Oppose	13	16	10	7
Don't know	1	1	1	0

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The third question:

In your opinion, which is more effective for dealing with a drug problem in the public schools in your community — an educational approach, pointing out the consequences of drug use, or severe penalties for those violating the school drug policy?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Educational approach	52	52	53	44
Severe penalties	42	41	42	49
Don't know	6	7	4	7

The fourth question:

Some public schools have a so-called zero tolerance weapons policy, which means that students found carrying weapons of any kind in school will be automatically suspended. Would you favor or oppose such a policy in the public schools in your community?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	93	92	95	91
Oppose	6	6	4	9
Don't know	2	2	1	0

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Financing the Public Schools

From time to time, the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls have surveyed public attitudes regarding school finance. The first question on that topic this year repeated one asked in 1986 concerning the source of taxes used to finance the public schools. In findings remarkably similar to those in the 1986 poll, 27% expressed a preference for local property taxes, 34% for state taxes, and 30% for taxes from the federal government. There is certainly no consensus. The two groups that do take a majority position in favor of federal funding are blacks (66%)

and nonwhite (64%).

In a second question respondents were reminded that the local property tax is the main source for financing the public schools and were asked whether they would prefer to change to a local income tax system as the principal source of public school funds in their community. Once again, there is no consensus: 43% favor changing to a local income tax system, while 48% oppose it. This lack of consensus characterizes all groups surveyed.

The first question:

There is always a lot of discussion about the best way to finance the public schools. Which do you think is the best way to finance the public schools — by means of local property taxes, by state taxes, or by taxes from the federal government in Washington?

	National Totals		No Children in School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	'97	'98	'97	'98	'97	'98	'97	'98
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Local property taxes	27	24	30	22	22	28	32	22
State taxes	34	33	35	34	32	32	28	38
Federal taxes	30	34	28	23	37	28	36	22
Don't know	9	10	9	21	9	12	4	20

The second question:

At the present time, local property taxes are the main source for financing the public schools in most states. Thinking about your own community, would you favor or oppose changing the local property tax system to a local income tax system as the principal way to finance the local public schools?

	National Totals		No Children in School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Favor	43		42		47		39	
Oppose	48		49		44		51	
Don't know	9		9		9		10	

Research Procedure

The Sample. The sample used in this survey embraced a total of 1,517 adults (18 years of age and older), including 1,017 parents of public school children. The sample of public school parents was increased to 1,017 interviews this year from the 500 interviews customarily used. The increased sample size permits analysis and reporting of findings for subgroups within the national public school parent population. A description of the sample and methodology can be found at the end of this report.

Time of Interviewing. The fieldwork for this study was conducted during the period of 3 June to 22 June 1997.

The Report. In the tables used in this report, "Nonpublic School Parents" includes parents of students who attend parochial schools and parents of students who attend private or independent schools.

Due allowance must be made for statistical variation, especially in the case of findings for groups consisting of relatively few respondents, e.g., nonpublic school parents.

The findings of this report apply only to the U.S. as a whole and not to individual communities. Local surveys, using the same questions, can be conducted to determine how local areas compare with the national norm.

Composition of the Sample

Adults	%
No children in school	64
Public school parents	33*
Nonpublic school parents	7

*Total exceeds 100% because some parents have children attending more than one kind of school.

	National	Public School Parents
Gender	%	%
Men	48	43
Women	54	57
Race	%	%
White	85	80
Nonwhite	13	16
Black	9	11
Undesignated	2	2
Age	%	%
18-29 years	22	12
30-49 years	44	75
50 and over	33	12
Undesignated	1	1
Education	%	%
Total college	55	47
College graduate	23	18
College incomplete	32	31
Total high school	44	53
High school graduate	31	35
High school incomplete	13	20
Undesignated	.	.
Income	%	%
\$50,000 and over	30	32
\$40,000 and over	42	48
\$30,000-\$39,999	14	14
\$20,000-\$29,999	16	13
Under \$20,000	20	20
Undesignated	8	5
Region	%	%
East	24	22
Midwest	25	25
South	30	38
West	21	20
Community Size	%	%
Urban	28	26
Suburban	49	49
Rural	24	25
Undesignated	.	.

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Design of the Sample

For the 1997 survey the Gallup Organization used its standard national telephone sample, i.e., an unclustered, directory-assisted, random-digit telephone sample, based on a proportionate stratified sampling design.

The random-digit aspect of the sample was used to avoid "listing" bias. Numerous studies have shown that households with unlisted telephone numbers are different in important ways from listed households. "Unlistedness" is due to household mobility or to customer requests to prevent publication of the telephone number.

To avoid this source of bias, a random-digit procedure designed to provide representation of both listed and unlisted (including not-yet-listed) numbers was used.

Telephone numbers for the continental United States were stratified into four regions of the country and, within each region, further stratified into three size-of-community strata.

Only working banks of telephone numbers were selected. Eliminating non-working banks from the sample increased the likelihood that any sample tele-

phone number would be associated with a residence.

The sample of telephone numbers produced by the described method is representative of all telephone households within the continental United States.

Within each contacted household, an interview was sought with the youngest man 18 years of age or older who was at home. If no man was home, an interview was sought with the oldest woman at home. This method of respondent selection within households produced an age distribution by sex that closely approximates the age distribution by sex of the total population.

Up to three calls were made to each selected telephone number to complete an interview. The time of day and the day of the week for callbacks were varied so as to maximize the chances of finding a respondent at home. All interviews were conducted on weekends or weekday evenings in order to contact potential respondents among the working population.

The final sample was weighted so that the distribution of the sample matched current estimates derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) for the adult population living in telephone households in the continental U.S.

As has been the case in recent years in the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll series, parents of public school children were oversampled in the 1997 poll. This procedure produced a large enough sample to ensure that findings reported for "public school parents" are statistically significant (see Research Procedure).

Conducting Your Own Poll

The Phi Delta Kappa Center for Professional Development and Services makes available PACE (Polling Attitudes of the Community on Education) materials to enable non-specialists to conduct scientific polls of attitude and opinion on education. The PACE manual provides detailed information on constructing questionnaires, sampling, interviewing, and analyzing data. It also includes updated census figures and how material on conducting a telephone survey. The price is \$35. For information about using PACE materials, write or phone Phillip Harris at Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 780, Bloomington, IN 47402-0780. Ph: 800/766-1156.

Sampling Tolerances

In interpreting survey results, it should be borne in mind that all sample surveys are subject to sampling error, i.e., the extent to which the results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole population surveyed had been interviewed. The size of such sampling error depends largely on the number of interviews.

The following tables may be used in estimating the sampling error of any percentage in this report. The computed allowances have taken into account the effect of the sample design upon sampling error. They may be interpreted as indicating the range (plus or minus the figure shown) within which the results of repeated samplings in the same time period could be expected to vary 95% of the time, assuming the same sampling procedure, the same interviewers, and the same questionnaire.

The first table shows how much allowance should be made for the sampling error of a percentage:

Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of a Percentage

	In Percentage Points (at 95 in 100 confidence level)						
	Sample Size						
	1,500	1,000	750	500	400	200	100
Percentages near 10	2	2	3	3	4	5	8
Percentages near 20	3	2	4	4	5	7	10
Percentages near 30	3	4	4	5	6	8	12
Percentages near 40	3	4	5	5	6	9	12
Percentages near 50	3	4	5	5	6	8	13
Percentages near 60	3	4	5	5	6	9	12
Percentages near 70	3	4	4	5	6	8	12
Percentages near 80	3	3	4	4	5	7	10
Percentages near 90	2	2	3	3	4	5	8

*The chances are 95 in 100 that the sampling error is not larger than the figures shown.

The table would be used in the following manner: Let us say that a reported percentage is 33 for a group that includes 1,000 respondents. We go to the row for "percentages near 30" in the table and across to the column headed "1,000."

The number at this point is 4, which means that the 33% obtained in the sample is subject to a sampling error of plus or minus four points. In other words, it is very probable (95 chances out of 100) that the true figure would be somewhere between 29% and 37%, with the most likely figure the 33% obtained.

In comparing survey results in two samples, such as, for example, men and women, the question arises as to how large a difference between them must be before one can be reasonably sure that it reflects a real difference. In the tables below, the number of points that must be allowed for in such comparisons is indicated. Two tables are provided. One is for percentages near 20 or 80; the other, for percentages near 50. For percentages in between, the error to be allowed for lies between those shown in the two tables.

Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference

TABLE A	In Percentage Points (at 95 in 100 confidence level)					
	Percentages near 20 or percentages near 80					
Size of Sample	1,500	1,000	750	500	400	200
1,500	4					
1,000	4	5				
750	5	5	5			
500	5	5	6	6		
400	6	6	6	7	7	
200	8	8	8	8	8	10

TABLE B	Percentages near 50					
	1,500	1,000	750	500	400	200
Size of Sample	1,500	1,000	750	500	400	200
1,500	5					
1,000	5	6				
750	6	6	7			
500	6	7	7	7		
400	7	8	8	8	8	
200	10	10	10	10	11	13

*The chances are 95 in 100 that the sampling error is not larger than the figures shown.

Here is an example of how the tables would be used: Let us say that 50% of men respond a certain way and 40% of women respond that way also, for a difference of 10 percentage points between them. Can we say with any assurance that the 10-point difference reflects a real difference between men and women on the question? Let us consider a sample that contains approximately 750 men and 750 women.

Since the percentages are near 50, we consult Table B, and, since the two samples are about 750 persons each, we look for the number in the column headed "750," which is also in the row designated "750." We find the number 7 here. This means that the allowance for error should be seven points and that, in concluding that the percentage among men is somewhere between three and 17 points higher than the percentage among women, we should be wrong only about 5% of the time. In other words, we can conclude with considerable confidence that a difference exists in the direction observed and that it amounts to at least three percentage points.

If, in another case, men's responses amount to 22%, say, and women's to 24%, we consult Table A, because these percentages are near 20. We look in the column headed "750" and see that the number is 5. Obviously, then, the two-point difference is inconclusive.

How to Order the Poll

The minimum order for reprints of the published version of the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup education poll is 25 copies for \$10. Additional copies are 25 cents each. This price includes postage for delivery (at the library rate). Where possible, enclose a check or money order. Address your order to Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 780, Bloomington, IN 47402. Ph: 800/766-1156.

If faster delivery is desired, do not include a postage with your order. You will be billed at the above rates plus any additional cost involved in the method of delivery. Persons who wish to order the 664-page document that is the basis of this report should contact Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 780, Bloomington, IN 47402. Ph: 800/766-1156. The price is \$35, postage included.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Bill,

This has some
interesting, negative
stuff on ~~prof~~ educational
professors' attitudes
towards testing.
Just in case you
hadn't seen it.

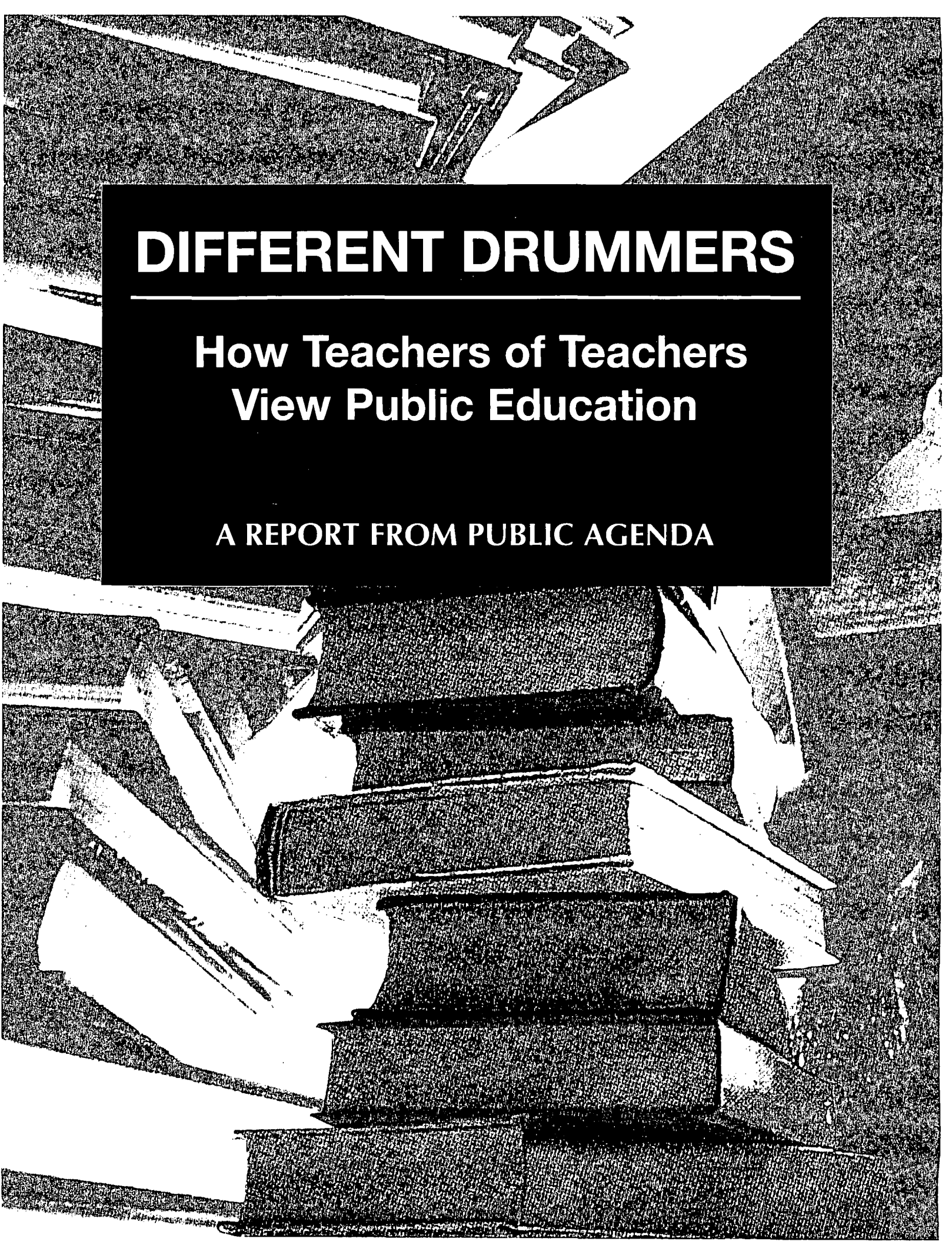
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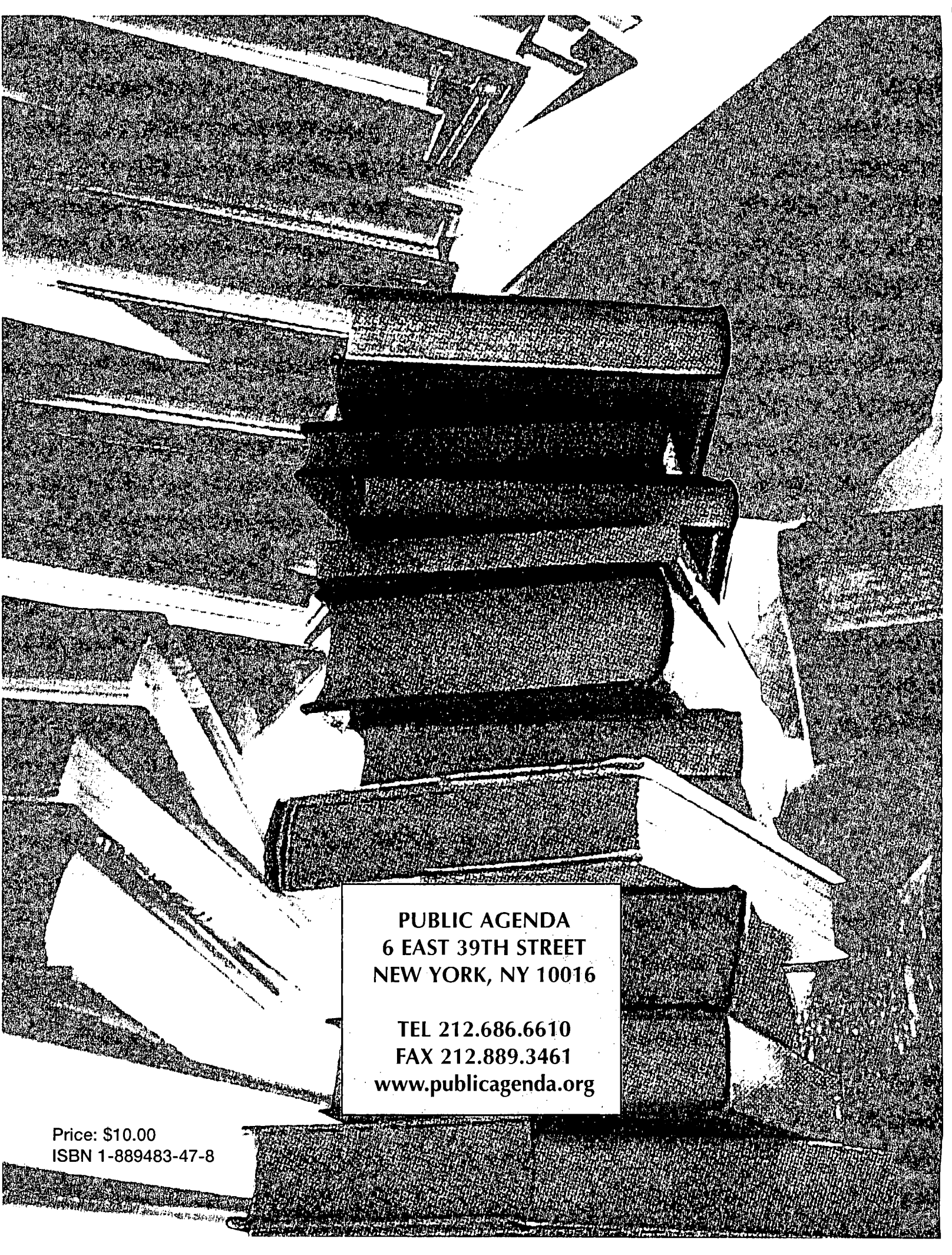
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Schools given good marks

COVER STORY

USA Today, May 13, 1996, P. 1

Poll finds mix of good, bad and mediocre

Parents' satisfaction decreases as kids grow up and schools get bigger

By Dennis Kelly
USA TODAY

Ask U.S. parents what they think of the public schools their children attend and they're ready to put them on the honor roll: 75% grade their schools A or B, finds a new education poll conducted for USA TODAY.

But parents also hand out a few warning notices. They don't think they get enough input into school budgets or the selection of their children's teachers, and they say school boards need to improve the ways they handle discipline.

And if they could afford it, almost half would send their kids to private or parochial schools.

Indeed, the nation and its educators will take a mix of

messages from the groundbreaking poll, an attempt to measure delivery of service in schools on a national scale.

While other surveys have sought opinions of all U.S. adults on quality of education or on issues such as tax vouchers, this poll — commissioned by USA TODAY and conducted by the Gordon S. Black of Rochester, N.Y. — targeted those closest to the system — students and their parents.

The public has already signaled that education will be key in this year's presidential election. A January USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup poll found more people, 67%, named education a high priority than named crime or the economy.

Teachers lauded

Educators will find some numbers to celebrate in this newest poll. For instance, 73% say the academic standards in schools are about right (those who disagree most are parents

with college degrees); 91% of elementary school students give their teachers an A or B; 90% of parents think schools provide a safe environment for their children; and 83% of parents say they would recommend their child's school to other parents.

But in the complex picture that emerges from the mounds of data, dissatisfaction surfaces as well:

► From the time students move from elementary into secondary school, satisfaction levels of parents and students drop noticeably. For instance, the percent of parents who give a grade of A or A- to how well schools communicate and keep parents involved drops from 48% in grades K-2 to 20% in grades 9-12.

"It's very bureaucratically organized (at the upper levels)," says Dianne Cittadino of Miami Shores, Fla. "There seems to be a lot more emphasis on rules and regulations. Every week there are new rules and regulations."

► Despite generally high ratings for schools overall, 47% of parents said they would ship their children off to private or parochial school if they could afford it.

Jody Stradford, a parent in Tucson, Ariz., thinks discipline and academics have a lot to do with the response.

"I think the (private school) kids are required to maintain standards in grades and behavior," she says. And public schools? "Oh, God. They do whatever the hell they want in public school."

But Claire Althoff of Mooreton, N.D., takes a different view.

"There are good teachers in public schools and good teachers in parochial schools. I just don't think sending kids to a parochial school is going to guarantee any better education," she says.

► 52% of parents feel they don't have an opportunity for input into their school system's budget process. But then again, 74% of parents say they have not attended a school board meeting in the last year.

Students feel safe

Responses from students offer a window on real life in schools. Again, it's a complex picture.

Media images of guns, knives and fights pervading school hallways notwithstanding, only 9% of secondary students say they feel unsafe while in school.

But they have other concerns:

► 33% say they're feeling too much pressure to compete for good grades, and 30% admit they've cheated on an exam or a paper.

► Many say their homework is uninteresting. They're most likely to say that for math (56%) and least likely for English (45%).

"I'm not surprised," says Denis Doyle, senior fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation. "(Educator) Ted Sizer says one thing that unites all kids across the country is that they're bored."

► Students confess they could be doing more homework. Almost half, 47%, think they should be doing an hour or more of homework nightly, but only 31% say they do.

But even for students who do work hard, problems arise: 33% of secondary school students say it's not popular to get

More...

good grades in school.

"I think there's a strain in our culture that says the important thing is to be pretty and to be good athletes and to make a lot of money," says former assistant education secretary Diane Ravitch. "But being smart is somehow not such a good thing. They really don't make any connection between someone who's smart and someone who's successful."

"They might admire a woman who's a Nobel-prize winning scientist, but it never occurs to them that when the woman was a teen-ager, she worked really hard and got good grades."

Daniel Hammond gets A's and B's as a 10th grader in Louisville. He says he doesn't get teased much, but he's seen lots of other students who do.

"I think it's not really jealousy," he says. "It's somebody who's different and they can't tolerate it, no matter what. If you're different, they'll start picking on you for no reason."

As for the kids who do the teasing, "They're jerks," he says.

Most students are getting decent grades, but it doesn't mean they always feel good about themselves. When asked whether they "ever feel like a failure at school," 31% of elementary school students and 38% of those in secondary school answered yes.

Eileen Shiff, who teaches child and family study classes at Glendale Community College, Glendale, Ariz., and is a member of USA TODAY's Parenting Panel, says teachers "tend to focus on what's wrong and not what's right. So a child may have gotten an A- on a math paper, but what's on the paper are seven X's rather than all the correct marks."

High school slide

For parents, an overriding theme from the poll is that they are less happy in their children's secondary school years than when the kids were in elementary school.

That confirms what experts have long argued about the problematic structure of U.S. middle, junior high and high schools — that they're too big, that parents lose the close contact they had with their child's teacher in elementary school and that the students don't feel like they're connected enough with any caring adult.

As their kids move into later grades, the poll shows, parents become less and less happy with the availability of parent-teacher conferences, with how well schools communicate when their child has a problem, and with the individual at-

tention kids get from teachers.

Elementary students themselves (70%) are more likely to say their teachers deserve an A or A- than are the secondary students (37%).

That's no surprise to Joyce Epstein, who has seen a similar pattern in the research she's done as co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, based at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

"A lot of times people will talk about how excited and curious and energized kindergarten kids are when they enter school — and they really are," Epstein says. "They haven't had any questions raised they can't answer, and all things are possible."

"But the reality is that as time goes by in school ... youngsters will meet up with difficulties. Parents will meet up with questions that can't be answered or they wish their children were more appreciated for the skills they have ... or

the youngster is disciplined in a way that the youngster or parent doesn't like. So when that parent is polled, they will give a lower score."

Timothy Dyer, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, says the impersonal nature of secondary schools was recognized in his group's *Breaking Ranks* report last

February. The report proposed that high schools should be no larger than 600 students and that teachers should have to see no more than 90 students in a day. What's closer to reality for teachers is 120 to 150 students a day.

"Middle schools and high schools are very large, and we've done that for economic reasons," Dyer says. "So to reverse that, schools have to work hard at changing and increasing personalization (with students). Those kinds of things will help dent that image."

Discipline concerns

Other parental concerns expressed in the poll:

► 43% say they have problems with how well their school boards develop ways to maintain discipline.

"I really feel that behavior is out of control in this school," says parent Lynn Bly, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "I feel like kids are threatened all the time, but there is no real punishment that really hurts that would make the kids really want to stop."

► 37% of parents say that public schools could do a better job training children in ethical and moral values that are consistent with their own family values.

"It started with the separation of church and state," says Lori Gradillas of Hesperia, Calif. "Once they took God out

of the education system, it went downhill from there."

► Parents would be happier in general if they felt they had more control: 51% say they don't have enough voice in the selection of their child's teacher, and 29% say schools need improvement in communicating with parents when their children are having problems.

Terry Peterson, senior counselor to Education Secretary Richard Riley, says the poll numbers reflect what he sees when he visits communities.

"In general, people feel like their schools are doing a pretty good job, but they want them to improve," he says. "They want more individualization, more personalization. That shows up throughout the survey."

Gordon Black says surveys like these should be used as guides to improvement rather than public-relations documents.

"We're not saying schools are terrible; actually, the data show the grade schools are pretty good," he says. The satisfaction level for grade schools — 8 on a 10-point scale — "compares favorably with most private-sector companies," he says.

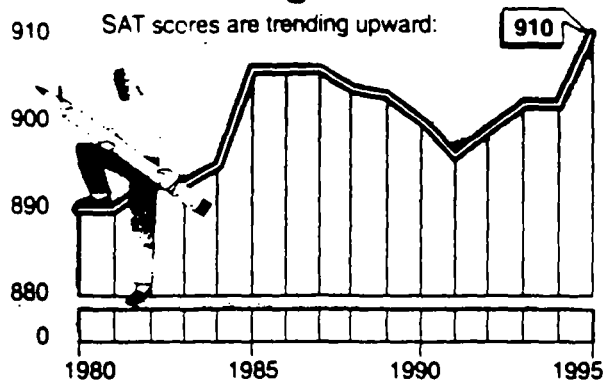
But the numbers that show problems at various grade levels can affect student satisfaction and even behavior, he says.

"If you want to improve," Black says, "that is what you're going to have to focus on."

More...

Students doing better on SATs

SAT scores are trending upward:



Source: The College Board

By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

Math, science scores up

National average scores of students ages 9, 13 and 17 on math and science proficiency tests by National Assessment of Educational Progress. (Scores on scale of 0-500.)

9-year-olds



9-year-olds



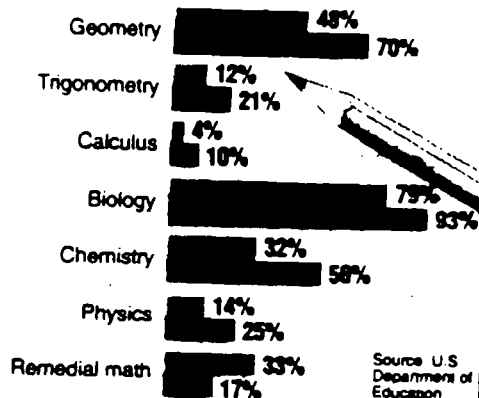
9-year-olds



By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

More students take tougher courses

High school students:



Source: U.S. Department of Education

By Gary Viegas, USA TODAY

Poll finds many constants for kids

By Dennis Kelly
USA TODAY

With the education poll out today, USA TODAY has committed considerable resources to bring readers the most up-to-date findings about how young people feel about their schools.

But some questions could have been asked two generations ago and gotten the same answer. Among secondary school students:

► 65% say gossip is a serious problem.

► 56% don't think math homework is interesting.

► 54% don't like the food served in the lunchroom.

► 53% find school assemblies uninteresting.

► 50% say the air temperature in class is usually uncomfortable.

► 43% say the restrooms aren't clean.

"Sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it?" agrees Michael LaFavore, executive editor, *Men's Health* magazine. He was in elementary school in the '50s and remembers that he was "a terrible student."

Now he watches trends in men's health, not education. But he still thinks kids don't know how good they have it, especially when it comes to school food.

"I grew up in Maine," he says. "They would take a piece of bologna and fry it. You know what happens when they fry it? It turns into a kind of cup-shaped thing. And then they would put a scoop of mashed potatoes in the cup."

"Kids today, they got pizzas, they got hamburgers — they don't know from bad school food," he says.

"Stewed prunes. We had a lot of stewed prunes. They probably don't see that a lot."

Nor is he impressed that kids don't like assemblies.

"Come on. This is to prepare them for life, to prepare them for meetings. They're not supposed to be interesting."

LaFavore says the results show "kids never change. They're always basically dissatisfied. I mean, school's a bummer. I don't think that's changed for eons."

How this report was produced

Early this year, USA TODAY began a major effort to find out how well America's public school system is working. Result: a groundbreaking survey of more than 1,200 students and 1,500 of their parents that has produced what Chester Finn, one of the nation's leading experts on education research, calls "an awesome trove of information."

The mail surveys included nearly 200 questions for secondary students, more than 80 questions for elementary students (grades 3 through 5) and more than 100 questions for the students' parents.

The Gordon S. Black Corp. of Rochester, N.Y., conducted the poll from March 25 to May 6. It has a margin of error of 3 percentage points for parents, all students, and secondary students; and 5 points for elementary students.

The survey, which ranges from cafeteria food to issues of safety and discipline, covers 10 basic aspects of public education: school atmosphere, budget process, the board of education, the superintendent, school curriculum, communication/involvement, school buses, equipment/facilities, principal/administration and teachers.

Finn, a former assistant secretary of Education, described the survey as "the largest, and in its way, richest collection of education-customer survey data I can recall seeing. It gets into some things that I've never seen asked."

For information on obtaining reports from the survey, contact Gordon S. Black Corp., 1-800-866-7655.

More...

U.S. schools can't teach? Don't believe the myths

It's time to set the record straight. Schools have been getting a bad rap over the past decade or so, fueled by some myths that have been around so long they're often accepted as fact.

Part of the public already knows the truth, or at least senses it. A USA TODAY survey out today shows most parents and students are pleased: 73% are satisfied with their schools' academic standards, and 83% would recommend their schools to others.

That echoes a long series of annual polls in which folks say their local schools are great, but schools nationally are pretty bad.

There is some bad news driving that perception. Drugs, dropouts, guns — the incidents one often reads about or sees on TV. But they obscure a far more encouraging and quantifiable long-term trend.

Test scores show students are learning more. They're taking tougher courses. Fewer need remedial work. Even fewer are dropping out. And they're piling up medals in international competitions.

The myths that say otherwise took root in the early 1980s when the landmark report, "A Nation at Risk," painted a bleak portrait of public education. In the 13 years since "Risk," serious reform has occurred. Facts in 1983 evolved into myths of 1996.

Myth: Plunging SAT scores show schools aren't doing the job.

In 1983, SAT scores had been dropping for a decade. In the 1990s, they are rising. National average score for the class of 1995 was 910, the highest since 1974. The average is up 14 points since 1990.

Those increases are occurring as more students each year take the SAT. And testing experts say when more people take a test, the average score should go down.

SAT bashers will say those numbers are meaningless. They say the SAT doesn't measure what students learn, merely their ability to do college work. OK, look at some other tests.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is a federally funded effort to test students' proficiency at three age levels in a wide range of subjects. The chart below shows how science and math scores are up — at ages 9, 13 and 17 — since 1982.

Emerson Elliott, longtime statistics guru in the U.S. Education Department, says the increases for 17-year-olds are "roughly equivalent to an additional year or two of learning in high school."

Ten years ago, a science score of 315 would put a student in the nation's top 10%. Today it takes a 327.

Myth: Students aren't learning what they need to know.

This cry was loud in the early '80s. In an endless stream of reports and conferences, business leaders told schools their graduates were not employable and that they were lacking too many vital skills. That's why businesses took a key role in the reforms that followed and remain active in school improvements today.

The complaint is still heard, but not as

loudly or as frequently. And if students aren't getting what they need from school, it's not because they aren't trying. The chart above shows the dramatic increase in students taking tough courses — trigonometry, calculus, physics — since 1982.

The parallel good news, in numbers crunched by the Education Department, is that the percentage of students needing remedial math has been cut almost in half — from 33% to 17% — since 1982.

More...



U.S. schools can't teach?

Don't believe the myths continued...

Myth: Schools are unsafe.

Yes, violence occurs. Students have been known to pack weapons and, occasionally, use them. In many schools, tighter security is in place. A National Center for School Violence has been born to help administrators deal with it.

It might be exaggeration to say the violence is isolated; but, when you ask the people who know best, a tiny minority is affected by it. In today's USA TODAY survey, just 9% of all high school students say they feel unsafe in school; 8% feel unsafe walking to school; 6% have stayed away from school because they felt personal danger. That leaves 90%-plus who feel safe at school. And that's high school. For elementary school students, the feel-safe percentages are higher.

Myth: Our students are far behind the rest of the world.

How do you feel about seventh place in a 30-team league? In the NBA, that's good enough for the playoffs. In a 1992 assessment of reading literacy among students of 30 countries, U.S. kids finished seventh. (France was first.)

True, our students don't fare as well in comparisons of math and science skills, but that's more like apples and oranges. In many other countries, students not heading for higher education are tracked into different school systems and don't take the international math and science tests. It's all of us against the best of them.

In head-to-head competition with the rest of the world — best vs. best — U.S. students win their share. Last summer, our team placed second in the International Physics Olympiad in Melbourne.

None of this is to say U.S. schools don't need improvement. Many still employ some teachers who put in time to get a paycheck, caring little what happens to the young minds in their care. They still have turf-conscious principals who refuse to allow parents to become involved in their schools for fear they'll lose control.

They still have drugs and violence and dropouts. They still have students paralyzed by apathy who would rather be anywhere but in the classroom.

The biggest myth is that these negatives are dominant. Parents and students responding to the USA TODAY survey — a statistically valid sample of the entire population — make it clear that, in their schools, good things are happening.

Schools have improved since 1983. They still have room for much more improvement. Let's dispel the myths, then get on with making schools better.



The Washington Post/
**Kaiser Family Foundation/
Harvard University Survey Project
1996**

-- Why Don't Americans Trust The Government? --

Methodology

This survey is the second in a series from a joint project by *The Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. The survey was designed and analyzed by all three partners and conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. Telephone interviews of 1,514 random-sample adults were conducted nationwide from November 28 through December 4, 1995. The margin error in the nationwide sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project
1995-1996

The *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project is a three-way partnership and an experiment in combining survey research and reporting to better inform the public. The *Post*, Kaiser, and Harvard jointly design and analyze surveys examining public knowledge, perceptions, and misperceptions on major issues. The *Post* then reports the results as well as the facts to dispel myths and correct misperceptions. We hope this project contributes to a better understanding of public knowledge on major issues facing the country, and to more effective efforts by the media to educate, inform, and engage citizens in national debates.

The first report released by the Kaiser Family Foundation, *The Four Americas: Government and Social Policy Through the Eye's of America's Multi-racial and Multi-ethnic Society*, expands on coverage in *The Washington Post* of the first survey focusing on the perspectives of different racial and ethnic groups with regard to social policy and the role of government in America. The findings show the different perceptions that America's racial and ethnic groups have of the social and economic standing of the other groups. It also shows how white American's misperceptions about the social and economic realities facing African Americans relate directly to their views and opinions on public policies and aid to minorities. Copies of this report are available through the Kaiser Family Foundation publications request line at 1-800-656-4KFF.

This second survey, released by *The Washington Post* on Sunday, January 28, 1996 examines public understanding, perceptions and attitudes about the role of government. It aims to shed light on why Americans are so distrustful and cynical about the federal government and its abilities to act effectively. The following is a report of the actual questions and national topline data from this survey. A full, analytical report with narrative describing the main findings from this survey will be available shortly through the Kaiser Family Foundation publications request line.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a non-profit, independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. The Foundation's work is focused on four main areas: health policy, reproductive health, HIV policy and health and development in South Africa.

Why Don't Americans Trust The Government?

Questionnaire and National Toplines

Conducted for the Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University
and *The Washington Post* by Princeton Survey Research Associates

N=

1514 adults age 18 or older

Margin of Error:

Plus or minus 3 percentage points for total sample

Plus or minus 4 percentage points for Form A; n= 718

Plus or minus 4 percentage points for Form B; n=796

Field Period:

November 28, 1995 - December 4, 1995

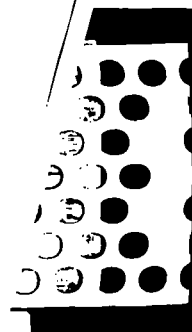
1.

To begin, do you think the nation's economy is getting better, getting worse, or staying about the same?

16	Better
39	Worse
43	Staying about the same
2	Don't know
100	

Is your personal financial situation getting better, getting worse or staying about the same?

21	Getting better
24	Getting worse
54	Staying about the same
1	Don't know
100	



3. Now I'm going to read you the names of some institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one -- a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little. [First, how much confidence do you have in.../ Next, how about . .].
(ROTATE)

	A great <u>deal</u>	Quite <u>a lot</u>	<u>Some</u>	Very <u>little</u>	None (VOL.)	<u>DK</u>	
a. The military	32	38	22	7	*	1	=100
b. The U.S. Supreme Court	13	26	41	16	2	2	=100
c. The Clinton Administration	9	16	36	33	5	1	=100
d. Congress	4	10	41	41	3	1	=100
e. Large business corporations	6	15	45	30	2	2	=100
f. Medicine	24	37	27	10	1	1	=100
g. The news media	6	14	40	37	2	1	=100

* = Less than .5%

- 3h. Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics and government: Very interested, fairly interested, not very interested, or not interested at all?

28 Very interested
47 Fairly interested
17 Not very interested
8 Not interested at all
* Don't know

100

4. How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do the right thing? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

4 Just about always
21 Most of the time
71 Only some of the time
4 None of the time (VOL.)
* Don't know

100

5. How much of the time do you trust your STATE government to do the right thing? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

5 Just about always
 30 Most of the time
 62 Only some of the time
 2 None of the time (VOL.)
1 Don't know
 100

6. On another topic... Compared with 10 years ago, do you think the threat of a major war like World War II has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same?

23 Increased
 41 Decreased
 33 Stayed about the same
3 Don't know
 100

7. Do you think it will be best for the future of this country if we take an active part in world affairs, or if we stay out of world affairs?

57 Take an active part
 37 Stay out
6 Don't know
 100

QUESTIONS 8 THROUGH 12 ROTATED

Now I'd like you to compare some things in this country TODAY with the way they were 20 years ago....

8. Compared with 20 years ago, do you think the quality of the air we breathe TODAY is better than it was, worse, or about the same?

18 Better
 57 Worse
 24 About the same
1 Don't know
 100

9. Compared with 20 years ago, do you think the share of Americans over 65 who live in poverty has increased, decreased or stayed about the same?

59	Increased
15	Decreased
23	Stayed about the same
<u>3</u>	Don't know
100	

10. Compared with 20 years ago, do you think the difference in income between wealthy and middle-class Americans TODAY is wider, not as wide, or about the same?

65	Wider
11	Not as wide
22	About the same
<u>2</u>	Don't know
100	

11. Compared with 20 years ago, do you think children in this country TODAY are more likely to grow up in single-parent families, less likely, or about as likely to grow up in single-parent families?

89	More likely
3	Less likely
7	About as likely
<u>1</u>	Don't know
100	

12. Compared with 20 years ago, do you think the rate of violent crime in this country has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same?

91	Increased
2	Decreased
7	Stayed about the same
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

BASED ON FORM A; n=718

13. Now I'd like to ask you what effect, if any, you think the federal government's programs have had in each of the areas I just asked you about. By federal government, I mean the government in Washington. How do you think the federal government's programs have affected...[INSERT ITEM/ ROTATE] ? Have federal programs helped to make things better, made things worse, or have they not had much effect either way?

	Helped make <u>things better</u>	Made things <u>worse</u>	Not had much effect <u>either way</u>	<u>DK</u>	
a. The quality of the air we breathe.	44	15	38	3	=100
b. The share of Americans over 65 who live in poverty.	23	32	39	6	=100
c. The difference in income between wealthy and middle-class Americans.	11	49	36	4	=100
d. The chances that children will grow up in single-parent families.	11	37	48	4	=100
e. The rate of violent crime.	10	34	54	2	=100

BASED ON FORM B; n=796

14. Suppose the federal government put more money and effort into the areas I just asked you about. By federal government, I mean the government in Washington. What effect, if any, do you think more effort and spending by the federal government would have on...[INSERT ITEM / ROTATE] ? Would it help make things better, would it make things worse, or would it not have much effect either way?

Question 14 continued:

	Would help make <u>things better</u>	Would make things <u>worse</u>	Would not have much effect <u>either way</u>	<u>DK</u>	
a. The quality of the air we breathe.	48	6	43	3	=100
b. The share of Americans over 65 who live in poverty.	55	10	32	3	=100
c. The difference in income between wealthy and middle-class Americans.	26	17	52	5	=100
d. The chances that children will grow up in single-parent families.	23	14	58	5	=100
e. The rate of violent crime.	44	9	43	4	=100

15. When the government in Washington decides to solve a problem, how much confidence do you have that the problem will actually be solved a lot, some, just a little, or none at all?

4	A lot
35	Some
38	Just a little
23	None at all
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

16. On another topic... During the past three years, do you think the size of the annual federal budget deficit has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same?

69	Increased
10	Decreased
19	Stayed about the same
<u> 2</u>	Don't know
100	

BASED ON FORM B; n=796

17. In order to lower the federal budget deficit, in which of the following areas, if any, do you think future government spending should be reduced? [First,] do you think federal spending for...[INSERT ITEM. ROTATE START] should be reduced, or not?

	<u>Yes, should be reduced</u>	<u>No, should not be reduced</u>	<u>DK</u>	
a. The environment	26	71	3	=100
b. Foreign aid	81	18	1	=100
c. Defense	41	57	2	=100
d. Medicare, which is the government program for the elderly	15	84	1	=100
e. Welfare, or public assistance for poor people	47	51	2	=100

Now I have some questions about politics and the government. Not everyone will have heard about all the issues and people I'm asking about. Please answer each question to the best of your knowledge, but if you're not sure about an answer, just say so.

18. Can you tell me which party, the Democrats or the Republicans, has the most members in...? (ROTATE)

	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Republicans</u>	<u>NS</u>	
a. The U.S. House of Representatives	11	61	28	=100
b. The U.S. Senate	11	62	27	=100

19. As far as you know, is there a limit on the number of terms in office a president of the United States can serve, or not?

81 Yes
11 No
8 Not Sure
100

20. How many years is a single term in office for a U.S. Senator?

26 Correct answer (six years)
 42 Incorrect answer
32 Not sure
 100

21. At the national level, would you say that one of the major political parties is more conservative than the other major party, or not?

22. Which party do you think is more conservative... **(ROTATE)** the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?

70 Yes
 17 The Democratic Party
 52 The Republican Party
 1 Not sure

18 No

12 Not sure
 100

23. Can you tell me who was President when the Watergate scandal took place?

86 Correct answer (Richard Nixon, Nixon)
 4 Incorrect answer
10 Not sure
 100

24. Now I'd like to ask if you happen to know the names of some people who now hold different titles. Can you tell me the name of the current...(ROTATE) ?

	<u>Correct Answer¹</u>	<u>Incorrect Answer</u>	<u>NS</u>	
a. Majority leader of the U.S. Senate	34	10	56	=100
b. Vice President of the United States	60	4	36	=100
c. Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives	53	4	43	=100
d. The Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court	6	8	86	=100

25. I'm going to read you some major legislation that the Congress in Washington has debated over the last three years. As I read each one, please tell me whether you think it was passed by Congress, or not. [First/Next, how about. .(ROTATE)]

	<u>Passed</u>	<u>Not passed</u>	<u>NS</u>	
a. Legislation providing for a national health insurance plan.	20	67	13	=100
b. Legislation limiting the number of terms members of Congress can serve	24	55	21	=100
c. Legislation providing for family leaves that require businesses to give employees time off after the birth of a child or for an illness in the family.	79	9	12	=100

26. Can you tell me which party -- the Democrats or the Republicans -- favors making greater reductions in future Medicare and Medicaid spending?

15 Democrats
69 Republicans
16 Not sure
100

¹ Correct Answers: a. Robert Dole, Bob Dole, Dole, Senator Dole
b. Al Gore, Gore
c. Newt Gingrich, Gingrich
d. William Rehnquist, Rehnquist

27. As far as you know, is more of the federal budget now spent on Medicare, or is more spent on foreign aid?

27 Medicare
58 Foreign aid
15 Not sure
100

28. During the past three years, do you think the number of people employed by the federal government has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same?

34 Increased
28 Decreased
35 Stayed about the same
3 Not sure
100

29. As far as you know, who has the FINAL responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not? Is it...?(ROTATE)

24 The President
19 The Congress
54 The Supreme Court
* Other (VOL.)
3 Not sure
100

BASED ON FORM A; n=718

30. [Earlier in this interview, you said you could trust the government in Washington (just about always/most of the time/only some of the time/none of the time)] What is the MAIN reason you [often / sometimes] don't trust the federal government? (OPEN-END)

35 Honesty/integrity (net)
9 Lack of honesty/distrust politicians
17 Promises are made and not kept/politicians lie all the time
5 Politicians don't give all the facts/withhold information
6 Politicians are corrupt/crooked/cheats
1 Lack of morality
0 A/O Honesty/integrity mentions

Question 30 continued:

- 6 **Special interest groups (net)**
 - 4 Lobbyists/lobbyists have too much power
 - 4 Politicians work on behalf of special interest groups/interest groups have too much power
 - 0 A/O Special interest groups mentions

- 28 **Public interest (net)**
 - 10 Politicians don't represent the interest of the people
 - 2 Politicians don't listen to the public
 - 1 Politicians don't care about the middle class
 - 3 Politicians are influenced by money/campaign funders/favor the rich
 - 16 Disagree with their decisions/judgements
 - 0 A/O Public interest mentions

- 24 **Self interest (net)**
 - 23 Politicians are concerned with themselves/ only interest in being re-elected
 - 1 Politicians are only concerned with their own states
 - 0 A/O self interest mentions

- 11 **Issues (net)**
 - 1 Bosnian situation/war/we are headed to war
 - 2 Foreign affairs/policy
 - 2 Decision on Medicaid/whether or not to cut Medicaid
 - 1 Welfare abuse
 - 1 Favor capitalism/big business
 - 1 Taxes/tax increases
 - 5 A/O Issues mentions

- 10 **Inefficient/wasteful (net)**
 - 4 Politicians don't accomplish anything/nothing gets done
 - 2 Takes too long to accomplish anything
 - 3 Government spending/wasting money/unnecessary spending
 - 1 A/O Inefficient/wasteful mentions

- 3 **Miscellaneous (net)**
 - 2 History/the past
 - 1 A/O Miscellaneous mentions

- 11 **Don't know**

BASED ON FORM A; n=718

31. People have different reasons for not trusting the government. I'm going to read you a list of some of those reasons. Please tell me if each one is a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason at all why YOU [often/sometimes] don't trust the federal government. (First,) how about... (ROTATE)

	<u>Major reason</u>	<u>Minor reason</u>	<u>Not a reason at all</u>	<u>DK</u>	
a. The federal government's taxes are too high.	55	29	15	1	=100
b. The federal government is inefficient and wastes too much money.	80	15	4	1	=100
c. The policies of the federal government don't reflect your own beliefs and values.	37	42	19	2	=100
d. When the federal government makes a decision, it usually ends up hurting more people than it helps.	46	34	17	3	=100
e. The federal government interferes too much in people's lives.	41	36	21	2	=100
f. The problems it is trying to solve cannot be solved by the federal government.	40	37	20	3	=100
g. Special interests have too much influence on the federal government.	65	22	10	3	=100
h. Elected officials lack honesty and integrity.	62	27	8	3	=100
i. The federal government spends too much on the wrong things.	79	16	4	1	=100
j. The federal government doesn't do enough to help people who really need it.	59	26	13	2	=100

32. [Earlier in this interview, you said you could trust the government in Washington (just about always/most of the time/only some of the time/none of the time)] Which of the following was most important in giving you the impression you have of the federal government? Was it your own personal experience with a government agency or program, what you learned from friends and family, or what you saw, heard or read in television, newspapers or other media?

18 Personal experience
 8 Friends and family
 72 TV/newspapers/other media
2 Don't know
 100

33. Generally speaking, which do you trust to do a better job running things--(ROTATE) the federal government or your state government?

24 Federal government
 61 State government
 11 Neither/Both equally (VOL.)
4 Don't know
 100

BASED ON FORM B RESPONDENTS WHO TRUST THEIR STATE GOVERNMENT MORE THAN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT; n=476

34. I'm going to read you a list of reasons people sometimes give for why they trust their own state government. For each one, please tell me if it is a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason at all why you feel your state government does a better job running things than the federal government? Your state government ...(ROTATE)

	<u>Major reason</u>	<u>Minor reason</u>	<u>Not a reason at all</u>	<u>DK</u>	
a. Wastes less money because it is better managed.	51	30	17	2	=100
b. Can solve problems more quickly.	64	24	10	2	=100
c. Is more likely to spend money on the right things.	56	31	12	1	=100
d. Is less dominated by special interests.	44	36	17	3	=100
e. Is more likely to have effective solutions to problems.	51	38	10	1	=100
f. Is more responsive to the needs of people like you.	65	26	9	*	=100
g. Better reflects your own beliefs and values.	49	32	18	1	=100

**BASED ON FORM B RESPONDENTS WHO TRUST THEIR OWN STATE
GOVERNMENT MORE THAN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT; n=476**

35. [You mentioned (**READ ITEMS**) as major reasons.] Which ONE of these would you say is the MOST IMPORTANT REASON?

- 11 Wastes less money because it is better managed.
 - 10 Can solve problems more quickly.
 - 10 Is more likely to spend money on the right things.
 - 10 Is less dominated by special interests.
 - 8 Is more likely to have effective solutions to problems.
 - 23 Is more responsive to the needs of people like you.
 - 16 Better reflects your own beliefs and values.
 - 7 None are major reasons
 - 5 Don't know
- 100

36. Do you think the federal government threatens your own personal rights and freedoms, or not?

37. Is this a MAJOR threat or a MINOR threat?

42 Yes
 20 Major
 21 Minor
 1 Don't know
 54 No
 4 Don't know
 100

38. Do you think the federal government threatens your own personal financial well-being, or not?

39. Is this a MAJOR threat or a MINOR threat?

52 Yes
 31 Major
 21 Minor
 * Don't know
 44 No
 4 Don't know
 100

40. Now I'm going to read you some statements that may or may not describe your own feelings about politics and government. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each one. The first statement is. . . [ROTATE] Do you agree/disagree STRONGLY or only somewhat?

	Agree <u>Strongly</u>	Agree <u>Somewhat</u>	Disagree <u>Somewhat</u>	Disagree <u>Strongly</u>	<u>DK</u>
a. I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.	40	28	23	8	1 =100
b. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.	29	23	28	19	1 =100
c. Politics and government are so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.	29	25	22	23	1 =100
d. Politicians tell voters what they want to hear, not what they will actually try to do if elected.	67	22	7	3	1 =100

BASED ON RESPONDENTS WHO SAY THE NATION'S ECONOMY IS GETTING WORSE OR STAYING THE SAME; n=1211

41. Earlier in this interview, you said you didn't think the nation's economy was getting better.... What do you think is the MAIN reason why the economy is not getting better? Is it mainly because of something the federal government HAS DONE, mainly because of something the federal government has NOT done, or mainly for other reasons that don't have much to do with government?

29	Something the federal government has done
34	Something the federal government has not done
30	Other reasons
<u>7</u>	Don't know
100	

BASED ON FORM A RESPONDENTS WHO SAY THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS MAINLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NATION'S ECONOMY NOT GETTING BETTER; n=346

42. What is the main thing the federal government (has done/has not done) to keep the economy from getting better? (OPEN-END)

<u>Total</u>		<u>Has done</u>	<u>Has not done</u>
80	Economy/policy (net)	86	76
10	Taxes/high taxes	11	8
4	Taxing the rich/rich have tax breaks	3	5
9	Effects on business	14	5
5	Imports/Exports	7	3
3	Welfare/controlling welfare	2	5
12	Unemployment /loss of jobs	8	15
4	Not helping poor people	1	5
40	Government spending (sub-net)	50	33
15	Foreign aid/too much spending on foreign countries	23	9
9	National debt/not paying off national debt	8	10
18	Too much spending/wasteful spending	20	17
1	Military spending	3	*
0	A/O Government spending mentions	0	0
9	A/O Economy/policy mentions	8	10
8	Miscellaneous (net)	6	10
15	Don't know	11	18

BASED ON FORM A RESPONDENTS WHO SAY THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS MAINLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NATION'S ECONOMY NOT GETTING BETTER; n=346

43. I'm going to read you a list of things some people think the federal government has done - or has not done -- to keep the economy from getting better. For each one, please tell me if you think it is a major reason the economy hasn't gotten better, a minor reason, or not a reason at all? (ROTATE)

	<u>Major reason</u>	<u>Minor reason</u>	<u>Not a reason at all</u>	<u>DK</u>
a. They took away or reduced government benefits people used to receive.	35	39	24	2 =100
b. They raised taxes.	56	31	12	1 =100
c. They didn't reduce the federal budget deficit fast enough.	67	26	6	1 =100
d. They did too much for the poor and minorities.	23	39	36	2 =100
e. They did too much for the wealthy.	60	22	17	1 =100
f. Government regulations hurt the economy.	51	40	7	2 =100
g. They didn't do enough to keep jobs from going overseas.	70	18	10	2 =100
h. They didn't do enough to make the economy grow.	62	28	10	* =100
i. They didn't tax the wealthy enough and use the money to help people who needed it.	60	23	15	2 =100
j. They didn't do enough to create new and better jobs.	68	22	10	* =100

BASED ON RESPONDENTS WHO SAY THEIR PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION IS GETTING WORSE OR STAYING THE SAME; n=1177

44. Earlier in this interview, you said your personal financial situation was not getting better. What do you think is the MAIN reason that your financial situation is not getting better? Do you think it is mainly because of something the federal government HAS DONE, mainly because of something the federal government has NOT done, or mainly for other reasons that don't have much to do with government?

23 Something the federal government has done
 17 Something the federal government has not done
 54 Other reasons
6 Don't know
 100

BASED ON FORM B RESPONDENTS WHO SAY THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS MAINLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION NOT GETTING BETTER; n=257

45. What is the main thing the federal government (has done/has not done) to keep your personal financial situation from getting better? (OPEN-END)

<u>Total</u>		<u>Has done</u>	<u>Has not done</u>
85	Economy/policy (net)	86	83
8	High cost of living	8	9
2	High inflation	2	1
3	Interest rates too low	4	2
5	Unemployment/lost jobs	3	7
5	Jobs have gone out of U.S./NAFTA treaty	5	6
4	Create job security/ maintain employment	3	6
23	Tax increases/taxes are too high/raise in taxes	31	13
3	Tax change/tax structure	5	0
4	Minimum wage is too low	3	5
5	Lack of educational support/Cut funding for education	2	10
3	Slow economy (unspecified)	3	2
3	Caps on wages/wage freeze	2	3
2	Haven't helped the middle class	3	1
4	Health insurance/made health care affordable	3	5
3	Bureaucratic/too much red-tape	2	3
28	Government spending (sub-net)	27	30
14	More spending/wasteful spending	13	15
4	Too much foreign aid	4	3
6	Too much debt/deficit is too big	5	7
2	Spending on welfare/haven't cut welfare	2	2
6	A/O Government spending mentions	6	5
1	A/O Economy/policy mentions	2	1

Question 45 continued:

1	Miscellaneous (net)	1	0
15	Don't know	13	17

BASED ON FORM B RESPONDENTS WHO SAY THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS MAINLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION NOT GETTING BETTER; n=257

46. I'm going to read you a list of things that some people say the federal government has done -- or has not done -- to keep their financial situation from getting better. For each one, please tell me if you think it is a major reason your financial situation hasn't gotten better, a minor reason, or not a reason at all? (ROTATE)

	<u>Major reason</u>	<u>Minor reason</u>	<u>Not a reason at all</u>	<u>DK</u>	
a. They took away or reduced government benefits you used to receive.	27	21	51	1	=100
b. They raised your taxes.	66	25	9	*	=100
c. They didn't reduce the federal budget deficit fast enough.	51	29	19	1	=100
d. You lost out because the federal government did too much for the poor and minorities.	21	33	44	2	=100
e. You lost out because the federal government did too much for the wealthy.	44	30	24	2	=100
f. Government regulations kept you from getting ahead.	34	34	31	1	=100
g. They didn't do enough to keep jobs from going overseas.	53	23	22	2	=100
h. They didn't do enough to make the economy grow.	47	35	15	3	=100
i. They didn't tax the wealthy enough and use the money to help people like you who needed it.	41	32	25	2	=100
j. They didn't do enough to create new and better jobs.	51	28	20	1	=100

47. Now I have some more questions about how things are going in your own life... What is your employment status? Are you employed for pay full-time, part-time, retired, or not employed for pay?

52	Full-time
14	Part-time
18	Retired
12	Not employed
2	Disabled (VOL.)
1	Student (VOL.)
<u>1</u>	Don't know
100	

- 47a. Given the chance, would you like to work full-time, or do you prefer to work part-time?

7	Would prefer full-time
7	Prefer part-time
86	Not applicable
<u>0</u>	Don't know
100	

BASED ONLY ON RESPONDENTS WHO WORK PART-TIME; n=196

48	Would prefer full-time
52	Prefer part-time
<u>0</u>	Don't know
100	

48. How worried are you, if at all, that you might lose your job during the next two years? Would you say you are very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all?

6	Very worried
12	Somewhat worried
16	Not too worried
32	Not worried at all
34	Not currently working
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

49. Has there been any time in the past two years when you were unemployed, but wanted to work?

15	Yes
51	No
34	Not currently working
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

50. Do you feel very confident, only fairly confident, or not at all confident that life for our children will be better than it has been for us?

10	Very confident
34	Fairly confident
54	Not at all confident
<u> 2</u>	Don't know
100	

51. Have you ever been a victim of a violent crime involving a physical assault or robbery of you personally?

19	Yes
81	No
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

52. Have you ever been a victim of a property crime involving theft or burglary of your money or property?

47	Yes
53	No
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

53. How worried are you, if at all, that you might become a victim of violent crime during the coming year? Would you say you are very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not worried at all?

14	Very worried
34	Somewhat worried
33	Not too worried
19	Not worried at all
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

54. Now I have some more general questions . . . Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?

55. Do you feel strongly about that, or not?

48	Would take advantage
39	Feel strongly
9	Do not feel strongly
<u> *</u>	Don't know
50	Would try to be fair
36	Feel strongly
13	Do not feel strongly
1	Don't know
<u> 2</u>	Don't know
100	

56. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

57. Do you feel strongly about that, or not?

35	Most people can be trusted
28	Feel strongly
7	Do not feel strongly
<u> *</u>	Don't know
63	Can't be too careful
54	Feel strongly
9	Do not feel strongly
<u> *</u>	Don't know
<u> 2</u>	Don't know
100	

58. Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?

59. Do you feel strongly about that, or not?

49	Try to be helpful
38	Feel strongly
11	Do not feel strongly
*	Don't know
48	Looking out for themselves
39	Feel strongly
9	Do not feel strongly
*	Don't know
<u>3</u>	Don't know
100	

60. Where do you usually get MOST of your news and information about national politics and government? Is it from: Television, radio, newspapers, news magazines like Time and Newsweek, from family, friends or co-workers, or someplace else?

58	Television
8	Radio
24	Newspapers
3	News magazines
1	Family
2	Friends or co-workers
3	Someplace else
<u>1</u>	Don't know
100	

61. In a typical week, on how many days, if any, do you read a daily newspaper?

13	One day
9	Two days
10	Three days
5	Four days
6	Five days
3	Six days
43	Seven days
11	None
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

62. How much attention do you usually pay to news about politics and government in the newspaper? A great deal, quite a lot, some, or not much at all?

13	A great deal
22	Quite a lot
38	Some
16	Not much at all
11	Non-newspaper readers
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

63. Last month, how often did you read a weekly news magazine such as Time, Newsweek, U.S. News or some other news magazine: Every week, two or three times, once or not at all?

12	Every week
14	Two or three times
20	Once
54	Not at all
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

64. On a typical weekday, about how many hours do you personally watch television?

19	One hour or less
25	Two hours
19	Three hours
14	Four hours
16	Five to nine hours
6	Ten hours or more
<u> 1</u>	Don't know
100	

65. In a typical week, on how many days, if any, do you watch national network TV news on ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS or CNN?

5	One day
8	Two days
8	Three days
8	Four days
15	Five days
5	Six days
42	Seven days
8	None
<u>1</u>	Don't know
100	

66. How much attention do you usually pay to news about politics and government on national network TV news? A great deal, quite a lot, some, or not much at all?

18	A great deal
25	Quite a lot
37	Some
11	Not much at all
9	Non-network TV news viewer
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

67. On a typical day, about how many hours do you listen to talk radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues and politics?

72	None ²
13	One hour
6	Two hours
6	Three or more hours
<u>3</u>	Don't know
100	

² Includes respondents who listen for an half hour or less

68. How often, if ever, do you listen to Rush Limbaugh's RADIO program regularly, sometimes, hardly ever or never?

6	Regularly
12	Sometimes
16	Hardly ever
66	Never
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

THERE IS NO QUESTION 69

70. Do you regularly attend or participate in a civic organization or service club, like the Chamber of Commerce, The Kiwanis Club, or the PTA?

20	Yes, attend or participate
80	No, do not
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

71. How often do you feel you don't have enough time to get everything done you really need to do? Do you feel this way all the time, most of the time, some of the time, every once in a while, or never?

26	All the time
26	Most of the time
28	Some of the time
15	Every once in a while
5	Never
<u> *</u>	Don't know
100	

72. How many years have you lived in your present community or city?

12	Two years or less
11	Three to five years
14	Six to ten years
18	Eleven to twenty years
17	Twenty-one to thirty years
28	More than 30 years
<u> *</u>	Don't Know
100	

73. Are you now married, living as married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

56	Married
3	Living as married
8	Widowed
11	Divorced
3	Separated
19	Never married
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

74. Have you ever been divorced?

26	Yes, have been divorced/are divorced
74	No, never been divorced/Never married
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

75. Did you grow up in a family in which your parents were divorced?

76. Did you grow up in a family in which your parents never married?

20	Yes, parents divorced
2	Yes, parents never married
78	No, neither
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

77. Do you have any children who are under the age of 18?

38	Yes
62	No
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

78. What is your religious preference? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, or some other religion?

79. Do you consider yourself a Christian?

80. Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?

60	Protestant/Christian
34	Evangelical
24	Non-Evangelical
2	Don't know
27	Roman Catholic
2	Jewish
6	Other religion
5	No religion (VOL.)
*	Don't know
*	Refused
<u>100</u>	

81. In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent?

29	Republican
32	Democrat
34	Independent
<u>5</u>	All others
100	

82. As of today, do you LEAN more to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?

41	Republican/Lean Republican
45	Democrat/Lean Democrat
<u>14</u>	All others
100	

83. Are you NOW registered to vote in your precinct or election district, or haven't you had a chance to register yet?

77	Yes
22	No
1	Don't have to register (VOL.)
*	Don't know
<u>100</u>	

84. Thinking back to the 1992 Presidential election, when Clinton ran against Bush and Perot, did things come up that kept you from voting, or did you happen to vote?

85. Did you vote for Clinton, Bush or Perot?

73	Yes, voted
31	Clinton
25	Bush
11	Perot
1	Other candidate (VOL.)
1	Don't remember / Not sure
4	Refused
26	No, did not vote/Too young (VOL.)
1	Don't remember / Not sure
<u>*</u>	Refused
100	

86. Did you happen to vote in the 1994 election for U.S. Congress, or didn't you get a chance to vote?

87. Did you vote for the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate for Congress in your district?

45	Yes, voted
21	Democratic candidate
20	Republican candidate
*	Other candidate (VOL.)
3	Don't remember / Not sure
1	Refused
51	No, did not vote
4	Don't remember / Not sure
<u>*</u>	Refused
100	

88. Would you say your views in most political matters are very liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, or very conservative?

6	Very liberal
19	Somewhat liberal
32	Moderate
27	Somewhat conservative
12	Very conservative
<u>4</u>	Don't know
100	

89. What is the last grade or class that you COMPLETED in school?

5	None, or grade 1 to 8
12	High school incomplete (grade 9-11)
36	High School graduate
2	Business, technical or vocational school after high school
23	Some college, but no four-year degree
14	College graduate, four-year degree
8	Post-graduate or professional schooling after college
<u>*</u>	Don't know
100	

90. How old are you?

21	18-29
44	30-49
17	50-64
16	65+
0	Don't know
<u>2</u>	Refused
100	

91. Are you of Hispanic or Latino background, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some other Spanish background?

5	Yes
94	No
0	Don't know
<u>1</u>	Refused
100	

92. What is your race? Are you white, black, Asian, or some other race?

85	White
10	Black or African-American
1	Asian
3	Other/Mixed race
*	Don't Know
<u>1</u>	Refused
100	

93. Last year, that is in 1994, what was your total family income from all sources, BEFORE taxes? Just stop me when I get to the right category.

10	Less than \$10,000
15	\$10,000 to under \$20,000
18	\$20,000 to under \$30,000
24	\$30,000 to under \$50,000
14	\$50,000 to under \$75,000
5	\$75,000 to under \$100,000
4	\$100,000 or more
4	Don't know
<u>6</u>	Refused
100	

BASED ON FORM A; n=718

- 93A. As you may know there was a recent shutdown of the federal government that resulted from a budget disagreement between President Clinton and the Republicans in Congress. Which of the following two statements comes closer to your own view of President Clinton's role in the shutdown ? (ROTATE)

a. President Clinton was trying to gain political advantage by creating a crisis when he could have reached a reasonable compromise with the Republicans, OR

b. President Clinton was standing up for what he believes are important national priorities

36	Statement a.
57	Statement b.
2	Neither (VOL.)
0	Haven't heard about (VOL.)
<u>5</u>	Don't know
100	

EDUCATION: WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A PRESENTATION OF PUBLIC AGENDA

Briefing For Acting Deputy Secretary Smith
U.S. Department of Education
January 31, 1997

Presented by Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC AGENDA: SOME BACKGROUND

- Nonprofit and nonpartisan
- Founded in 1975 by Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich

Public Agenda's Mission

- Foster public dialogue
- Improve communication between leaders and public

Two Major Thrusts

- Public opinion research
- Citizen education projects

PUBLIC AGENDA'S PUBLIC OPINION EXPERTISE

Variety Of Issues

- Health care, welfare, crime, foreign policy, and education

Indepth Approach To Public Opinion

- Indepth, multi-faceted studies
- Focus groups, surveys, interviews, case studies, panel studies
- What people think vs. why they hold their views
- A special interest: Gaps between leaders and the public

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Education: The Research Base

Six Years Of Research

- Four national surveys
 - The general public
 - Parents -- white, African-American, traditional Christian
 - Leadership -- business, media, elected officials
 - Public school teachers
 - High school students -- public and private schools
- Regional studies: Connecticut, Missouri, St. Louis
- Over 120 focus groups
- Citizen engagement work

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The General Public: Three Recurring Images

- Metal detectors in high school
- Kids outside school during school hours -- smoking
- Check-out clerks who can't make change

For The Public: *First Things First*

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The First Priority: Safety

- Defining image: Metal detectors in high school

Widespread Fears of Violence, Gangs, Drug Use

- 72%: Too much drugs/violence *in local public schools*
- 80%: Among African-American parents
- Similar concerns tapped by Gallup and others

Is It the Media?

- Among teachers and students, roughly half express concerns

For Most, Not a Personal Fear

- Symbol of nation that has lost moral center
- The world we have lost

Call for Answers

- 76%: Remove youngsters with weapons, drugs
- Support among teens, especially minority teens
- 83%: Among African-American parents

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Second Priority: Order and Discipline

- Defining image: kids outside school during school hours -- smoking

Not Just "Kids These Days"

For Adults and Teachers: A Prerequisite for Learning

- 88%: Emphasizing work habits such as discipline, punctuality *will improve academic performance*
- Among teens: 71% own school has too many disruptive youngsters
- Remove persistent troublemakers from regular classroom -- support among public, parents, teachers, and teens

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

And Teach Them Basics -- At Least

- Defining image: check out clerks who can't make change

Basics -- Not a New Concern

Examples from Real Life

Basics "Absolutely Essential" for Every Child

- 92%: The general public
- 94%: Public school students
- 98%: Public school teachers
- 99%: Leadership in business, government, etc.

Require Good Command of English for High School Graduation

- 88%: The public -- across the board support
- 76%: Teenagers -- again support across the board

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Why Is The Public So Preoccupied With Basics?

- No basics, no future -- the economically doomed
- The minimal contractual obligation of schools
- Basics first -- not basics only

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Raising Standards: A Shared Agenda

- A common sense approach
- "You ask more, you get more"
- Basics drives support for standards

Broad Support among All Groups of Public

- 82%: Set clear guidelines for what teachers teach, kids learn
- 70%: Raise promotion standards from grade school to high school
- 76%: High school teachers should toughen grading
- 60%: Grade school teachers should toughen grading

Teens Agree

- 74%: Pass students only when they've learned what's needed
- 71%: *Require* after-school classes for teens with D's, F's in major subjects
- "They practically hand you a diploma."

Teachers: Support for standards, but less urgency

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

What Kids Should Learn: A Practical View

- What is "absolutely essential" for every child?

The Top Tier

- The basics
- Mainstream values: hard work, responsibility
- 80%: computer skill "essential for every child"
 - Beyond the little red school house
 - Staring the work place in the face

The Middle Tier

- 63%: American history and geography
- 59%: Biology and chemistry

The Bottom Tier

- 37%: Advanced math
- 35%: History and geography of Europe and Asia
- Fewer than 25%: Classic writers such as Shakespeare, Hemingway, Steinbeck

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Public's View Of Education

- Rejected: OK to have illiterate underclass
- Not yet accepted: Most Americans need to be much more rigorously educated
- Some negative connotations to being "highly educated"

The Teenagers' View

- No academic subject -- other than basics -- in top half of list
- 38%: extremely important to learn American history
- The stunning lack of curiosity

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public Education: Serious Concerns, Faltering Commitment

A Public Opinion Paradox

- Disapprove of "schools" in general
- Approve of "local public schools"

Support for Local Public Schools Drops Sharply When . . .

- Questions get specific
 - 47%: Diploma from local high does not guarantee basics
 - 65%: Among leadership
- Public schools are compared to private schools
 - Private schools better: safety, discipline, standards, small classes
 - 57%: Parents would send child to private school if financially able

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Student Report

Private School Students vs. Public School Students

Different Experiences: The Question Is Why

- Private students more positive about teachers and schools
- Teachers "care about students personally": 28 point gap
- Less concern on safety, unruly students, discipline

EDUCATION:

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Some Important Areas of Consensus

Standards: Just do it!

Order, Discipline, Standards of Behavior

- Teachers: Need for respect and civility
- Students: Yearning for structure

People Are Talking

But Important and Difficult Questions

- Academics: Can we convey the excitement of knowledge?
- Parents and teachers: Who does what?
- Keeping teens from the undertow: Clothes, cliques, teasing, cheating -- who will take the first step?

COVER STORY

Education, for 1st time, is top voter concern

And 'until the picture becomes clearer, a low-grade anxiety persists'

By Richard Benedetto
USA TODAY

The highly volatile mood of the electorate appears to have shifted from angry to anxious as the nation enters this pivotal 1996 election year.

Voters vented years of pent-up anger by kicking George Bush out of the White House in 1992, and then stung Democrats by giving Congress to the

Republicans in 1994.

But the budget, health care, welfare and other top issues are still at an impasse. And voters approach the upcoming campaign not at all sure if the sweeping changes wrought in the last two elections are working the way they envisioned.

Now, a new USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll finds voters rallying around issues that touch closest to home: the quality of their children's education, crime and the economy. All are perennial top concerns, but this is the first time education, with 67% calling it a high priority, has topped the list.

Analysts say the prize in 1996 may go to those candidates who target those problems and convince voters they know a way to fix them.

"People are in a wait-and-see mode, so until the picture becomes clearer a low-grade anxiety persists," says Democratic pollster Alan Secrest. "Voters are becoming more realistic, and not expecting the president and Congress to wave a magic wand and solve their problems. But they are holding officials more accountable for addressing them."

The economy topped a similar list in 1992, and became

the issue that toppled Bush and elected Bill Clinton in 1992; crime was a top concern in another poll in 1994, and was a big factor in the switch to Republicans that fall.

That's why few can ignore the ascent of the education issue, long high on the national list but seldom in the top spot. It's an issue that seems to cut across traditional party lines.

Republican pollster Ed Goess sees it as a function of fear of a faded

dream: "Two-thirds of the people think their children will be worse off than they are, and see a good education key to survival."

Democratic pollster Celinda Lake sees it as a function of changing times: "Voters are anxious about the economy, and anxious about a decline in moral values, and see a good education as something that can have a positive impact on both."

The poll shows women and voters under 50 most likely to list education quality as their top priority.

But it also ranked high among all income groups — from poor to rich. And it cut across partisan political lines with Democrats, Republicans and independents all listing it among their top two concerns.

"We've got kids out here who aren't going to be ready for the future," says Regina Vest, 28, a Moline, Ill., homemaker in a typical comment from some of the 1,000 adults polled Friday through Sunday.

Overall, anxiety about the state of the nation still runs high:

► 72% say they are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the country — the most in 2½ years.

► 70% rate the economy only fair to poor.

► More than a third — 36% — say the economy is getting worse, up from 30% in November 1995.

► 62% predict things won't get any better by 2000.

► And crime remains high on the priority list. Two out of three call it a top concern.

"We're in a pretty sad state right now," says Linda Robinson, 46, a Richmond, Vt., school aide. "We're throwing more money into education and we're not seeing anything for it. The morals of our country are a big problem too. And the economy has become so bad two people in a family have to work to make ends meet."

More...

COVER STORY, continued...

Americans also see much left to play out in the year-long budget battle between President Clinton and congressional Republicans, who each gained from recent voter anger over the last two elections.

So far, the messy partisan squabbles over balancing the budget, and the pain it might cause in areas such as Medicare, leave many wondering if throwing the old burns out made any difference after all.

"I think we've seen a lot of things said in the campaigns that aren't followed through afterwards," says Donna Astrauskas, 44, a community college instructor in Mesa, Ariz.

Voter attitudes like that suggest the ultimate outcome between competing philosophies of government

— and voter perceptions of how it will affect their lives — will be paramount in determining whether Clinton wins a second term and the GOP holds its congressional majority.

At first glance, people might be expected to be feeling better about the economy, long the best measure of the public mood in an election year.

In 1992, Clinton beat Bush with the message, "It's the economy, stupid."

Three years after Bush's loss, unemployment is relatively low at 5.6%. The stock market is at record-high levels. Interest rates are at their lowest in decades. Budget deficits have been cut in half.

A full half of respondents say they're personally better off than three years ago; 34% say they're worse off.

But family incomes are flat and good-paying jobs are scarce. Moreover, announcements of huge layoffs — 420,000 jobs lost last year — leave many fretting about job security and their families.

The personalized worries add to the interest in education, which analysts say has been quietly growing as an issue for years. Polls show the public concerned about low test scores, lack of discipline, deteriorating buildings, incompetent teachers, inadequate curricula, rising costs and high dropout rates.

A 1995 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll found that 71% of all Americans graded the nation's public schools at C or below.

At the same time, more middle-class families feel besieged by the invasion of drugs, guns and violent crime in their schools. These elements, they feel, threaten the safety of children, corrupt their morals and hamper learning.

Therefore, look for the candidates to target their pitches in the education area to the voter groups the poll finds most concerned about education quality.

The 1995 Virginia election was a good test case. There, Democrats held off Republicans by bashing GOP plans to cut education spending.

Presidents have addressed the education issue with mixed success ever since Ronald Reagan received *A Nation at Risk*, a report outlining the serious decline in school quality.

Bush campaigned for the White House saying he wanted to be known as the "education president."

Clinton followed up with a Goals 2000 program that set minimum national standards for student and school performance. And he recently scored points in the budget battle by hammering GOP proposals on the federal role in education.

The prime thrust of the GOP education package is to provide parents with vouchers that would enable their children to attend the school of their choice, public or private.

As politicians argue, voters look for answers. Says Matt Duris, 19, a Michelin Tire factory worker in Spartanburg, S.C.: "If people aren't well educated, the economy is definitely going to go downhill."

Contributing: Brian O'Connell

P-16

CAPITAL JOURNAL

BY GERALD F. SEIB

It's School Time: A Sleeper Issue Is Waking Up

JACQUILLA BROWN, a Pittsburgh department store employee, is the classic swing voter: She could vote either Republican or Democrat in Pennsylvania, a state that could go either Republican or Democrat in next year's presidential election.

But there's one thing that isn't swinging back and forth in Ms. Brown's



mind, and that's her view of what should be the most important issue of 1996. "The schools," she declares. "That's my top priority."

That's one pretty good hint that education may be the sleeper issue of next year's election. But it's hardly the only hint.

When The Wall Street Journal and NBC News conducted a large national poll earlier this month, Americans were asked to name the issues they would most like to see the federal government "do something about." Education and schools were mentioned more often than anything except controlling crime. Education, in fact, was mentioned nearly twice as often as it had been when the same question was asked in each of the past three years. Education concerns cut across all lines: They are cited as a top priority by liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats—nearly every group except the elderly.

So Americans want the federal government to do *something* about education. But what?

That's where there should be an interesting debate next year. At a time when voters generally say the federal government is trying to do too much—and botching too much of that—education is shaping up as a test of whether the political parties and their leaders can find some new paths to travel.

DEMOCRATS ENTER this debate with a built-in advantage. They are ready to spend more money, which is always the easiest way to demonstrate that you're responding to voters' concerns. Democrats already have used education to their great advantage in one closely watched election. Republicans were threatening this fall to take over both houses of the Virginia state Legislature for the first time. Democrats fought back by relentlessly charging the GOP would gut the state's education system. Result: Democrats didn't lose either chamber, and GOP Gov. George Allen has just responded by proposing more education spending.

And in the current federal budget impasse between President Clinton and congressional Republicans, Democrats are using education as a main cudgel for beating up on the GOP. Politics doesn't get any simpler than a Democratic National Committee ad. Its complete description of the Republicans' proposed education budget is as follows: "Education: cut \$30 billion."

But Democrats' natural instinct to propose spending more money on a problem isn't sufficient on this issue. While crying out for help, voters also sense more than ever that the ultimate solution to problems in their schools will be found within their communities. The challenge for Democrats is to show that they are finding ways Washington can help out, and then bow out.

THAT'S WHAT IS so intriguing about a virtually unnoticed mission Attorney General Janet Reno undertook to Long Beach, Calif., a few days ago on orders from President Clinton. She traveled to a school there to declare that the Clinton administration would support the Long Beach school system's attempt to increase discipline in its schools by requiring students to wear uniforms.

The Long Beach district in 1994 became the first in the nation to require all students to wear uniforms to class, a step the local leaders decided would raise standards and undercut gang influence by barring gang apparel. Local officials now credit the policy with helping to halve the number of school fights and reducing crimes and suspensions by about a third in one year.

But the American Civil Liberties Union, acting on behalf of a small group of parents, has challenged the uniform policy in court. Long Beach needed some reinforcement in its fight to keep a policy local officials thought was working. And that is why Ms. Reno appeared, throwing the influence of the Justice Department behind the school system.

Now a mediator is trying to negotiate a way to meet the ACLU's concerns while preserving the uniform policy. In the meantime, the suit isn't being pursued actively in court, and the school district is confident uniforms will survive the challenge. "Certainly the appearance of the attorney general isn't hurting the resolution of this case," says Dick Van Der Laan, information officer for the school district.

It may seem a minuscule step toward improving education, but it's important. Long Beach shows how the feds can intervene without taking over.

No money has changed hands, no new federal offices opened. But an innovative policy is being pushed ahead anyway. That suggests Democrats are figuring out something important about education. And maybe that's a prelude to a useful national debate about education in 1996.

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

(D)

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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Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that seeks to raise the level of public discussion about critical policy choices facing the nation. This study was done in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Leadership. Copies of *Assignment Incomplete* are available from Public Agenda, 6 E. 39th Street, New York, New York 10016. Tel: 212-686-6610, Fax: 212-689-3461 (\$10 each, or \$5 for 10 or more copies. Please add \$2.50 for shipping and handling on one book, \$5 for 2-5 books, or \$10 for 6-25 books.)



FOR RELEASE OCTOBER 11, 1995

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
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Kerry Flynn

HALF OF AMERICANS SAY HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA NO GUARANTEE OF BASICS

NEW YORK, N.Y. -- Public support for public schools is far more fragile than many educators' would like to believe, but a window of opportunity does exist to reverse the downward spiral in public attitudes toward local schools. This is according to a new Public Agenda study, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, prepared in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Leadership.

"When almost six in ten parents with children in public school say they would send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so, it's time for reformers to take heed of citizens' concerns with the public school system," said Public Agenda's Executive Director Deborah Wadsworth.

"Citizens are not yet ready to abandon the public system, but unless schools begin to deliver on what the public considers to be the essential elements of education, support for public schools is in jeopardy."

Americans surveyed in *Assignment Incomplete* think private schools do a better job than public schools in areas they are most concerned with - school safety, higher standards, order, and smaller classes. While nine in ten Americans say teaching the basics is "absolutely essential," almost half (47%) do not believe that a high school diploma from their own local public high school guarantees that a student has mastered the basics. Americans, however, have not reached consensus on alternatives. When presented with a scenario of long-term school failure, only 28% embrace the concept of school vouchers and 10% of privatization. Additionally, 28% want to overhaul the public schools and 20% want to give schools more money.

"Findings from *Assignment Incomplete* show a public dissatisfied with public school policies and practices, but a public still desirous of fixing the schools. For the reform movement to be successful, the public's remaining support cannot be squandered. Public priorities must be addressed and soon," said Michael Usdan, President of the Institute for Educational Leadership.

-more-

Assignment Incomplete examines four subject areas: why support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so focused on the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. Conducted in the summer of 1995, the comprehensive study is based on a national telephone survey of 1,200 Americans, including 439 parents with children currently attending public schools, and 237 public school teachers. The margin of error for the general public portion of the survey is plus/minus 3.4%. It is also based on a mail survey of 734 decision-makers in business, government, the media and other sectors. The mail survey explored the views of some 417 educational administrators across the country as well. The study also draws on results from a dozen focus groups in different parts of the country.

Key findings from *Assignment Incomplete*:

Public versus Private:

- 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. Fifty-one percent say private schools provide more safety and security; 20% say public schools are safer. Fifty-four percent say private schools are better at providing an environment that promotes values such as honesty and responsibility; 17% say public schools are better in this area.
- 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. Sixty percent say private schools are more likely to provide smaller class size.
- Only 33% of Americans think private school teachers are better than public school teachers; and 68% of leaders say teachers in public schools are the same or better than teachers in private schools.
- 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.
- Forty-six percent, almost half, of America's leaders say their local public schools are only doing a fair or poor job.

Focus on the Basics:

- 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.

Higher Standards for All:

- 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.

The Value of Education:

- 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."

According to *Assignment Incomplete*, Americans' views on knowledge and learning are highly pragmatic. They want their children to succeed socially and academically, but many are skeptical of the value of high academic achievement. "A culture that glamorizes mediocre levels of learning is hardly compatible with global forces that daily put a higher premium on knowledge," said Wadsworth. "As with latent health hazards, people deserve to know that, 'A lack of real learning could be hazardous to your child's health!'"

Assignment Incomplete is a follow-up report to Public Agenda's 1994 study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*. It is also a part of a three-year project Public Agenda has undertaken with the Institute for Educational Leadership to work with communities across the country to sponsor in-depth discussions of education issues among educators, parents, business people, and community residents. It was made possible by grants from Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Procter & Gamble Fund, TRW Inc., and The George Gund Foundation. Additional Public Agenda reports on education reform include, *The Public's Attitudes Toward the Basics*; *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education*; *Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts*; *Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics*; and *Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness*.

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public opinion research and education organization working to help citizens better understand complex policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. It was founded in 1975 by Daniel Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance.

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) is a 30-year old nonpartisan and nonprofit organization whose mission is to develop, inform, and support leaders for the purposes of improving educational, economic, and civic opportunities for all.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Public and Private Schools

Question: "Now I'm going to ask you to compare your community's public schools and the private non-religious/Catholic/Christian schools.* In your area, which schools are generally more likely to provide:"

*Question wording was tailored to fit respondent's point of comparison.

(compares public to combined private responses)

	GENERAL PUBLIC			Public	PARENTS	
	Public	Private	Same		Private	Same
An environment that teaches kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds	53%	22%	7%	54%	19%	8%
A better education for kids with special needs, such as the physically handicapped	51%	23%	6%	49%	22%	6%
Tried and true teaching techniques	29%	36%	16%	32%	29%	18%
A school policy that removes kids who are routinely disruptive	29%	42%	11%	29%	38%	12%
A better preparation for college	27%	45%	13%	29%	40%	12%
Better teachers	26%	33%	22%	30%	26%	23%
Higher academic standards ¹	24%	53%	8%	26%	45%	9%
Good work habits	22%	45%	19%	25%	38%	19%
More safety and security	20%	51%	13%	19%	46%	15%
More discipline and order in the classroom	18%	61%	8%	18%	54%	10%
An environment that promotes such values as honesty and responsibility	17%	54%	16%	19%	46%	20%
Smaller class size	13%	67%	6%	13%	65%	5%
An appreciation for religious values	11%	70%	4%	9%	69%	5%

¹Leader wording: "expectations" instead of "standards"

Note: Percentages in tables may not add up to 100% because "not sures" are not reported, or because of rounding. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in tables.

TABLE 2
Satisfaction with Public Schools

Question: "Overall, would you say that the public schools in your community are doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job?"

	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Excellent	16%	24%	42%	11%
Good	39%	47%	46%	42%
Fair	26%	21%	11%	34%
Poor	10%	7%	1%	12%

TABLE 3
Proposed Solutions for Failing Public Schools

Question: "If the public schools in your community had been failing to give kids a quality education for 10 or 15 years, which of the following would you want done FIRST?"

	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Give parents vouchers to make private schools a more affordable option	28%	30%	6%	16%
Overhaul the public schools	28%	25%	47%	65%
Increase the money public schools get	20%	25%	28%	6%
Have companies that specialize in education run the local public schools	10%	8%	4%	8%
Have the state government take over and run the local public schools	6%	3%	7%	2%



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

November 2, 1995

NOTE TO: Secretary Riley
Deputy Secretary Kunin
Mike Smith
Mike Cohen
Kay Casstevens
Kay Kahler
Frank Holleman
Leslie Thornton
Kevin Sullivan

FROM: Terry Peterson

I have been trying to continually summarize the different ideas around education that seem to connect with the public and that match our agenda.

Attached is a draft for possible discussion at the Hot Issues meeting.

If you have any hot changes that you would like to suggest, please let us know by about 3:30 and we will try to incorporate them.

Copy to our staff (immediate office)

↳ FYI

↳ -light?

mt

President Clinton is fighting for education as the best way to get young people on the right course so they and their families can make the most of their lives in this changing economy. He is for:

I. Improvements in Quality education so our children get a leg up on the future and make up a strong country with a strong economy.

- A. Elementary schools that rigorously teach our students the basics to high standards.
- B. Middle and secondary schools that
 - 1. make the connections for our students between K-12 education and college and/or productive employment and careers; and
 - 2. rigorously teach the basics and advanced skills, work habits, discipline, and respect to prepare our students to bridge that connection between childhood and responsible adulthood.
- C. Strengthening the quality of training of teachers.
- D. Forming private-public partnerships throughout America to get computer technology and technology-trained teachers in America's classrooms as fast as possible.
- E. Improving student loans and financial aid so deserving students can go to college.

II. The fight against civic decay and the wedge issues that divide us.

- A. Public schools that are not hostile to religion and respect individual religious beliefs.
- B. Positive, effective ways to deal with the violence and drugs in and around our schools.
 - 1. trained safety and drug officers in our high schools.
 - 2. special training for teachers in violence and drug prevention.
- C. Public schools providing on a year-round basis safe, disciplined, supportive, environments, and after-school mentoring programs for youth.
- D. Schools once again stressing civic responsibility and citizenship education.
- ? E. Advocacy of "V" chips in television for parents to control the television programming available to their children.

III. Support of increased parent involvement in education.

- A. Promote new opportunities to improve communications between parents and teachers to provide an early warning system for students in trouble as well as regular communication about students who are doing well..
- B. Encourage and support parent involvement in education (e.g., reading with their children, talking to their children's teachers)..
- C. Increased policies in the workplaces of America supporting employee involvement in their own or other children's education and schools.
- D. Support for young parents to learn how to work with, and be advocates for, their children.
- E. At least one caring and supportive adult in the life of every child.

IV. Increased investment in improved quality of education and better college loans and financial aid for deserving college students.

- A. Provide every low-income school with the equivalent of a reading and math specialist to help bolster student performance in the basics and two teaching assistants to work with parents and volunteers to help children with homework and tutoring (through expansion of Title I).
- B. Expand Safe and Drug-Free schools to include funding for better discipline: uniforms in schools, alternatives for disruptive students, drug testing, etc.
- C. Expand the availability of computer technology in the classroom to strengthen learning in the core subjects.
- D. Provide new learning opportunities and internships, apprenticeships in business for students who will enter the workplace directly (through expansion of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act).
- E. Provide better, streamlined Direct Loan program for college students.
- F. Double the funding for Work-Study for college students and increase Pell Grants.
- G. Provide half a million teachers every year with the opportunity to upgrade their technology skills to better teach students in the basics and major subjects. All teachers would be reached in 5 years (through an expansion of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program).
- H. Initiate an After-school Academic Challenge Fund available to local communities that want to expand educational opportunities beyond the regular school day and year.
- I. Provide excellence grants to 40,000 of America's schools most committed to improving standards of achievement and discipline, and forge new local partnerships for quality education (through expansion of Goals 2000: Educate America Act).
- J. Promising Innovations
 - 1. Charter Schools +\$50-100 million
 - 2. Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education +\$100-150 million
 - 3. Gifted and Talented +\$20 million

THE PUBLIC AGENDA FOUNDATION

October 6, 1995

Start new Poll
Polling Job / ed.
✓



Dear Colleague:

A year ago we released a comprehensive study of citizens' views on education reform entitled, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*. We did not anticipate the overwhelming response this study would receive nor the impact it would have on the reform debate. *First Things First* clearly conveyed to readers why the priorities of many educators and reformers were out of sync with the views of the general public.

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Our latest study, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, takes up where *First Things First* left off. Our findings, in and of themselves, are interesting and at times surprising. They are also the basis for the launch of a joint Public Agenda-Institute for Educational Leadership initiative to engage citizens in town meetings across the country in genuine productive deliberation about their expectations of public education.

Assignment Incomplete explores why support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so focused on the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. It is clear from this study that while citizens may not yet be ready to abandon the public school system, unless schools begin to deliver on what the public considers to be essential elements of education, support for public schools is in jeopardy.

Assignment Incomplete also comments on Americans' attitudes toward the value of education itself. In a nutshell, Americans want their children to succeed socially and academically, but many are skeptical of the value of high academic achievement. This finding surely has implications for those who continue to glamorize mediocre levels of learning in the face of global forces that daily put a higher premium on knowledge.

As with *First Things First*, I think you will find *Assignment Incomplete* a thought-provoking study. I hope it will also be useful to you as you continue to address the country's education needs.

Sincerely,

Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director

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.

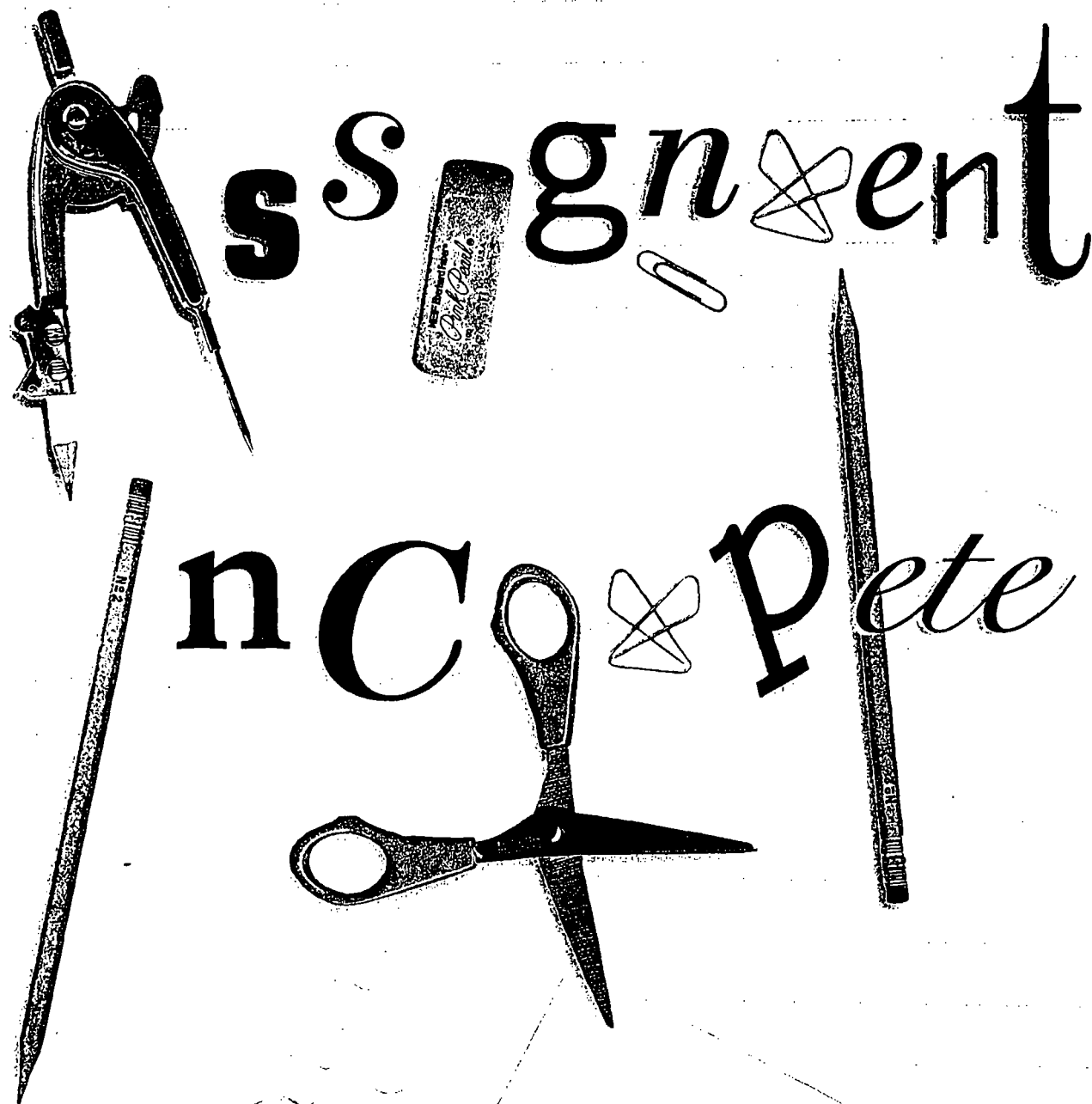
Section 4 - What About the Pursuit of Knowledge?

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."
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**Assignment Incomplete:
The Unfinished Business of Education Reform**

A REPORT FROM PUBLIC AGENDA

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**Assignment Incomplete:
The Unfinished Business of Education Reform**



A REPORT FROM PUBLIC AGENDA

By Jean Johnson

With

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and

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Donna Rhodes at the Mott Foundation, *Robert Schwartz* at Pew, *Bob Wehling* at Proctor & Gamble, *David Bergholz* at Gund, and once again *Michael Jackson* at TRW for their willingness to support this research and their belief in our work.

Deborah Wadsworth, Public Agenda’s executive director, whose intelligent advocacy made this project a reality and whose insight and judgment are indispensable ingredients in all of Public Agenda’s work.

Daniel Yankelovich, whose seminal thinking about public opinion guides and enriches Public Agenda’s endeavors.

About Public Agenda

Founded over a decade ago by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's indepth research on how average citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum.

About the Institute for Educational Leadership

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to improve educational opportunities and results for children and youth by developing and supporting leaders who work together. To achieve these results, IEL works with the leaders and emerging leaders of education, human and health service agencies at all governmental levels, non-profits, corporations and private foundations. It is located at 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036. Tel: (202) 822-8405. Fax: (202) 872-4050 On-Line: iel@access.digex.net

A National Conversation: A Joint Project of Public Agenda and IEL

Public Agenda and IEL have launched a project to engage citizens in a civil and thoughtful conversation about their expectations of public education. Based on significant opinion and communication research conducted to date, including findings reported in this study, Public Agenda and IEL will create a process, plus materials, to encourage such conversation in a series of local town meetings. These meetings will be held in eight pilot sites during 1996. Based on evaluations from the pilot sites, the process will be fine-tuned and, ideally, be used as a basis for similar town meetings nationwide. Too often, discussions of education have been held captive by groups and elected officials with narrow, sometimes short-sighted, concerns. The primary goal of this project is to provide a fresh framework so that citizens may engage in genuine and productive deliberation about the schools. For more information about the project, contact Jacqueline Danzberger at IEL.

PREFACE

Assignment Incomplete is a follow-up report to Public Agenda's 1994 study on public school education, entitled *First Things First*. That study, reflecting the in-depth attitudes of over 1,100 Americans, suggested that in many important ways the public and reformers are on dramatically different wavelengths. For its part, the public is persuaded that schools cannot succeed unless they are safe and orderly, and unless teachers concentrate, first and foremost, on helping children master basic skills. Education reformers, meanwhile, have focused their attention elsewhere — for example, on the need to teach higher order, conceptual skills and on dramatically raising standards to achieve that goal.

The response to *First Things First* has been encouraging. Many reformers have taken the public's message to heart, devoting more serious attention to safety and order in the schools and reexamining their own goals and messages in light of what the public has to say. As Public Agenda had hoped, the research has helped educators and reformers understand where they can count on strong public support, where they are likely to encounter stiff resistance, and where they need to take a second look at their own goals (and rhetoric) if the public schools are indeed to reflect the public's thinking.

The New Debate over the Future of Public Education

From Public Agenda's perspective, however, much important work remained to be done. We saw a need, not only to monitor public attitudes during the reform process but also to delve even more deeply into emerging issues. For in the last year or so, a new debate has mushroomed among educators and decision-makers regarding the very future of public education. In Wisconsin, for example, legislation allowing parents to use tax-funded vouchers to send their children to religious schools has provoked a court battle, with private donors stepping in to provide tuition pending a judicial ruling. Communities such as Baltimore and Hartford have mounted bold experiments in which private companies manage public schools.

Assignment Incomplete investigates the public's perspective on this exceptionally important policy debate. We also return to two key topics covered by *First Things First* — attitudes about teaching basics and raising standards — in an attempt to help educators and decision-makers better understand the public's thinking. Finally, we explore the public's views of education itself. What

importance do the American people really attach to knowledge and learning?

Assignment Incomplete reports on findings from research conducted in the summer of 1995. The study included two components: a national telephone survey measuring the views of 1,200 Americans, including 439 parents with children currently attending public schools, and 237 public school teachers; and a mail survey tapping the views of 734 decision-makers in business, government, media, and other sectors. The mail survey also explored the views of some 417 educational administrators across the country. Although Public Agenda will issue a more detailed interpretation of educators' views later this fall, we have reported the views of teachers and administrators where they seem particularly revealing. The study also draws on results from dozens of focus groups in different parts of the country — some conducted specifically for this study and others conducted for other current Public Agenda projects on education (See *Methodology*).

From the public's perspective, educators have yet to deliver on their most important assignments.

When Is Public Thinking Stable?

We have tried throughout this report to differentiate between areas where public thinking is stable, and unlikely to change with further discussion, and areas where public thinking is fragmentary or unsettled. Opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich, an explorer of trends in American thinking for over four decades (and with Cyrus Vance, a co-founder of Public Agenda), recommends three criteria for judging when public opinion is likely to be stable: One, do responses change when questions are worded differ-

ently? Two, are people's views internally consistent, or do they say one thing at one time and something quite different a few moments later? And three, do people stick with their views even when the costs and trade-offs associated with a course of action are made clear? In reporting our results, we have attempted to help educators and others understand these distinctions. From Public Agenda's perspective, such understanding is essential to grasp the public's viewpoint accurately and to interpret the findings responsibly.

Lastly, we call this report *Assignment Incomplete* for several reasons. As we report in the following pages, the findings suggest strongly that from the public's perspective, educators have yet to deliver on their most important assignments, such as teaching the

basics. The findings also suggest that the American people themselves have an assignment to complete. In several key areas, people have not considered issues as fully and carefully as they need to in order to make decisions they themselves can live with.

And finally, our own work is incomplete. This report itself is part of a larger effort that will continue at least through 1997. Public Agenda, joined by the Institute for Educational Leadership, will work with communities across the country to sponsor in-depth discussions of education issues among educators, parents, business people, and community residents (See *A National Conversation*, page 8). Based on the findings we report here, we are convinced that educators and the American people still have much to discuss.

SECTION ONE

WHY SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS IS IN JEOPARDY

This Section In Summary

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 — at least not yet. 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 really improve the schools. Thus, in the battle over the future of public education, the public is essentially “up for grabs.” Neither the advocates of public education nor the proponents of private alternatives should confidently count the American public on their side.

Introduction

In a recent speech calling for sweeping reform of city schools, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani suggested that without such changes, public dissatisfaction will become so potent that movements to privatize school management and/or utilize tax dollars for private schools will eventually succeed. These are ideas Mayor Giuliani says he opposes.

A number of prominent New Yorkers immediately took issue with the Mayor's characterization of both the performance of city schools and the public's view of them. Still others countered that privatization and/or vouchers will produce far better results than “yet another overhaul” of the city's schools. But whatever one thinks of Mayor Giuliani's views, or those of his opponents, his speech crystallizes a policy debate that extends far beyond New York City. It is a debate that is taking place, or is about to take place, in urban, suburban, and rural districts nationwide.

This debate over the future of public education raises important questions about what Americans really think about the public schools. Are Americans nationwide as dissatisfied with public schools as Mayor Giuliani

contends New Yorkers are with theirs? If so, why? What does the public consider wrong, and right, with public schools? Just how strong — or how tenuous — is the public's commitment to public education? This section outlines key findings on the public's assessment of public schools and its commitment to them.

Although many people voice initial approval of their own local public schools, this support disintegrates at the slightest probing.

What We Want vs. What We Get

The American public is remarkably clear about what it wants from public schools. Public Agenda's research on education, along with studies by many other groups, shows that people want safe, orderly schools where all children learn at least basic skills, and more if possible. Americans from all walks of life, in every demographic group and in every part of the country, endorse the very same list of priorities — safety, order, and the basics.

But although Americans' views about what the schools should be doing are exceedingly clear, their judgments about how well the schools are doing are more complex and

ambiguous. Indeed, Americans' current thinking about the state of public education displays many of the hallmarks of opinion that is unresolved and evolving. Researchers have long observed that although Americans express deep concern about "education" or "schools" in general, they routinely voice much more positive views about schools in their own community.¹ But analysis by Public Agenda shows that public support even for local public schools is far more fragile than many educators would like to believe.

Collapsing on the Specifics

This survey, like many others, picks up initially positive reactions to local public schools. Over half (55%) of the public and 71% of parents with children currently attending public school initially give schools in their community a "good" or "excellent" rating. But the high levels of satisfaction found in surveys evaporate at the slightest challenge — when people are asked to compare current schools with the ones they themselves attended, when they are asked about specific areas such as discipline or academic standards, when people are asked whether they are getting their money's worth as taxpayers, or when they are asked to compare public schools to private ones.² This underlying negativity and disappointment emerges repeatedly in focus group discussions, even when conversation remains firmly centered on local public schools.

This phenomenon — the downward spiral in the public's views of local schools when the questions become more precise — occurred starkly in Public Agenda's 1994 *First Things First* study. Positive, top-of-the-head responses to local schools — 53% of respondents initially gave local schools a rating of "excellent" or "very good" — disintegrated the moment the questionnaire turned to specifics: 72% of respondents voiced concern about drugs and violence in local schools, 61% said low standards were a problem, 60% complained about lack of attention to basics.

The public's top-of-the-head endorsement of local public schools does mean something — respect for the purpose of public schools, loyalty to a community institution, respect and affection for local teachers and students.

But, as we show in the following pages, this initial approval masks underlying concerns and frustrations that genuinely disturb people. Educators who are comforted by positive responses to general, "How are the schools doing?" questions may be lulled into a dangerous and false complacency. When most people talk about public education, the word "crisis" may not be on the tips of their tongues, but it may also not be far from their minds.

Why Look at Private Schools?

In this study, Public Agenda tested the softness of support for public schools in another way, by asking respondents to compare their own local public schools with private schools in their areas. The comparison with private schools is particularly revealing for two reasons. One, it cuts through nostalgia often associated with the past and at least partially addresses the argument that problems in schools today are largely a manifestation of broader social developments, such as more single-parent families or the influence of television. Two, comparing public schools to private schools is interesting because so many critics are proposing vouchers as a remedy for the problems afflicting American education.

Public Schools: Suffering by Comparison

Many critics have pointed to private schools as models for what public schools should be doing, suggesting that private schools provide a better atmosphere for learning and are more successful in teaching children what they need to know. But educators in public schools often recoil at this comparison, disputing the "success" or "effectiveness" of private schools compared to public ones, or attributing private school effectiveness to their selectivity. This survey asked the general public, parents with children now in public schools, public school teachers, and community leaders to make the comparison.*

* Throughout this report, references to "parents" indicate parents with children currently in public schools, and references to "teachers" indicate public school teachers.

When first asked to compare the two systems, the public is fairly evenly split: Almost four in ten Americans (39%) say private schools in their community provide the better education; a third (33%) say public schools do better, and an unusually large number of respondents (27%) say they are unsure which schools are best.³ But once again, the phenomenon of disintegrating support emerges. As the subject turns to discipline and standards and values and class size, Americans give the nod to private schools by margins of two-to-one.

This survey asked people to compare the performance of public schools to private ones in 13 different categories ranging from safety to quality of teaching staff to teaching children with special needs. Questions specifically asked respondents to think about public and private schools in their own communities. In 11 of 13 categories, pluralities say private schools do better. And it is in the areas that Americans identify as most important — safety, order, standards, and smaller classes — that private schools excel. (Table 1)⁴

Private Schools: Winning in the Areas that Count

Sixty-one percent of Americans surveyed say private schools are more likely to provide order and discipline in the classroom, compared to only 18% who say their local public schools do better in this area. Fifty-three percent say private schools have higher academic standards, compared to only 24% who think standards are higher in local public schools. Fifty-one percent say private schools provide more safety and security, compared to only one in five (20%) who think public schools are safer. And finally, over half (54%) say private schools are better at providing an environment that promotes values such as honesty and responsibility. Only 17% say public schools do better in this area.

Private schools also score well in the public's mind by providing smaller classes. Sixty-seven percent of Americans say private schools do better in this area, compared to 13% for the public schools. Focus groups conducted for this project, and other Public Agenda projects, suggest that people think smaller classes are doubly beneficial: In small classes, teachers can work with children

individually, helping them learn to the best of their abilities; teachers can also establish the discipline and order that make learning possible.

Leadership Disenchanted

Leaders in business, government, media, and other sectors surveyed for this study were even more likely than members of the public to say private schools are superior. Eighty-two percent of leaders say private schools are better at providing discipline and order in class; 65% say they have higher academic standards. Sixty-three percent say private schools are more successful in providing an environment that promotes honesty and responsibility, and 58% say private schools are superior in teaching good work habits. Leaders also show higher initial disapproval of local schools than do the general public or parents. Even when first asked, almost half (46%) of America's leaders say that local public schools are only "fair" (34%) or poor (12%). (Table 2)

A Public Poised for Flight?

Perhaps most ominous for advocates of public schools, almost six in ten (57%) parents with children now in public schools would send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so — 36% to a religious school and 21% to a non-religious private school. This, of course, is in addition to parents who have already selected private education for their children. A recent Empire State survey in New York showed similar results: 66% of New York City parents with children in public schools say they would choose a private school for their children if they had the money.⁵

As the subject turns to discipline and standards and values and class size, Americans give the nod to private schools by margins of two-to-one.

A Very Contrary View from Teachers

Public school teachers surveyed for this study make a very different assessment of the performance of public schools in their community. Three-quarters (75%) say public schools in their community are better than private ones, compared to only a third of the

public and 29% of leaders who make a similar judgment. Almost nine in ten public school teachers (88%) rate local schools as “good” or “excellent,” compared to roughly half of leaders (53%) and the public (55%). In fact, about four in ten teachers (42%) say local public schools are “excellent,” compared to just 11% of leaders and 16% of the public. (Table 2)

Perhaps not surprisingly, seven of ten teachers say public schools have better teachers than private schools. But educators also rate public schools as superior in key academic areas. Seventy-five percent of teachers say public schools are better or at least equal to private schools in providing good preparation for college. Eight in ten (82%) teachers say public schools are better or at least equal to private schools in using “tried and true teaching techniques.”

However, there are two areas where teachers appear to envy private schools. Half of teachers (51%) say private schools are better at removing routinely disruptive children from classrooms, and 60% say private schools are more likely to provide smaller class size. (Table 1)

Americans Blame Policies, Not People

The public’s verdict that private schools succeed where public schools fail is centered squarely on public school policies and practices — not on the people involved. Neither the general public nor leaders attribute problems in public education to inferior teachers or to the public schools’ obligation to educate every child. Only a third of Americans (33%) think private school teachers are better than public school teachers, while one in four (26%) says that public school teachers are better and 22% rate teachers the same. Leaders are even less likely than the public to say the problem with public schools is the teaching staff. Over two-thirds of the leaders (68%) say teachers in public schools are the same (41%) or better (27%) than teachers in private schools.

Positive attitudes about public school teachers also emerge frequently in focus groups where respondents routinely characterize them as well-intentioned professionals who labor against mighty odds for unimpressive rewards. One Albuquerque woman was typical of many interviewed for this project: “Most of the teachers must be pretty dedi-

cated people to be doing what they’re doing for the amount of pay that they’re getting.”

Americans who favor private schools also reject the notion that these schools succeed because they refuse to admit less capable students or are able to expel disappointing or unruly ones — an argument often made by public school educators and their supporters. 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. Research by Public Agenda in *First Things First* also shows that most Americans support giving public schools themselves more leeway to remove students who are repeatedly disruptive or are dangerous to teachers or other students from regular classrooms.⁶

Socialization and Diversity: A Major Public School Asset

Private schools do not win the battle for public approval hands down. Americans say public schools are better than private schools in two areas, one of which is teaching children to live in a diverse society. Over half of the public (53%) and almost six in ten leaders (59%) say local public schools are more effective in teaching kids how to get along with people of diverse backgrounds.

Public Agenda’s research for *First Things First* found broad support for the public schools’ role in teaching children to live together in a diverse society. Nine in ten Americans (95%) support the idea of schools teaching “respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background,” while eight in ten (84%) advocate schools teaching that it is good to “have friends from different racial backgrounds and [to live] in integrated neighborhoods.” And in focus groups, people routinely emphasize the ability to get along with different kinds of people as a quality that is valuable in the workplace and the community.

Thus, public school superiority in this area is not a trivial or inconsequential advantage. Americans’ commitment to public schools as a mechanism to help bind society together is an important strength, especially as the nation becomes increasingly diverse. The question for public school proponents is whether this advantage can offset widespread

perceptions that too many public schools are unsafe and disorderly, with sub-par academic standards.

Special Education: A Mixed Blessing

Providing a better education for children with special needs is the other category in which public schools clearly outperform private ones. Half of the public (51%) and 62% of leaders say public schools are superior in this area. However, for many Americans, public school superiority in special education is a mixed blessing. While two-thirds of the American people believe that physically handicapped children can and should be taught in regular classes, only one American in five (22%) thinks that children with "mental handicaps" can be successfully "mainstreamed."⁷ Most people want such children to receive an education that will help them achieve to the best of their ability, but many also worry that mainstreaming "takes away" from the education of "average children" — both siphoning off funds and distracting teachers in class.

Lingering, But Precarious Support

Findings from this study suggest that Americans believe private schools provide a better education for most children. The general public, parents, and leaders uniformly rate private schools better at providing the essential, indispensable ingredients of education — safety, order, standards, small classes. But these views — seemingly damning to the future of public education — coexist alongside a public desire to save America's public schools. People aren't sure how to save the schools, and they are unfamiliar with many points in the debate over the future of public education, but it's certain that the debate has been joined.

How to Fix Failing Schools

This study presented respondents with a hypothetical, worst-case situation: Suppose public schools in your own community had been "failing to give kids a quality education for 10 or 15 years." What remedy should be tried first? (See Table 3) Even under these dire circumstances — more than a decade of public school failure — almost half the public (48%) still wants to fix public schools rather than move to vouchers or privatization. In

response to the question raised above, 28% of the public wants to "overhaul the public schools," and 20% would give them more money. In contrast, 28% favor giving parents vouchers to send their children to private schools. Even among parents whose children presumably would be the victims of a failing public school system, and the primary beneficiaries of a voucher system, only 30% list vouchers as their preferred approach.

The idea of privatizing the management of public schools — presented in the questionnaire as having "companies that specialize in education run the local public schools" — drew minimal support, 10% among the public and 8% among leadership. However, this concept did surpass the idea of having state government take over and run the local public schools, which attracted a scant 6% of the public and 2% of leaders.

Even among leaders — by far the most skeptical, dissatisfied group — two-thirds would overhaul the public schools as the remedy of choice. In contrast to the public, leaders are much less eager to attack problems in public schools by providing more money — only 6% call this the best course of action.

The public itself seems undecided about whether more money would help improve public schools.

Is Money the Answer?

The public itself seems undecided about whether more money would help improve public schools. This survey presented people with a direct head-to-head choice: Which course of action, the survey asked, is more likely to improve local public schools? "More money for up-to-date equipment, smaller classes, and increased support for kids with the greatest problems?" Or "higher standards and more discipline — things that do not require additional money?"

The public is split down the middle on this question. Almost half (47%) believe their local schools would improve with more money while 45% say higher standards and more discipline would be more effective. Leaders, again, are less disposed to think money will help; only 36% would increase local schools' funds. And surprisingly, this is one area where the views of educators and the public are quite similar. Half the teachers (49%) say more money would help, but 41% vote for standards and discipline.

Failing Schools, Fractured Responses

As we have already noted, Americans are far from united in how to respond to a picture of failing public schools. Some Americans want to overhaul public schools. Some think the problem is money. Some want vouchers. A handful opt for privatization or a state takeover of the schools. The Public Agenda survey even pressed respondents for a second response, asking people what they would do if their first option failed. Here again, however, no solid consensus emerges. Americans seem to equivocate between overhauling public schools or giving them more money, or giving money directly to parents to allow them to send their children to private schools.

But how well do people actually understand this policy debate — one with enormous consequences for millions of American children, parents, and taxpayers? Do people know how vouchers and privatization would work? Have they actually considered the arguments for and against these alternatives?

Changeable, Unresolved Public Thinking

Survey questions examining people's views on vouchers and choice plans show variable results depending on how the questions are asked — an important signal to opinion analysts that findings may be, to use the highly technical term, "mushy." Questions that emphasize giving parents choice about which schools their children attend routinely elicit a positive response, as do questions about giving people choice in health care coverage or retirement plans.⁸

The most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, which has looked at attitudes on schools for the past 27 years, shows that 69% of Americans favor allowing parents and students to choose among public schools, but only 33% favor allowing them to choose to attend "a private school at public expense," suggesting that people make some distinction between choice plans within public systems and traditional voucher programs. The current Public Agenda survey reveals somewhat conflicting patterns of thought among public school parents. Over half prefer private schools for their children, but only 30% support vouchers as a remedy for consistently failing schools. Again, when people's views seem internally inconsistent,

survey findings should be viewed with caution.

Vouchers and Privatization: An Embryonic Debate

Focus groups from the last few years suggest a growing public familiarity with voucher plans, at least as they would affect individual families, and a generally positive reaction among parents with youngsters now in public schools. However, participants rarely show any real understanding of the issues roiling debate among policymakers — for example, whether taxpayer funds should be spent on religious schools or whether public schools would improve or decline if they faced more competition from private education. Respondents do occasionally express concern about "children left behind," but their comments suggest that this thought has often just occurred to them. Even when moderators ask about these arguments directly, they usually have to explain the various viewpoints, laying out the concerns of opponents and advocates.

Overall, focus group discussions suggest that most people have not thought seriously about either the benefits or possible drawbacks of the widespread use of vouchers — either the potential of dramatically upgrading the education most children receive through competition or the possibility of creating a two-tiered system of educational "haves" and "have-nots."

The handful of focus groups Public Agenda has conducted which touch on privatization suggest that this approach is not well understood at all. Public Agenda did explore attitudes about privatization in a 1994 study in the state of Connecticut, where this approach has been hotly debated. Here, privatization also drew minimal support (24%) from the public. Leaders in Connecticut were divided over the issue (32% in favor, 35% opposed), with a surprisingly high 34% saying they were "not sure" whether or not the state should rely on private companies to run the most troubled school districts.⁹

Looking for Answers

Thus, the principal message from this study is not what the findings say about alternatives to a public system. Debate about these ideas, for the general public at least, is nascent, and polling data on these issues will

remain unreliable for some time. What leaps out most strongly is public willingness, despite deep disappointment, to give public schools one more chance. There is no clamor to dismantle the current system, as there is, for example, when people talk about welfare or the federal tax code. What people would really prefer, if they had their "druthers," is for the public schools to work.

But when it comes to specific solutions, people's views seem unsettled and equivocal. Proponents of alternatives to the traditional

public system certainly have the public's ear, and over a quarter of Americans express support for new approaches. But proponents of alternatives also have much explaining to do. So while advocates of public schooling can probably count on a brief "extension" to address public concerns, the message for those who care deeply about public education seems clear: it would be unwise to assume that public education is entitled to public support as a matter of birthright. The status quo in public schooling is unlikely to be acceptable to most Americans forever.

What leaps out most strongly is public willingness, despite deep disappointment, to give public schools one more chance.

SECTION TWO

WHY AMERICANS ARE OBSESSED WITH THE BASICS

This Section In Summary

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 anger and 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 fundamentals include the ability to work hard and apply oneself, proficiency in using computers, along with mastery of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Introduction

Over the past year, Public Agenda has presented findings from *First Things First* to many groups of educators around the country. The study shows that Americans are deeply concerned about safety, order, discipline, and the ineffective teaching of basic skills. They are skeptical about teaching innovations that have a strong following among educators — ideas such as using calculators in early grades and heterogeneous grouping — and they are dubious about the way education reform is proceeding in many communities. *First Things First* contained disappointing news for many who have been laboring long and hard in the vineyards of education reform.

To Public Agenda’s surprise, no finding has elicited as much dismay among education reformers as the public’s continuing preoccupation with teaching children “the basics.” Educators (and others) make a compelling argument that children need more than the basics to do today’s jobs. Business and industry need a work force capable of more than simply reading, writing, and doing basic arithmetic, and from the individual’s perspective, few Americans can expect to make a good living for themselves and their families if that is the extent of their skills.

Consequently, many reformers see teaching basics as a simplistic, low-level goal. They fear that the focus on basics means that Americans have dangerously low aspirations for their children and a disturbingly inaccurate

view of what it really takes to do most jobs. For some highly committed, hard-working reformers, the notion of “teaching the basics” has become “educationally incorrect.”

Given the level of concern among reformers about this strain of public thought, we have returned to the issue in the current survey. We have attempted to learn what people mean when they encourage schools to teach the basics, and whether, for most Americans, basics are just the beginning of education, or an acceptable end, in and of themselves. In this section, we present the results of this investigation.

Basics: The One Thing Everyone Agrees On

The public’s anxiety about children learning “basics” is indisputable. Moreover, the public is hardly alone in its judgment that basics are an educational necessity of the highest order. The public’s point of view is shared universally by leaders, teachers, and educational administrators. In focus groups — and Public Agenda has conducted over 100 focus groups on education issues over the last five years — moderators never even have to ask people about “basics.” Ask people about education, and the word pops up spontaneously — in any part of the country, among any group of Americans.

The current survey merely confirms what numerous other surveys have found: Ameri-

cans see basics as the most important teaching goal for any school. And for the public, this goal is non-negotiable. Out of 16 areas that might be emphasized in school — with categories ranging from “a love of learning” to chemistry and physics, to values such as honesty and tolerance — the basics easily tops the list. Nine in ten Americans (92%) say teaching the basics is “absolutely essential.” Among leaders, the figure is an astonishing 99%. (Table 6)

And although some reformers have greeted this particular message from the public with dismay, the focus on basics is shared, almost universally, by teachers and other educators nationwide. Ninety-eight percent of teachers and 100% of the school administrators surveyed for this study agree that the basics are “absolutely essential.”

Diplomas Signifying Nothing

But despite the preeminence people place on children mastering the basics, large numbers of Americans are not convinced that getting a high school diploma from their own local public high school guarantees even this modest level of educational attainment. Almost half of Americans surveyed (47%) say they do not believe a high school degree is a guarantee that a student has learned the basics. Parents of children currently attending public school, whose views about local public schools are more positive than the public generally, are almost as skeptical. Forty-one percent say a high school diploma does not necessarily mean the student has the basics. Among leaders, the number of skeptics totals almost two-thirds (65%).

In focus groups, people seem bewildered and frustrated that young people with a high school degree lack seemingly simple basic skills. A Denver man was typical: “You come across people who have graduated from high school and don’t know how to read at all. They can’t read a newspaper and make sense of it. They couldn’t look at a legal document and understand what it’s trying to say. I get letters from people... and there are obvious misspellings of simple words.”

An Albuquerque woman made a similar complaint: “I see an awful lot of kids graduating from high school now, coming in and putting in applications at my place of work, and they can’t even fill it out. But they’ve

graduated. It’s very disturbing.” A teacher in New Jersey talked about the students she sees in her classes. “I had a student in my Spanish class this summer who was a native Spanish-speaker, and she could not write in English or Spanish.... You try to figure out, ‘How did this student get to be a senior in high school? Why wasn’t this caught early on?’”

Doubt Among Teachers as Well

Even teachers and school administrators who make very positive assessments of local public schools admit to substantial doubt. Almost a third of teachers (32%) say that a high school diploma from their local public schools does not guarantee a mastery of basics; a similar number of administrators agree (33%). Interestingly, nine in ten teachers and administrators say local schools do a good or excellent job at teaching “basic reading, writing and math skills,” but it is not clear from this study whether educators are merely admitting that some small number of students “slip through the cracks” because standards are imperfectly enforced, or whether these findings reflect a sense that some level of “social promotion” is acceptable to many educators.

“How did this student get to be a senior in high school? Why wasn’t this caught early on?”

—New Jersey Teacher

Other People’s Children

These findings also suggest that Americans apply a “zero tolerance” standard when it comes to ineffective teaching of basics. In focus groups, people are genuinely disturbed by what is happening, not to their own children, but to other people’s children.

Respondents in focus groups rarely talk about children in their own families or children they know personally when they express alarm about educational failure at this level. But neither is their image gleaned mainly from TV or other media. Their image is frequently a youngster from the neighborhood — someone they have actually encountered. The ubiquitous check-out clerk who can’t make change is a staple of focus group conversation in virtually every community (and a phenomenon probably familiar to readers of this report).

People do seem to acknowledge that, for most kids, teaching of the basics goes reasonably well. For those who see basics as absolutely essential, 62% of the public (and 72% of parents) say local schools do a good or excellent job. What disturbs people are the exceptions — the youngsters who “fall through the cracks.” People are convinced that youngsters without basic skills are more likely to be unemployed, go on welfare, or be drawn into a life of crime. Consequently, for most Americans, this is not an issue they ignore just because their own children are not directly affected.

The Fundamentals of Learning

The public's concern about the basics is hardly new. Exactly what people mean by the term has been less clear. This study, along with a series of focus groups conducted by Public Agenda for The Business Roundtable's Education Task Force, attempted to clarify the public definition of “basics.” Do people mean anything more than reading, writing, and arithmetic? What about subjects such as history and geography? What about the ability to think and reason? Do people understand that modern jobs require more than mere basics?

Focus groups suggest repeatedly that the initial public definition is rather straightforward — basics are the ability to read and write and spell the English language and do basic arithmetic. For most people, these skills are important in and of themselves, and they are crucial if a child is ever to learn more. Basics are the skills that make all other learning possible. For the public, and for leaders, teachers, and other educators as well, a child who does not master basics by junior high or high school is educationally, and probably economically, doomed. Unless kids get the basics, people say, they have very little chance at a productive and contented life.

Reading and Writing as Foundation. Just a small sampling of comments from the focus groups suggest how important and how functional people think basics are. A Cincinnati woman put it this way: “I think academics have to be the foundation for all other things. You may be able to get along well with other people, but if you don't know how to tell time, and you don't know how to read, how can you really survive in the world?” A

Birmingham woman painted the same picture — the basics as foundation, the basics as starting point: “If you do not have the basics, then you're not going to learn anything else. It's like climbing a set of stairs... one step at a time.”

A first-grade teacher from Grand Rapids stressed the absolute priority of making sure children learn to read: “Reading, writing, and math is very important. I feel that if they can read, they can add all this other stuff to it. But first, teach them to read.”

Skills, Plus Values. But for the vast majority of Americans, skills like reading and writing will not take a child very far unless other qualities are present. More than nine in ten (92%) Americans say teaching youngsters basics is “absolutely essential.” But almost as many point to the importance of schools teaching (or at least reinforcing) a small circle of essential character traits. Eight in ten Americans say it is absolutely essential for youngsters to learn “good work habits such as being responsible and on time” (83%) and “the value of hard work” (78%).

Almost three quarters (74%) of Americans would add “values such as honesty and tolerance of others” to their absolutely essential list. These are not abstractions from public's point of view. Americans across the country and in every walk of life — the public, leaders, teachers, and other educators — see these values as vital to successful education and to a responsible and productive adult life.

A Birmingham man used his own job to show why schools need to emphasize responsibility and self-discipline: “It's building good habits for life... When I go home tonight, the first thing I'm going to want to do is turn on the TV... But I've got two proposals due tomorrow, and I'm going to go to my office and do those proposals... Most kids don't do that unless they're taught that at an early age... like in junior high school.”

People believe that being able to apply oneself to a task and having the motivation and self-discipline to carry the task out is what allows youngsters to succeed in education and in later life. Asked what determines people's success in jobs and careers, 41% of Americans choose “being persistent and having inner drive” as the key factor, compared to 27% who say an excellent academic background and 23% who choose “knowing

how to deal well with people." Only a handful of Americans (no more than 6% in any category) say success comes from "knowing the right people and having the right connections." (Table 7)

The leaders surveyed for this study are individuals who have themselves achieved considerable success in their jobs and careers. Asked what contributes to success in later life, they see a similar formula. Thirty-eight percent say inner drive is the key factor, 32% choose an excellent academic background, and 29% say dealing well with people is the key. And like other Americans, leaders discount the role of "connections." Only 2% think "knowing the right people" is the secret to professional success.

Computers: The New Basic. Education reformers, alarmed by the public's continuing focus on basics, often fear that too many Americans are caught "behind the times." Do Americans, reformers often ask, understand that education today needs to be different than when they attended school? Focus group discussions show that most people do in fact pattern their vision of what children should learn on what they themselves learned. But surveys also show that people continually adapt their view of what youngsters need to learn to accommodate the realities of modern life. Previous research by Public Agenda and others shows that Americans strongly support AIDS education, for example, and teaching about environmental and health hazards that, for many, were essentially unknown during their own school years.

The current survey demonstrates that Americans have, once again, refurbished their view of what children need to learn, and clearly proficiency in using computers is near the top of that list. Eight in ten Americans (80%) say that teaching computer skills is "absolutely essential," reflecting both a willingness to adapt their concept of education and at least a partial understanding of what is needed to ready the next generation for the world of work.

Like concern about the more traditional basics, concern about computer skills is spontaneous, immediate, and ubiquitous in focus groups on education. People recognize the need: they have thought about it and internalized it. A man in Middletown, NY simply added it to his list when the moderator asked what he meant by basics: "Math,

English, writing, and probably computers." A woman in the same focus group immediately agreed: "Years ago, reading, writing, and arithmetic were considered the basics. Today, basics are reading, writing, and computers."

A Cincinnati man tied his concern about computers specifically to the job market: "To succeed in the future years, they [high school graduates] have to have computer literacy. They're just going to have to get that by the time they finish high school 'cause if they don't, they're just not going to be employable. They're not going to get jobs. It's just that simple."

Basics Only or Basics First?

Some educators have expressed a concern that the public's focus on basics could preclude schools' ability to educate children more broadly. But the public sees almost exactly the opposite picture. For most Americans, it is virtually impossible for children to be more broadly educated — to acquire higher skills — unless and until they master basics. While some reformers fear that the public means "basics only," what the public really wants is "basics first."

"Years ago, reading, writing and arithmetic were considered the basics. Today, basics are reading, writing, and computers."

—Middletown NY Woman

The Add-Ons

People do expect students to learn a broad range of traditional academic subjects, and many of these are, like the 3 R's, considered "absolutely essential" by large numbers of Americans. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed believe American history and geography are absolutely essential; 59% would add biology, physics and chemistry. Large numbers of Americans also add skills that are useful to society and living in the modern world. For example, two-thirds (66%) say it is "absolutely essential" for the schools to teach "the habits of good citizenship"; 64% add the ability "to deal with social problems like drugs and family breakdown."

A Bridgeport businessman talked about the importance of more comprehensive learning, and his concern about youngsters who seem to have little sense of what education offers: "I have college students that work for me that

don't know where South America is. . . . They have no idea. . . [when] the Middle Ages were . . . They have no sense of the scope of history, no sense of mathematics, and no sense of geography. . . . I find it hard to believe that they can succeed with that lack of processing."

Fifty-seven percent say that it is absolutely essential for the schools to teach "practical skills for office or industry," although this is one of few areas investigated in this study where leaders' views diverged sharply from those of the public. Only one of every three leaders places "practical skills" for office or industry in the essential category. Other surveys of business leaders have suggested that employers prefer the schools to concentrate on academics and good work habits. With that base, employers believe they can most effectively design practical workplace training.¹⁰

And lastly, almost six in ten Americans (57%) would add "curiosity and a love of learning" to their absolutely essential list.

Schools as Sole Supplier

The basics are a special category for the public. Teaching basics, unlike teaching values such as responsibility and self-discipline, or even getting youngsters familiar with computers, is seen as the exclusive province of the schools. No one else can do it. It is the schools' minimum contractual obligation, and people are dismayed to encounter youngsters who have attended public schools, even graduated from public schools, without these basic skills. This inability to get the results they want — every child reading and writing English well and at least being able to make change — angers and frustrates people. And that frustration leads to a preoccupation, as people say, "This is the schools' major job, and they aren't doing it."

SECTION THREE

RAISING STANDARDS — WHAT PEOPLE WANT, WHAT THEY FEAR

This Section In Summary

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.

Introduction

Opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich has constructed a seven-stage model for how public opinion develops when people confront new or difficult ideas. The process, as Yankelovich describes it, frequently takes years to evolve. It is often stymied in the early stages by a simple lack of awareness that a problem exists or a lack of urgency on the part of the public. Frequently, there is strong public resistance to change or key gaps in knowledge or understanding that derail public debate. People may not understand what alternatives they have for addressing a problem or they may be unclear about how alternatives work.

The two final stages, which often take years or even decades to develop, are intellectual acceptance of the solution followed by full acceptance. In the intellectual stage, people acknowledge rationally that an idea is a good one. But only in the final stage do people act on their beliefs and see them through to the end, even when “smooth-sailing” cannot be guaranteed. Full acceptance is generally not possible until the preceding stage — intellectual acceptance — has taken hold.

On the issue of standards, the vast majority of Americans have arrived at least at the intellectual stage of acceptance. And, to the degree that surveys can actually predict what people will do — as opposed to what they say they will do — large numbers of Ameri-

cans are willing to stay the course. Two factors from the research suggest the strength and stability of public support for standards.

Assessing the Stability of Support for Standards

One is that people support standards even when survey questions are reworded and when different formulations are presented. *First Things First* found that large majorities of Americans endorse raising standards for high school graduation and for moving from grammar school to junior high. Questions that probe different ways of enforcing standards — giving tests, withholding diplomas, “toughening” grading, or establishing clear guidelines about what youngsters should learn — all yield the same result: People believe in standards and want them enforced.

The second factor suggesting stability is that people support standards even when trade-offs, such as failing students who don't meet the standards, are explicitly pointed out. *First Things First* found that 76% of the public believe teachers should be more willing to fail high school students who don't learn. And, given the head-to-head choice between passing students only when they have learned what was expected or passing stu-

Large majorities of the public, parents, teachers, and leaders believe that most children will thrive under a system of higher standards.

dents who have tried hard, people come down solidly on the side of enforcing standards. Eighty-one percent say students should be passed only when they have mastered the required material. This year's Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll shows a similar resilience in support for standards even when "the down side" is highlighted.¹¹

The current Public Agenda study took this question a step further, considering how people think higher standards will work if actually put into effect.

Will Standards Drive Students from School?

Americans are far from naive about how standards will work. They understand that creating and enforcing standards will have consequences and accept the probability that some students will be discouraged and perhaps leave school. And, while focus group participants often express sympathy for these youngsters — if they have really put in the effort — that sympathy does not change their strong support for standards.

Roughly half (45%) of the public think that more youngsters will drop out if schools enforce higher standards, and roughly half (46%) don't. Teachers are perhaps slightly more pessimistic, with 49% predicting an increased number of drop-outs. Leaders, who as a group are the most supportive of higher standards and strict enforcement, are optimistic about the results. Only 33% of leaders predict that drop-outs will increase, although 21% admit they aren't sure what the result will be.

Although a majority (53%) of Americans reject the idea that higher standards will make more youngsters dislike school and learning, almost four in ten (38%) fear this outcome. Non-college educated Americans are more likely to say that standards will cause some children to reject learning, and focus groups suggest that these are often individuals whose own schooling was painful and unrewarding. A New Jersey woman was typical of people with this concern: "I think you're going to have a higher drop-out rate with [a principal who enforces high standards]. I think you're going to have a lot of kids say, 'The heck with this.'"

Interestingly, teachers who are on "the front lines" in enforcing standards are less

concerned that youngsters will dislike school with higher standards in place. Only one in four teachers (27%) predicts that standards will lead youngsters to resent school and learning. And again, leaders are the most optimistic group. Only 13% say more kids will dislike learning, although on this question also, a fairly large number of leaders (20%) admit that they aren't sure what will happen.

Expect More, Get More

Despite their concerns, large majorities of the public, parents, teachers, and leaders believe that most children will thrive under a system of higher standards. Seven in ten Americans (71%) say youngsters will "pay more attention to their school work and study harder." Seventy-two percent say youngsters will "actually learn more." Leaders express even greater confidence. More than eight in ten (84%) think standards will increase learning.

Comments in focus groups reiterate the survey findings. In group after group, people expressed a common-sense conviction, often drawn from their own life experiences, that setting and enforcing standards motivates youngsters to do their best. A woman in a Grand Rapids focus group was typical: "I think that if you don't expect kids to achieve a high degree of learning, they don't. They'll live only up to what you expect of them." A Birmingham woman referred to her own schooling as evidence: "I think we learned more when we were in school because teachers expected certain things of us, and we had to meet these expectations. Now there is no backlash [if students don't apply themselves]."

A Cincinnati woman talked about the importance of combining expectations with encouragement: "I think there's a lot to be said for what you expect of a child.... If you really encourage them and tell them, 'I know you can do this — I know you'll be successful,' nine times out of 10, they will be."

Equal Standards For All

Not only do people voice strong support for standards under a variety of circumstances, most Americans support applying standards across the board, to all children, even when question wording is deliberately

selected to provide a compassionate reason not to do so. Six in ten Americans (60%) say public schools should expect "inner-city kids to achieve academic standards that are as high as standards for kids from affluent backgrounds." Inner-city residents, by the way, agree in roughly equal (55%) numbers. About a third (32%) of the general public, and only one in four parents (26%), want to ease standards for some children by "mak[ing] some allowances because inner-city kids come from disadvantaged backgrounds." Among leaders, support for uniform, across-the-board standards is a striking 80%.

The most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll also shows a strong public commitment to equal standards for all children. In that study, 60% of Americans agree that higher standards will "encourage students from low-income backgrounds to do better in school," compared to only 29% who think higher standards will lead more disadvantaged students to become discouraged or drop out.¹²

In focus groups, people often voiced confidence that standards will help all children — privileged kids, average kids, and kids who have had a rough start in life. As one San Francisco woman put it: "You expect more, you get more. You expect less, you get less. There's no reason that just because a child is poor that they can't make just as many A's or B's as someone else."

Educational Breach of Contract

The educators and opinion-leaders in business, government, higher education, and other sectors who mounted the standards "movement" have often discussed the need to build broader public support for their cause. But ironically, from the public's perspective, it is the educators themselves who repeatedly undermine standards. Speaking in focus groups, people express exasperation and wonderment at the seeming inability of schools to enforce even minimum standards.

Almost half of Americans (47%) believe that it is entirely possible to get a high school diploma without possessing even the most minimal attributes of education — the ability to read and write English and do basic arithmetic. This frustration spills out in any discussion of the schools. Like the concern about teaching basics, exasperation over sieve-like educational standards arises spontaneously without moderators ever broaching the subject. "Why," people seemed

to be asking, "do they let these youngsters graduate? Why did they pass them along from year-to-year? How did this happen?" And, repeatedly, people point out that the real victims of social promotion are the children themselves.

Failure as Kindness

An Albuquerque woman stressed the need for standards right from the beginning: "The kid who doesn't learn the alphabet should not be moving on to the next grade. The kid who's not reading at a certain level at the end of the first grade doesn't belong in the second [grade]. It's far less devastating to the kid to do it then." Another Albuquerque woman criticized a local school's "no fail" policy, again decrying the long-term consequences for the children: "In the first through fifth grade, they can't fail a student. They cannot keep a student back. I disagree with that because that's not fair to the child."

A San Francisco teacher made a similar point: "I had to leave back a student. He was artistic... our class artist. But he couldn't read. It was heartbreaking to have to do that, but even his parents appreciated at that point that I did."

In focus groups, people express exasperation and wonderment at the seeming inability of schools to enforce minimum standards.

Social Promotion: For Whose Benefit?

Not only are educators seen as the weak link in the chain, their motives in "moving kids along" are often questioned. Many respondents suggested with some vehemence that unqualified students are passed to the next grade, not to protect youngsters from emotional damage, but to get these less-than-rewarding pupils out of the teachers' hair.

A Cincinnati woman described the situation as she saw it: "You would think that there wouldn't be kids [getting] passed that don't go to school half the time... They don't know the basics... They should be failed. But a lot of times they're not failed because they want to get them out of that school so they can get passed on to someone else... and be someone else's problem." And an Albuquerque woman complained: "She [a teacher] had a problem child in her class, and she said, 'Well, she failed math, but I'm going to give her a "D" anyway because I'm not going to get her again next year.'"

Some Teachers Also Frustrated

Teachers are often harsh critics of their professional peers. A Birmingham man described the situation he encountered: "I was an assistant-coach and a biology teacher, and I was teaching 9th-grade biology. Some of you may not believe this, but at least 30% of those kids could [hardly] read at all. They couldn't even write. And you question those children, and they've never failed a grade."

A high school teacher from Birmingham talked about the difficulties he faced in making grades mean something. "It's a success if I can get a child to bring a pencil to my class. I'm not joking. That's success. There are some kids, if they will bring pencil and paper, I'll write a note home bragging about them.... There are two teachers in my school, myself and my friend — we both teach part-time at a college too, and maybe that makes a difference — we have a 90 to 95% failure rate.... I fail them.... All the other teachers, they're passing them. If they go to the class, they'll pass them.... When there are only two of us doing that, they just think we're the meanest teachers."

So What's the Point?

Some teachers attributed the social promotion phenomenon to the selfish concerns of administrators. A Cincinnati teacher complained about the way a 4th-grade proficiency test had been instituted in the system where she works. "The way it stands now, 4th-graders don't have to pass the 4th-grade proficiency test before going on to the 5th grade. So what's the point of having the test if you're not going to require that the children master these skills?... I would be willing to say, 'This child may not go on,' but a lot of times administrators don't want to use the word 'retention.' Oftentimes, my administrators don't want to retain a child because it's bad for the public image."

Rejecting an Educational Reign of Terror

The breadth and the strength of support for standards is unarguable. People back the concept. They understand the pitfalls and still support the idea. They are angry that standards are so seldom enforced, and they don't understand why.

This does not mean, of course, that support for standards is universal, or that parents will not complain if their own children fail. Americans support enforcement of traffic laws, but virtually everyone is upset — and innocent — when they actually get a ticket. However, the findings from this study and Public Agenda's previous work suggest that educators can count on broad support for standards, and that they can appeal to people's common-sense belief that this approach is better for the children themselves. But like all major policy change, there are areas of underlying doubt and possibilities for miscommunication.

One concern — markedly stronger among some individuals than others — is the possibility of putting "too much pressure" on youngsters. Many people seem to fear a sudden swing from a lackadaisical status quo with mid-level standards indifferently applied to a swift, draconian enforcement of harsh standards in ways that would be devastating to children. This study asked respondents to consider a variety of hypothetical situations and indicate whether these situations put too much, too little, or the right amount of pressure on students. (See Table 4)

Acceptable Pressure

Some level of academic pressure is clearly considered acceptable and even desirable. Seventy-one percent of Americans, and 91% of leaders, say that a principal who "stresses academic achievement and expects teachers to give homework and tests often" is applying the right amount of pressure. Solid majorities (61% of the public and 62% of leaders) support teachers who require a struggling C-average student to stay after school to do extra work.

People also know too little pressure when they see it. Over three-quarters (78%) of the general public and nine in ten leaders (89%) say that a school district that gives out diplomas even if kids fail to meet academic standards is applying too little pressure. Similarly, very large majorities of the public (80%) and leaders (93%) agree that parents "who look the other way" when their child brings home failing grades are applying too little pressure.

What about parents who insist that their B-average high schooler, who is capable of getting A's, stay after school and do extra work? Parents split on this case, with 47% calling this too much pressure and 43% saying it is the right amount, perhaps reflecting a judgment that B's are good grades and further pressure of this kind is unwarranted.

A Mindset with Misgivings

Most Americans seem to be looking for a middle ground in devising and enforcing standards — one that is neither too soft, nor too harsh. There is, however, a segment of the population (about 25%) that will be more likely to resist standards and more alert to possible stress or psychological damage caused by them. This group of “self-esteemers” is almost three times as likely as other Americans to disapprove of a high school principal who emphasizes achievement, homework, and tests (44% of self-esteemers say this is too much pressure, compared to 14% of other Americans). Almost three-quarters (74%) of self-esteemers would not push a B-student to do better (compared to only 33% of other Americans), and 62% wouldn't want a teacher to push a C-student to do better (compared to only 16% of other Americans). Although higher income Americans are slightly more likely to be “self-esteemers,” there are no other distinguishing demographic characteristics. Members of this group simply display a particular mindset about education and standards that educators should anticipate and not necessarily extrapolate to the population as a whole.

Japan — A Model of Success and a Cautionary Tale

Focus group discussions suggest that many people are looking for a prudent balance, both in the way standards will be explained and presented to students, and in the way they will be enforced. Discussion about the perceived academic success of Asian students in American public schools captures this desire to find an acceptable middle ground. A Cincinnati woman, a teacher, was typical in her admiration for the motivation and seriousness of purpose she sees in her Asian students: “As an educator, when I see an Asian kid come into class, I know that child is going to achieve well. I know that child

will be disciplined and I know that child will do everything that's expected to achieve. . . . I wish I could say [that my expectations of other non-Asian students] are as high. . . . I wish I could say they're all equal, but I really can't.”

At the same time, many people who were concerned about an overly draconian implementation of standards referred to Japanese schools, which they see as highly pressured and overly severe. People often talk about suicides among Japanese teenagers who receive disappointing grades or test results. And while the American image of Japanese youth may be inaccurate (the suicide rate among Japanese teenagers is actually lower than that of U.S. teenagers, who more often experience troubling family and social pressures), this disturbing vision is powerful to many parents. These contending perspectives — admiration for the seriousness of purpose of Asian students, alongside fear of the harsh system of standards people attribute to the Japanese — suggest the public's desire to find a middle path, a system of standards that motivates and encourages, not one that destroys.

Too Much Pressure? Hardly a Problem Today

Whatever concerns people have about how standards might be applied in the future, almost no one thinks that

American youngsters currently face too much academic pressure at school. Only one in ten Americans (13%) thinks public schools currently expect students to learn too much. Among leaders, the figure is an insignificant 3%.

Asked about a variety of pressures that American youngsters face today — such as pressure from peers, pressure at home because of troubled families, or from crime and drugs in the neighborhood — academic pressures come out dead last. (See Table 5) No more than 10% of any group — the general public, parents, teachers, or leaders — think American youngsters are under too much academic pressure today.

“The way it stands now, 4th-graders don't have to pass the 4th-grade proficiency test before going on to the 5th-grade. So what's the point. . . .”

—Cincinnati Teacher

SECTION FOUR

WHAT ABOUT THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE?

This Section In Summary

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.”

Introduction

Before the introduction of printing, the ability to read and write was a rarified and specialized skill. Yet, what was once exceptional is now commonplace — a requirement for most jobs throughout the industrialized world, and, indeed, for most daily activities.

The next few decades are likely to produce a similar revolution in what most human beings are expected to know. Obviously, people will need computer skills, but many observers foresee another, more subtle transition in the works. Already, technology has eliminated much of the physical or routine labor that characterized work in the past. Computers handle repetitive jobs; robots increasingly take on dangerous, back-breaking work. More and more, humans are doing what only human beings can do — think, analyze, imagine, and make judgments that require knowledge, subtlety, and perhaps even wisdom. This sea-change in the world of work, now well underway in companies world-wide, is a driving force behind the movement to dramatically upgrade what students learn in school. Many observers say that Americans need to develop a new conception of “basic education,” one that includes more advanced knowledge, more rigorous thinking, and the continual pursuit of excellence.

There is another societal change that has some Americans advocating more demanding education and more advanced skills. A heated discussion has emerged among econo-

mists and political leaders about the existence of a widening “income gap” — a trend which seems to suggest that middle- and lower-income Americans are rapidly losing economic ground to those in the upper income strata. While not all economists concur about the degree to which the “gap” is real, illusory, or transitory, the advice for individuals seems inescapable: No single attribute is more likely to insure individual financial stability and career success in today's world than a top-notch education.

This study attempts to delve beneath the public's views on schools, as important as they are, to explore their views on education itself. How do people think about the value of knowledge and learning and academic achievement? What role do they think education plays in their own lives and those of their children? Section Four outlines the results of this research.

A Love of Learning?

Two perspectives run through much expert thinking on the value of learning and knowledge. One holds that there is a core of knowledge that all educated people should possess. This knowledge is not only useful for its own sake, but the process of acquiring it produces an open-mindedness, an ability to think clearly and rationally, and, finally, a quality of judgment that captures “the wisdom of the ages.” This is the liberal arts ideal, and many thoughtful educators are returning to it, adapting it for the new

century. The second perspective emphasizes traits such as curiosity, the ability to learn, and skill at gathering and examining different types of information. It places less emphasis on one particular tradition of thought or set body of knowledge. Yet, these two perspectives have much in common. Both attach a high value to knowledge itself. Both incorporate a receptivity and attraction to learning that doesn't have an immediate practical use. Both see learning itself as rewarding and even exciting. Both assume that children need to master far more than basics, "lifeskills," or vocational skills, however modernized they may be.

In the abstract, this approach to knowledge and learning scores well with the public. Roughly six in ten Americans (57% of the public and 61% of parents) say teaching youngsters "curiosity and a love of learning," is "absolutely essential." In focus groups, people from all parts of the country, in every kind of work, and with varying levels of education express support for "exposing" young people to a wide panoply of knowledge — literature, history, mathematics, the sciences, social sciences, the arts, and more.

Little Enthusiasm, Little Urgency

But while people usually display an openness to giving youngsters a "dusting" of knowledge — the "Try it, you might like it" approach — very few respondents expressed urgency or enthusiasm about teaching youngsters subjects without immediate practical use. In focus groups, non-college educated participants reserved their sense of urgency for "the basics" and "job skills." Many rejected any policies that require prolonged exposure to advanced subjects that youngsters don't "take to."

College-educated parents, while more likely to express appreciation for the intrinsic value of knowledge, were also pragmatic. Many considered advanced areas of knowledge and learning useful because, "You need them to get into college." Public Agenda research on attitudes about higher education documents a similar pattern of thinking about higher education itself. College is seen as useful, not for what is taught but because the diploma is needed to get a good job.¹³

In the current survey, Public Agenda asked respondents to judge whether different

categories of learning were "absolutely essential," "important, but not essential," or "not very important at all." (See Table 6) As reported in Chapter Two, the vast majority of Americans say that it is absolutely essential that every child learn reading and writing, positive character traits such as self-discipline and responsibility, and computer skills. Subjects such as American history, biology, and chemistry fall in the middle-range, but other areas attract minimal support — at least as necessities. Only 37% of Americans say that "advanced mathematics" are essential, and only 35% say that "the history and geography of Europe and Asia" should be required areas of study.

No Classics Required

Fewer than one in four Americans say that teaching great literature is absolutely essential. "Classic writers such as Shakespeare and Plato" attract just 23% of the public to their corner, while "American writers such as Steinbeck and Hemingway" fall at the very bottom of the list, called "absolutely essential" by just 22% of Americans. These particular subject areas are, of course, only exemplary; they are not the sole examples of what a broader, more advanced education might involve. But public responses do suggest the relative importance people may assign to similar advanced areas.

The relative importance people assign to these areas of learning — from reading and writing at the very top to American history and biology in the middle to Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and world history near the bottom — extends across all groups. (Table 6) Teachers and leaders are generally no more likely to see these topics as absolutely essential than is the public. In part, this hierarchy may reflect an open-mindedness about the nature of knowledge and education. In a world of specialization, even extremely well-educated individuals freely admit to ignorance and lack of interest in some areas. In an age of rapidly expanding cultural exchange, people may be less doctrinaire about what is "abso-

People usually display an openness to giving youngsters a "dusting" of knowledge, but very few express urgency or enthusiasm about teaching youngsters subjects without immediate practical use.

lutely essential." These findings may also reflect a certain pragmatism and functional hierarchy. In a sense, people are saying, "You can get along without Shakespeare, but you definitely have to be able to read."

"Don't Know Much About History..."

The survey findings by themselves might not be especially noteworthy if they were not accompanied by a general lack of enthusiasm for more advanced learning, voiced by many in focus groups. The prevailing attitude toward learning evidenced in these discussions is almost single-mindedly practical. And for some, there is evident discomfort and perhaps even slight disdain for more advanced subjects. Advanced academic subjects don't seem to have an immediate pay-off, and most people are happy to leave them behind when they complete school. Many are convinced that other aspects of schooling — socialization, athletics, etc. — are far more important in people's lives.

A businessman from San Francisco talked about the relative uselessness of some types of knowledge in his own life: "Looking back on my own career in the business world, I never solved anything with calculus in my 36 years in business."

A Birmingham teacher described what actually helped his students most. "I am a high-school teacher and a high-school coach.... I teach an academic subject, and I understand that academics are important. But I also know that the number one reason people get fired from their jobs is not how smart they are, but their inability to get along with their co-workers.... I had a kid go into the Marine Corps boot camp.... He didn't say, 'Coach, my math class really helped me get through this experience.' He didn't say, 'My English class did.' He said, 'You helped me get through this experience by athletics.'"

Regurgitating Shakespeare

Many respondents recounted their own school experiences with more advanced subjects — experiences that were not recalled with fondness. A Sacramento man said: "I wouldn't sic Shakespeare on anybody. I think we read every one of them [when I was in school]. There was a requirement... It was horrible." A Denver woman had a

similar recollection: "We spent the whole semester learning, memorizing, and regurgitating Shakespeare."

When asked whether schools should teach youngsters "practical skills that will help them in the job market" or subjects that help them become "broadly educated individuals who are life-long learners," four-in-ten Americans opt for broad education, although large numbers of respondents volunteered a "both" answer when this question was posed. Leaders (73%) are far more attracted to the "broadly educated" alternative.

And even though people clearly recognize the importance of having a diploma in hand when looking for a job, many don't assign much importance to what is actually studied in class. Six in ten Americans, and a roughly equal number of teachers (57%), say diplomas are important because employers are reluctant to hire people without one, not because "schools teach knowledge and skills that help them on the job." But here again, leaders make a distinctly different judgment. Six in ten (60%) say a diploma is important because it represents skills and knowledge that are useful on the job.

The public's ambivalence about the value of education itself actually extends to their views on colleges and universities. A 1993 Public Agenda study found that 54% of Americans think too many young people go to college, and that more should attend trade schools to learn skills like plumbing and computer repair. In other words, while many opinion leaders are calling for a more highly educated America, many people think the country is over-educated.

Lovers of Learning

More advanced education and learning do have their advocates. In nearly every focus group, at least one participant was a Shakespeare or history buff, clearly taking pleasure and satisfaction from knowledge that was not put to use at work or in daily life. What's more, analysis of the data suggests that advanced learning has a definite constituency that comprises about 25% of the population. These "lovers of learning" are far more likely to advocate teaching European and Asian history (79% see this as absolutely essential compared to just 19% of other Americans). They are also more likely to say that Shakespeare (71%

compared to just 6%) and Steinbeck or Hemingway (69% compared to just 8%) should be required.

People in this group would also require that students take biology and chemistry (86% compared to 49% for other Americans), and over half (55%) want to add calculus. As might be expected, these lovers of learning are themselves quite well-educated — 35% of college graduates fall into this group. They are also more likely to be suburbanites, rather than rural, small-town, or city dwellers.

How Important Is Academic Achievement?

Based on focus group discussions, many Americans — particularly those who have not themselves had the benefit of college or other advanced education — are willing to let educators decide what their children should learn. Clearly, people want the fundamentals (basics, a sense of responsibility, computer skills) to be at the heart of their child's education. Beyond that, however, many people assume that educators have better judgment than they do about what children should learn. So how important is academic achievement to most Americans?

Results from this study suggest that, for most Americans, academic achievement itself (at least at the highest levels) is not a primary goal. A plurality (41%) of people believe that inner drive and motivation are more important factors in career success, with "an excellent education" coming in a fairly distant second. (See Table 7) Leaders are somewhat more likely to select academics as the key: 32% give it the highest rating, perhaps reflecting the role education has played in their own careers.

Surprisingly, teachers give academics a lower rating than either the public or leadership. Only 11% of teachers say academics are the most important factor in career success, compared to 50% of teachers who pick inner drive and 33% who opt for "dealing well with people."

Personality Counts

The conviction that personal character and social skills are more important components of career success than academic achievement is readily apparent in focus

group discussions. People often see success as a blend of personality and skill, and when asked to choose, often come down on the personality side of the equation. A New Jersey man talked about the importance of character and personality: "A lot of what I learned in school, I don't apply. What I do apply is interaction with people: being honest, being polite, you know, doing the right thing, knowing that what comes around goes around. You don't learn that in school."

A woman in the same focus group described how an acquaintance became successful: "I think what made her successful was her drive to be successful; it was not education. She doesn't have a college degree." Another man basically agreed: "I know a lot of people who are successful. The principal of the high school... He's that type of guy. He was on the football team. Everybody liked him — a real driver in school. Everything that was done in sports, or outside the classroom or at parties even, [he was] always up and friendly and just got along with people." A Sacramento man pointed out: "There are a lot of people with no education who are billionaires."

Straight A's: Who Needs Them?

Many Americans are not convinced that A-average students actually get much of a "payback" later in life for their accomplishment. Four Americans in ten (40%) say A-students and average students have about the same chances of getting good jobs. Only 28% think A-students are "much more likely" to do well, while another 30% think they are "somewhat more likely" to succeed. Leaders, in contrast, are far more likely to see an advantage for the A-students. Only 15% say their chances are the same as those of average students. Eighty-four percent of leaders say their chances are better — 32% saying their chances are much better and 52% saying their chances are somewhat better.

"Looking back on my own career in the business world, I never solved anything with calculus in my 36 years in business."

—San Francisco Man

The rough financial calculus people apply to the value of top-notch grades may be reflected in their expectations for their own children. People unquestionably understand the career value of a college diploma, and an

astonishing 83% of parents say they expect their own child to continue on to college. But most people do not place nearly as much importance on their children reaching the highest levels of academic achievement. Sixty-two percent of parents say they would be satisfied with a B-average for their child. Only 16% says they want their children to get mostly A's. And almost one parent out of four (23%) would be unconcerned if their child had lots of friends and participated in many social activities, but was only a C-average student.

Why People Are Ambivalent About Too Much Education

For many Americans, the term "highly educated" seems to have negative, rather than positive, connotations. Highly educated people are often seen as aloof, impractical, and perhaps a little "too big for their britches." Most Americans apply a very pragmatic gauge when they look at the value of knowledge. If they haven't used it in their own lives, and they don't understand its practical value for their children, they see it as "icing on the cake."

Both survey results and focus groups suggest that three different strands of thinking are intertwined when people voice reservations about their children becoming too highly educated. One is the extraordinary premium people place on the quality of well-roundedness. People want their children to succeed socially and academically, but some seem to see the proposition as a zero-sum game. Most people just don't want their children to be "nerds." Second is the common assumption that many highly educated people are so impractical and narrow in their thinking that they can't get anything done. And finally, there is a fear of elitism, a sense that too much education severs the highly educated from the rest of humanity and results in sheer snobbery.

The Desire for Well-Roundedness. The premium people place on a well-rounded personality is evident both in what they say about successful adults — the importance of drive, personality, and adaptability in addition to skills and knowledge — and what they say they want for their school-age children. Seven in ten parents say they would be very or somewhat concerned if their child were serious about school and got

excellent grades, but had only a few close friends and did not participate in many social activities. The number leaps to 91% when the hypothetical child has no close friends and does not participate in any social activities. In focus groups, parents sometimes expressed fear about having a child who is unhappy, a loner, and whose only friend is a book.

A San Francisco woman's comment was typical: "I think academics is very important, but I think social skills is definitely something this world needs, and other activities besides school.... You have enough stress when you're an adult, why add to it when you're a kid?" A man in New Jersey pointed out that even college acceptance is often dependent on social and personality skills, not just academics: "I know kids today who are scoring 1,250 or 1,300 [on the SAT's] and they're still not being accepted. The colleges are looking for a kid who's rounded, who's had a lot of community work, and it's just not the kid who sits down there and is a book worm."

A Cincinnati man said: "I don't think you can say to the student that you have to be very successful in the classroom. I don't think you can say that you have to perform well academically and let other things kind of slide as far as social orientation, being active in sports or other extracurricular activities. There has to be balance."

Many people in focus groups, however, seemed to go slightly further. Although they talked about balancing academics and social skills, their comments suggest some level of discomfort with serious academic work. A New Jersey woman, for example, seemed to have an uneasy relationship with serious study and learning: "If you just focus on the brain, it becomes too tedious." A Cincinnati woman seemed to be thinking in a similar vein: "If everyone was a genius, it would be a dull world."

The Problems with Being "Book-Smart." Seven of ten Americans (71%) say they agree with the statement that "people who are highly educated often turn out to be 'book smart' but lack the common sense and understanding of regular folks."¹⁴ Although this judgment is significantly less common among college-educated respondents (only 53% of whom say they agree with this statement) and among leaders (only half of whom agree with it), it is widely held and

does not seem to stem primarily from either negative media portrayals or assumptions about elites with whom most people have little contact.

Comments in focus groups centered repeatedly on real-life encounters with some well-educated but very impractical people — most often at work. A Bridgeport woman said: “I used to work in the job force myself. And there was nothing worse than dealing with a person that had all book knowledge, but no common sense.” A New Jersey woman complained about the same phenomenon: “I know a lot of people who are very intelligent, but they’re stupid when it comes to dealing with people. And I think that you have to have that other part to you. . . . I don’t think that you can just be book smart.”

The Fear of Elitism. Two-thirds of Americans (66%) say the people who are highly educated “often think they are better than others.”¹⁵ While college-educated Americans (56%) are less likely to agree, as are leaders (47%), it is probably noteworthy that substantial numbers of well-educated people themselves actually hold the statement to be true. The survey findings were fleshed out in focus groups, often in comments by parents concerned that their children might lose “the common touch” if they were placed in advanced classes or became particularly academically successful. A Birmingham mother talked about her children: “I have two, and both of them are exceptional, but even then, one of them is a little too excep-

tional. He’s very smart, and he’s six. They’re talking about putting him in a gifted class, and I’m not even too keen on that. . . . I don’t want him separated from his buddies and made to be ‘up here’ and his buddies ‘down here’ because they’re not, just because they’re not as gifted as he is.”

Where Do Good Grades Come From?

Although Americans express a perhaps surprising degree of uneasiness about highly educated people, they are overwhelmingly convinced that any child has the capacity to do very well in school. Only 11% of Americans think that “kids who get excellent grades in school” do well because they were born with “strong intellectual abilities.” Most see academic success as a matter of volition; children get excellent grades because they study hard and apply themselves (37%) or because their parents stress education at home (44%). Even when asked about subjects like calculus or physics, most people say getting good grades is a matter of making the effort. Three in ten (29%) say inborn intellectual abilities are the key, but almost two-thirds say success comes from either applying oneself (50%) or because parents emphasize education at home (14%).

People want their children to succeed socially and academically, but some seem to see the proposition as a zero-sum game. Most people just don’t want their children to be “nerds.”

AFTERWORD

One year ago, *First Things First* helped explain why public school reform has been such a disappointment in so many communities. We learned that the priorities of many educators and reformers were out of sync with the views of the American public. Americans want safe schools that create an orderly learning environment. They want schools that concentrate on teaching basic skills, which their real-world experience tells them is not happening today. They want rigorous standards. And they want an end to what they consider wrongheaded, experimental teaching techniques. People believe that educators and reformers are ignoring the essentials of good schooling. Until the schools put "first things first," broad public support will be scarce.

The reaction to this study was unlike anything Public Agenda has seen in two decades of public policy research. The findings were widely reported and became a focus of discussion among educators, business leaders, and others. They prompted comment by observers ranging from William Bennett and Chester Finn to Education Secretary Richard Riley and Jesse Jackson. They caused the American Federation of Teachers and The Business Roundtable to adapt their agendas to include an emphasis on the primacy of order and discipline. The report's message was not an easy one for educators and reformers to absorb, and credit is due the many groups that have tried very hard to listen, even as they struggle to advance reform.

Assignment Incomplete takes up where *First Things First* left off, seeking deeper understanding of public views on standards and basics, testing public commitment to a continued system of public education, and examining public views on the value of knowledge itself. What can we learn from this new research, and how can these lessons advance the education reform process?

Stop the Debate Over Basics and Standards

First, the tendency of some reformers to castigate the public over its concern for basics must stop. It is consuming considerable energy that is needed to retrieve the schools from their current predicament and to improve public understanding of the importance of education today. As this new data shows, no one objects to teaching basics, certainly not educators. While it's true that the basics are necessary but insufficient in today's world, the public correctly sees the

basics as an essential floor on which higher-order skills can be constructed. As the report makes clear, people are saying "the basics first," not "the basics only." Thus, educators and reformers should stop challenging the public's obsession with basic skills and make the achievement of those skills an urgent reform goal — perhaps the first "higher standard."

The same goes for standards themselves. Many educators and reformers question whether the public supports higher standards when, in fact, the public knows that high standards are essential and is convinced that most students can meet them. Further, the public is outraged that kids are not being held accountable to rigorous standards — that, for example, many high school graduates can't even make change — and believes it is the educators themselves who are responsible. Interestingly, it is the public concern for basics which fuels the support for standards. Leaders should capitalize on this support, not challenge it.

If the notion that well-rounded is better than well-educated is allowed to stand, it will do our children a terrible disservice.

Stand and Deliver

Next, the public clearly feels it has "contracted with" the schools to perform a service, and that the schools are not delivering. Consequently, when it comes to the future of public schools, public opinion is very much up for grabs. People like what they see from America's private schools but remain attached to the *principle* of public education. But public school supporters should not

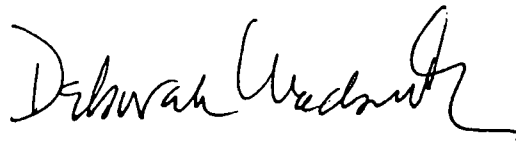
delude themselves into thinking that such fragile support will continue indefinitely. At the same time, those advocating alternatives to public education — vouchers, privatization, or other approaches — should realize that though public indications of interest are real, they are not based on a thorough understanding of the implications and thus must be considered tentative at this stage. There is little pressure to dismantle the current system. People simply want the schools to work.

Dumb and Dumber

In many ways, the most intriguing findings from *Assignment Incomplete* reflect public views on knowledge and learning, where we found a surprising degree of disdain toward highly educated people and some sense of antagonism toward an educational cultural elite. Americans regard knowledge very pragmatically, and fewer than one in four citizens finds it essential to teach great literature. Too much learning is suspect, no match for the concept of being “well-rounded.”

For most people's children, and for America itself, such a mindset could become a formula for disaster. A culture that glamorizes gladhanding and mediocre levels of learning is hardly compatible with global forces that daily put a higher premium on knowledge. If the notion that well-rounded is better than well-educated is allowed to stand, it will do our children a terrible disservice. America cannot succeed under the motto, “dumb and dumber.” As with latent health hazards, people deserve to know that, “A lack of real learning could be hazardous to your child's health!”

People can change. They can “get it” — as, for example, they have come to recognize the importance of computers. But when it comes to true learning and a meaningful education, is anyone asking them to? Without a culture that values knowledge and learning for all citizens, education reform may remain an elusive target.



Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director, Public Agenda

TABLE 1
Comparison of Public and Private Schools

Question: "Now I'm going to ask you to compare your community's public schools and the private non-religious/Catholic/Christian schools.* In your area, which schools are generally more likely to provide:"

*Question wording was tailored to fit respondent's point of comparison.

(compares public to combined private responses)

	GENERAL PUBLIC			PARENTS		
	Public	Private	Same	Public	Private	Same
An environment that teaches kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds	53%	22%	7%	54%	19%	8%
A better education for kids with special needs, such as the physically handicapped	51%	23%	6%	49%	22%	6%
Tried and true teaching techniques	29%	36%	16%	32%	29%	18%
A school policy that removes kids who are routinely disruptive	29%	42%	11%	29%	38%	12%
A better preparation for college	27%	45%	13%	29%	40%	12%
Better teachers	26%	33%	22%	30%	26%	23%
Higher academic standards ¹	24%	53%	8%	26%	45%	9%
Good work habits	22%	45%	19%	25%	38%	19%
More safety and security	20%	51%	13%	19%	46%	15%
More discipline and order in the classroom	18%	61%	8%	18%	54%	10%
An environment that promotes such values as honesty and responsibility	17%	54%	16%	19%	46%	20%
Smaller class size	13%	67%	6%	13%	65%	5%
An appreciation for religious values	11%	70%	4%	9%	69%	5%

¹Leader wording: "expectations" instead of "standards"

Note: Percentages in tables may not add up to 100% because "not sures" are not reported, or because of rounding. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE 1 (continued)
Comparison of Public and Private Schools

Question: "Now I'm going to ask you to compare your community's public schools and the private non-religious/Catholic/Christian schools.* In your area, which schools are generally more likely to provide:"

*Question wording was tailored to fit respondent's point of comparison.

(compares public to combined private responses)

	TEACHERS			LEADERS		
	Public	Private	Same	Public	Private	Same
An environment that teaches kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds	81%	5%	8%	59%	14%	22%
A better education for kids with special needs, such as the physically handicapped	86%	4%	4%	62%	13%	14%
Tried and true teaching techniques	57%	9%	25%	17%	34%	37%
A school policy that removes kids who are routinely disruptive	30%	51%	10%	13%	63%	17%
A better preparation for college	52%	20%	22%	17%	54%	25%
Better teachers	71%	3%	19%	27%	25%	41%
Higher academic standards ¹	50%	24%	19%	9%	65%	22%
Good work habits	25%	26%	42%	7%	58%	29%
More safety and security	31%	33%	24%	6%	67%	24%
More discipline and order in the classroom	23%	49%	18%	4%	82%	13%
An environment that promotes such values as honesty and responsibility	21%	30%	42%	5%	63%	28%
Smaller class size	18%	60%	11%	6%	77%	14%
An appreciation for religious values	11%	76%	6%	2%	84%	7%

¹Leader wording: "expectations" instead of "standards"

TABLE 2
Satisfaction with Public Schools

Question: "Overall, would you say that the public schools in your community are doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job?"

	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Excellent	16%	24%	42%	11%
Good	39%	47%	46%	42%
Fair	26%	21%	11%	34%
Poor	10%	7%	1%	12%

TABLE 3
Proposed Solutions for Failing Public Schools

Question: "If the public schools in your community had been failing to give kids a quality education for 10 or 15 years, which of the following would you want done FIRST?"

	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Give parents vouchers to make private schools a more affordable option	28%	30%	6%	16%
Overhaul the public schools	28%	25%	47%	65%
Increase the money public schools get	20%	25%	28%	6%
Have companies that specialize in education run the local public schools	10%	8%	4%	8%
Have the state government take over and run the local public schools	6%	3%	7%	2%

TABLE 4
Pressure on Students

Question: "When it comes to school and education, people have different views about what is too much pressure and what is too little pressure. How about [INSERT]? Does this seem like too much pressure, too little pressure, or is it about right?"

	GENERAL PUBLIC			PARENTS		
	Too much	Too little	About right	Too much	Too little	About right
Parents who insist their A-average high school student spend summer vacation taking advanced courses even though he wants time off	84%	4%	9%	87%	4%	8%
Parents who urge their child who is already an "A" high school student to study longer and take tougher courses	61%	4%	29%	67%	5%	24%
A high school principal who eliminates team sports to get kids to concentrate on academics	49%	13%	32%	47%	14%	32%
A high school principal who constantly pushes teachers/ students to maintain school's top academic ranking	44%	6%	44%	47%	5%	44%
Parents who insist their B-average high school student, who is capable of getting A grades, stay after school and do extra work	42%	4%	48%	47%	5%	43%
A high school teacher who fails a kid who tried hard but did not learn course material	34%	10%	46%	36%	13%	42%
A teacher who requires a struggling C-average high school student to do extra work by staying after school	27%	6%	61%	29%	8%	58%
A high school principal who stresses academic work and expects teachers to give homework and tests often	19%	6%	71%	20%	6%	70%
A school district that will give high school students a diploma at age 18 even if they fail to meet basic standards	12%	78%	7%	11%	77%	8%
A high school teacher who does not criticize children's poor quality work so their self esteem is not damaged	12%	43%	37%	12%	41%	39%
Parents who look the other way when their high school student brings home failing grades	11%	80%	6%	11%	82%	5%

TABLE 4 (continued)
Pressure on Students

Question: "When it comes to school and education, people have different views about what is too much pressure and what is too little pressure. How about [INSERT]? Does this seem like too much pressure, too little pressure, or is it about right?"

	Teachers			Leaders		
	Too much	Too little	About right	Too much	Too little	About right
Parents who insist their A-average high school student spend summer vacation taking advanced courses even though he wants time off	88%	2%	8%	90%	1%	5%
Parents who urge their child who is already an "A" high school student to study longer and take tougher courses	55%	3%	35%	62%	1%	28%
A high school principal who eliminates team sports to get kids to concentrate on academics	65%	11%	17%	57%	6%	26%
A high school principal who constantly pushes teachers/students to maintain school's top academic ranking	49%	3%	40%	55%	3%	38%
Parents who insist their B-average high school student, who is capable of getting A grades, stay after school and do extra work	28%	3%	60%	35%	4%	54%
A high school teacher who fails a kid who tried hard but did not learn course material	31%	5%	51%	23%	4%	61%
A teacher who requires a struggling C-average high school student to do extra work by staying after school	33%	2%	53%	23%	5%	62%
A high school principal who stresses academic achievement and expects teachers to give homework and tests often	14%	3%	79%	4%	3%	91%
A school district that will give high school students a diploma at age 18 even if they fail to meet basic standards	6%	85%	4%	7%	89%	1%
A high school teacher who does not criticize children's poor quality work so their self esteem is not damaged	6%	50%	34%	3%	75%	15%
Parents who look the other way when their high school student brings home failing grades	8%	88%	2%	5%	93%	1%

TABLE 5

Where Kids Face Pressure

Question: "Where would you say that kids generally face the most pressure and stress today?"

	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Among their friends because of peer pressure	40%	46%	35%	49%
At home because of troubled families	27%	22%	51%	36%
In their neighborhoods because of the threat of drugs and crime	20%	18%	8%	10%
At schools because of tough academic expectations	9%	10%	3%	<1%

TABLE 6
Importance of Various Subject Areas

Question: "Now here are some things the local public schools in your community could concentrate on teaching. Please tell me whether you think each is absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important for your local schools to be teaching."

PERCENTAGE SAYING "ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL"	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Basic reading, writing and math skills	92%	91%	98%	99%
Good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined	83%	79%	92%	88%
Computer skills and media technology	80%	78%	88%	75%
The value of hard work	78%	77%	84%	70%
Values such as honesty and tolerance of others	74%	71%	80%	76%
Habits of good citizenship such as voting and caring about the nation	66%	64%	78%	58%
How to deal with social problems like drugs and family breakdown	64%	63%	65%	39%
American history and American geography	63%	61%	83%	61%
Biology, chemistry and physics	59%	56%	65%	43%
Practical job skills for office or industry	57%	55%	57%	33%
Curiosity and a love of learning	57%	61%	69%	61%
Advanced mathematics such as calculus	37%	38%	22%	29%
The history and geography of such places as Europe or Asia	35%	35%	48%	29%
Classic works from such writers as Shakespeare and Plato	23%	21%	33%	21%
Sports and athletics	23%	22%	19%	7%
Modern American writers such as Steinbeck and Hemingway	22%	21%	29%	20%

TABLE 7
What Determines Success in Jobs and Careers?

Question: "I'm going to read four things that could determine people's success in their jobs and careers. Which do you think is generally most important?"

PERCENTAGE SAYING "MOST IMPORTANT"	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	TEACHERS	LEADERS
Being persistent and having inner drive	41%	38%	50%	38%
Getting an excellent academic education	27%	29%	11%	32%
Knowing how to deal with people well	23%	25%	33%	29%
Knowing the right people and having connections	6%	5%	4%	2%

METHODOLOGY

To assess Americans' attitudes towards public education, Public Agenda conducted a national telephone survey with 1,200 randomly selected adults. The sample includes 800 members of the general public, as well as "oversamples" of 200 parents with children in public schools and 200 public school teachers. The survey was preceded by twelve focus groups. A nation-wide mail survey of 1,151 economic, political, civic and educational leaders was conducted as well.

The Telephone Survey

Public Agenda designed the survey questionnaire and contracted Eastern Research Services of Pennsylvania to execute the interviews and tabulate the results. Telephone interviews were conducted from May 12 to May 25, 1995 with a total of 1,200 adults.

General public respondents (n=800) were selected through a standard random digit-dialing technique whereby every household in the continental United States, including those with unlisted numbers, had an equal chance of being contacted. The sampling error is plus or minus 3.4% for the general public sample; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups. As in all surveys, question-order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can affect results.

In addition to the general public sample, a randomly drawn oversample of 200 parents with children currently in public schools was surveyed. When the study reports results for parents, it pools the 200 oversampled parents with the 239 parents appearing "naturally" in the general public sample, for a total sample size of 439 parents. A randomly drawn oversample of 200 public school teachers was surveyed as well. Teachers were first contacted at their schools and invited to either participate in the survey immediately or to make an appointment to be interviewed at a time and place of their choosing. If the teacher was not available a message with a toll-free 800 number was left to allow for a return call. The oversample of 200 teachers was pooled with the 37 public school teachers appearing naturally in the general public sample, for a total sample size of 237 public school teachers.

The Mail Survey

A questionnaire, comparable to the telephone survey of the public, was mailed to 3,650 economic, political, civic, and educational leaders across the country in early May, 1995. A reminder postcard was sent out a week later, followed by a second mailing of the questionnaire to non-respondents. The process netted 1,151 completed questionnaires for an overall response rate of 32%. Of those, 417 respondents are administrators and decision-makers in the public school system, including district superintendents, principals, presidents of school boards and state education commissioners. The remaining 734 respondents are broken down as follows: 261 leaders from the economic sector (directors of Chambers of Commerce, personnel directors from mid-sized businesses, presidents of professional associations, and union presidents); 165 leaders from the political sector (mayors, state legislators and governors' senior staff); 207 civic leaders (college presidents, religious leaders, police chiefs, media editors and station managers, and heads of foundations and social service agencies); and 101 leaders from other categories.

The Focus Groups

This study draws on two sets of focus groups conducted in 1995 by Steve Farkas and Will Friedman. One set was conducted for the joint Public Agenda/Institute for Educational Leadership project between February 16 and June 12 in Ft. Lee (NJ), San Francisco, Bridgeport (CT), Birmingham, Cincinnati, and Elmsford (NY). Participants included parents of children in public schools, teachers, business people, young unmarried adults, senior citizens, and college admissions officers. Participants reflected the general demographic characteristics of the community in which the focus groups took place.

The second set of focus groups was conducted between June 26 and July 17 for a project undertaken on behalf of the Education Task Force of The Business Roundtable. Half of the groups were with parents with a high school degree or less, and half were with parents who had at least a four-year college degree. They also reflected the general demographic characteristics of the community in which the focus groups took place. The groups took place in Middletown (NY), Birmingham, Cincinnati, Denver, Albuquerque, and Sacramento.

NOTES

¹For example, for every year from 1985 through 1995, the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools shows that Americans consistently "grade" their community's public schools higher than they grade the public schools of the nation as a whole. The September 1995 survey shows that 41% of respondents give community public schools an A or B, whereas only 20% give the public schools of the nation as a whole an A or B. National survey of 1,311 adults.

²John Immerwahr with Jill Boese and Will Friedman, *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education*, Prepared for the William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund (Public Agenda, 1994).

³Somewhat surprisingly, the "not sures" are not just older Americans whose children are long out of school or younger people without children. Almost a third (32%) of parents with children currently in public schools say that they ~~aren't able~~ to judge which schools are better overall.

⁴These findings raise the question of what people have in mind when they talk about "private schools." In this study, respondents were asked early in the questionnaire what kind of schools they picture when they think of private schools. Forty percent said they think mainly of Catholic parochial schools; 22% said they think of non-religious private schools, and 20% said they think of Christian academies. All subsequent questions referred to the ~~form of~~ private school respondents initially said they had in mind.

⁵August, 1995, Empire State Survey (A joint project of the Empire Foundation and The Lehrman Institute), Telephone survey of 1,218 adult New Yorkers.

⁶Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (Public Agenda, 1994). National telephone survey of 1,198 adults. Respondents were asked if "taking persistent trouble-makers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn" would improve academic achievement. Using a 5-point scale, where 5 means it would improve academic achievement a great deal, and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all, 73% rated this scenario a 4 or 5.

⁷August 1992, Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Survey: Attitudes Towards the Public Schools 1992. National survey of 1,306 adults. Exact wording: "In your opinion, should physically handicapped children be put in the same classrooms with other students, or should they be put in special classes of their own?" Responses: Same classroom (65%), Special classes (27%), Don't know (8%). Exact wording: "In your opinion, should mentally handicapped children be put in the same classrooms with other students, or should they be put in special classes of their own?" Responses: Same classroom (22%), Special classes (67%), Don't know (11%).

⁸For example: July 1992, Louis Harris and Associates, National telephone survey of 1254 adults: "President Bush's new education plan outlines a series of steps to improve the nation's public schools. For each aspect of the plan, tell me whether you strongly support it, somewhat support it, somewhat oppose it, or strongly oppose it?... Creating a system of parental choice under which government funds could be transferred to private and parochial schools." Responses: Strongly/somewhat support (63%), somewhat/strongly oppose (35%), Not sure (2%).

July 1992, Omnifacts, Inc., National telephone survey of 754 adult blacks: "Which of the following statements best describes your position on educational choice...choice in education is just a way for wealthy parents to have the government pay for their children's private school tuition [Statement A] or choice in education will help poor children gain access to a better education [Statement B]?" Responses: Statement A (13%), Statement B (83%), Don't know (4%).

March 1993, Louis Harris and Associates, National telephone survey of 1,255 adults: "Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose giving people the option of paying somewhat more if they prefer to use any doctor or hospital of their choice?" Responses: Strongly/somewhat support (83%), Somewhat/strongly oppose (15%), Not sure (2%).

Promises to Keep: A Technical Appendix (Public Agenda, 1995), National telephone survey of 1,100 non-retired adults ages 22-61. "As things stand now would you say that you are able to choose the best place to invest the money in your retirement accounts on your own, that you need help and advice, or that you would like someone else to make the choice for you?" Responses: I can do it on my own (51%), I need help (35%), Someone else make the choice (12%), Don't know (2%).

⁹Immerwahr, *The Broken Contract*. Exact wording: "Which of the following comes closer to your view? Connecticut should rely on private companies to run the most troubled school districts because these districts have had long histories of poor performance [Statement A] OR Connecticut should not rely at all on private companies to run any of its schools because such companies care more about profits than about the education of children [Statement B]" Responses: Leaders (Statement A—32%, Statement B—35%, Not sure—34%) Public (Statement A—24%, Statement B—57%, Not sure—13%).

¹⁰In *Putting Learning First: Governing and Managing Schools for High Achievement* (A Statement by the Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development (CED), 1994), the CED argues that "the primary mission of the public schools should be learning and achievement. Schools should solidly ground all students in language and mathematical skills and provide them with a broad base of knowledge in subjects such as literature, science, foreign languages, history, social sciences, and the arts."

¹¹September 1995, Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Survey. When asked, "Would you favor stricter requirements for high school graduation even if it meant that significantly fewer students would graduate than is now the case?" 65% of respondents said "Yes," 29% said "No" and 6% said "Don't know."

¹²September 1995, Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Survey.

¹³John Immerwahr with Steve Farkas, *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (Public Agenda, 1993). Prepared for the California Higher Education Policy Center.

¹⁴Exact wording: "People who are highly educated often turn out to be 'book smart' but lack the common sense and understanding of regular folks. Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your own view?" Responses: Very/somewhat close (71%), Not too/not at all close (27%), Not sure (1%).

¹⁵Exact wording: "People who are highly educated often think they are better than others. Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your own view?" Responses: Very/somewhat close (66%), Not too/not at all close (33%), Not sure (2%).

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

**First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools.* 1994. Based on a national study of over 1,100 members of the public, including 550 parents of children in public school, this report examines attitudes about values conflicts in public schools as well as views on reform. The study offers detailed analyses of the views of white and African-American parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

**The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education.* 1994. Prepared by Public Agenda for the William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund, this report describes how the citizens of Connecticut feel about public education and integration in their state and why they hold these attitudes. The gaps among educators, business leaders, and the public, including a special focus on African-Americans and Latinos, are outlined. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$5.50.

Contested Values: Tug-of-War in the School Yard. 1995. Prepared by Public Agenda for the National Issues Forums, this citizen discussion guide lays out pro and con arguments for having schools promote diversity and tolerance; having them convey a common core of civic values; having them teach traditional Christian values; and granting parents the choice of which schools their children will attend. The book can be ordered from McGraw-Hill, Inc. by calling 1-800-338-3987. ISBN 0-07-051825-4

**Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness.* 1991. A research report from Public Agenda and the Business-Higher Education Forum. The report describes a gap between the way leaders and the public view the issue of U.S. economic competitiveness and the associated crisis in education and work force training. Copies available from Public Agenda for \$17.50.

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**Math Leads the Way: Perspectives on Math Reform.* 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for The Math Connection. A survey of more than 1000 participants in a national video-conference on math reform sponsored by WQED in Pittsburgh and the Math/Science Education Board. This study identified a consensus among math educators about the kinds of changes needed to improve student achievement. Single copies are available from Public Agenda for \$7.50.

The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System. 1993 and *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy.* 1995. Prepared by Public Agenda for the California Higher Education Policy Center. Based on leadership interviews focus groups, plus phone surveys in California and nationwide, these two studies compare Californians' perceptions of cost, accessibility, value, and opportunity in their higher education system with those of citizens in other parts of the country. Available from the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, Suite 704, San Jose, CA 95113. Ask for report #93-6 (Closing Gateway); Report #95-3 (Legacy).

*Reports marked with an asterisk can be ordered by calling or writing Public Agenda at 6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016: Tel: (212) 686-6610, Fax: (212) 889-3461.

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Lake Research

MEMORANDUM

To: White House Political Affairs

From: Lake Research

Subject: Recommendations for Framing the Education Debate

Date: October 25, 1995

This memorandum summarizes conclusions drawn from recent research on American voters' issue priorities, including research specific to education issues conducted for the American Association of University Women in August 1995. One purpose of these groups was to identify the most effective ways to talk about cuts in the federal education budget for women voters. In other words, how can we maximize the impact of a national (federal) dialogue about an issue with such a strong local and state component?

The starting point of this research was the fact, confirmed by a wide range of research, that education is a powerful issue, and one that carries particular intensity for women voters. During the past few years, however, political strategists have argued whether education is most effectively framed in an economic context or a values context. We believe that, when it comes to framing a federal debate, both approaches have both strengths and clear limits for the President:

Framing education in terms of values is important because voters see the failure of education as central to a broader decline in morals. In addition, for the President, a values framework helps maximize his personal connection to voters. **However, in a federal context, a values framework is substantially weakened by voters' strong belief that values are not a federal responsibility, by their inability to conceive of a federal education program that could effectively restore values, and by their suspicions of a values program imposed at the federal level rather than emerging from the local community.**

Framing education in terms of the economy is important because this is in fact the context in which voters support a strong federal role. The reason education should be *federal* priority, in voters' minds, is that education is central to the country's economic future and to their children's economic future. This is also a major reason they look for leadership at all levels of government, including federal and Presidential leadership. However, as we have seen and other research has

demonstrated, framing education strictly in terms of economics is often too abstract to effectively harness the emotional power of the issue.

In short, we strongly recommend the following for a national (federal) debate:

- **Framing a message in economic terms is the best way to get voters to think about education in national terms, rather than locally.** In general, voters think about the problems in education as well as their solutions in a local context. The economy, however, is something they think about nationally as well as locally, and an economic framework is critical to linking their strong education concerns to a federal context.

To harness voters' strong concerns about education and their economic anxiety simultaneously, the language used to talk about education in economic terms must be broad enough to be relevant to the largest number, and it must seem big enough for the context. Limiting an economic message to job training is thus ineffective -- it is narrow and it is not personally relevant to most, nor does it tap voters' broader emotional concerns about their children's future. Voters see job training as a good idea, but hardly as a major economic dialogue. An economic message should be framed much more broadly and include strong language about what the future holds for our children.

- **Framing a message in terms of values is important in building the President's personal profile on this issue and communicating both his understanding of the issue and his character. Values are particularly important in a defensive context, helping neutralize right-wing attacks on Democratic leadership for failing to address the current lack of values.** Voters, blue collar women especially, clearly link the failure of American education with a broader context of declining morals and increasing dangers for their children, with the image of guns in the schools both vivid and symbolic. Discussing education in this context is critical for the President in making a personal connection to these voters, minimizing the distance that the right seeks to inject.
- Even in the context of the economy, voters have difficulty imagining (although they support) a specific federal role in education. **The best goal and programmatic example of a federal role is the idea of national standards.** Although education is primarily a local issue for these voters, they believe it is important to have high national standards, and this is the area where they most clearly support a federal role. Voters believe it is important not to have a country where children who move from one state to another could be sacrificing a good education.

In addition, voters support national involvement in safety net and opportunity programs like Head Start, school lunches, and college loans, and they support federal involvement in improving teacher training. The Christian Coalition's desire to end

national standards and turn school lunches over to families and private charities are two of their vulnerabilities.

- **Populist messages are effective because these voters already believe that Congress would rather help themselves and the wealthy than ordinary people.** Two types of populist messages clearly resonate. The first is the idea that Congress is cutting education at the same time they are pushing a tax-break for the wealthy. The juxtaposition of these ideas is consistent with voters' suspicions of Congress, politicians, and Republicans, and it sends the message that the cuts are not defensible. The second message that works is political populism -- pointing out that Congress voted to expand their own perks (such as installing new elevators) while cutting education. Again, this is consistent with existing assumptions about Congress, and sends a signal that the cuts cannot be defended as the right thing to do. It clearly positions these education cuts as the wrong priorities rather than reform.
- **An effective message is on the side of reform, not the status quo.** Voters are not happy with the current state of American education, they are critical of government bureaucracies and programs as a general rule, and they have no reason to believe that federal programs on education are any better than any other federal programs. Thus, while they support a national role, they also believe that everything the federal does could be improved substantially. Our message must incorporate an acknowledgement that reform is needed. The best contrast for us is reform versus elimination; the contrast we must avoid is the status quo versus reform, with our side positioned as the status quo.

In sum, we would recommend an overarching message on education that incorporates the language of economics, children, and the future, as well as a federal commitment to standards. When on the offensive, we would recommend incorporating the language of values implicitly -- for example, through references to guns in the schools, which is a constant theme among those who most decry the erosion of values, and through reinforcement of the need to restore responsibility and discipline -- the two most frequently-mentioned values that voters want returned to the classroom:

Education is fundamental to our country's future, and to the future of our children. As a nation, we need to make a public commitment to a quality education for every child. A quality education means an education where hard work, responsibility, and accomplishment are rewarded, and where guns and violence are not classroom dangers. We need to set the highest standards, and we need to make this a national priority. Things like Head Start, strong teacher training, and college loans are fundamental to setting such standards. We should be improving them, not eliminating them. They are fundamental to building a strong economic future for our children. They are fundamental to creating tomorrow's leaders, and to giving our children a sound foundation on which to build their future.

October 25, 1995

Note to Michele Cavataio

Attached as requested is public opinion poll data on the topics you requested. We assume that you were able to reach OERI concerning research on these topics.

Please let us know if we can provide further assistance.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Val Plisko", with a stylized, cursive script.

Val Plisko

Attachment

cc: Mike Smith
Alan Ginsburg

PUBLIC OPINION POLL DATA ON SELECTED ISSUES

Public opinion poll data is attached for the following topics:

- Teacher Exams
- Uniforms
- Class Size
- Longer School Periods/Longer School Year
- Single-Sex Classes
- Inclusion of Students with Disabilities
- Alternative Schools for Disruptive Students
- Teaching Values and Morals in Schools
- Teaching Basics
- Teaching Writing Without Teaching Spelling
- Teaching Math with Calculators

There is no public opinion poll data available for the following topics:

- Teacher Tenure
- Race Norming
- Remedial Education in Universities

Teacher Exams

While there is no public opinion poll data on giving examinations to teachers themselves, the 1993 Gallup Poll asked about possible uses for national standardized tests of students, in addition to measuring students' academic achievement.

- The public strongly supports using standardized national tests of students to “identify areas in which teachers need to improve their teaching skills” (87%); this was ranked second, after “to identify areas in which students need extra help” (91%). Forty-six percent say they should be used to “determine how much teachers should be paid.”

Uniforms

- A 1994 Public Agenda survey, while it did not ask specifically about school uniforms, found support for appropriate dress for teachers and students: 56 percent of the general public favor “requiring teachers to dress like professionals” and 49 percent favor “requiring kids to dress in standard clothing, such as a button-down shirt and slacks for boys.” Support among African American parents was very high, with 71 percent favoring professional dress for teachers (white parents, 47%) and 64 percent favoring standard clothing for students (white parents, 41%).

Class Size

- A 1994 Public Agenda survey asking about serious problems in local schools found that 50 percent of the public said “classes are too crowded” was serious (combines “very serious” with “somewhat serious”); 63 percent of African American parents and 55 percent of white parents said this. Overcrowded classes was ranked seventh on a list of 13 problems by the general public.
- According to a 1993 Princeton/*Newsweek* national poll, when parents were asked to pick “the best way to improve the quality of education in your children’s schools” from a list of six, “smaller classes” topped the list (35%).
- The 1991 Gallup Poll found that 72 percent of the public oppose increases in class size for their local schools as a way to reduce education spending (21 percent were in favor).
- The 1991 Gallup Poll found that, when choosing a public school for a child, 57 percent of the public consider the size of classes very important, 31 percent say fairly important, and 9 percent say not too important (1%, not important at all; 2% don’t know).
- The 1995 Public Agenda survey confirmed that the public sees the smaller classes offered by private schools as an advantage; 67 percent of Americans say that private schools do better on this score, compared with 13 percent who indicate that public schools have the advantage.

Longer School Periods/Longer School Year

- The 1993 Gallup Poll asked whether respondents favor or oppose extending the school day or year in their local public schools; 52 percent were in favor, with 47 percent opposed (1% don't know).
- The 1993 Gallup Poll also asked what plan respondents would prefer for extending the time children spend in school; 47 percent prefer "increasing the number of days in the school year," 33 percent prefer "increasing the number of hours in the school day," 5 percent favor "having classes on Saturday morning," 2 percent favor a combination, and 12 percent favor none of these (1% don't know).
- A 1993 *Newsweek*/PTA poll asked respondents how much they thought increasing the number of school days from 180 to 220 or 240 "like some countries in Europe and Asia" would help improve the educational system in their area. Respondents were asked to rate the idea on a scale from 1 to 7:

("would help enormously")	7	25%
	6	12%
	5	15%
	4	10%
	3	7%
	2	7%
("would not help at all")	1	20%

- The 1993 *Newsweek*/PTA poll also asked respondents to rate how much they thought year round schools "in which the 3 month summer break would be replaced by several short vacations, each a few weeks in length" would help improve education locally.

("would help enormously")	7	29%
	6	9%
	5	13%
	4	6%
	3	9%
	2	6%
("would not help at all")	1	24%

- A 1992 Gallup/*Life Magazine* poll asked whether, "taking into account that changes in education may cost more money and require additional tax dollars," respondents favor extending the school day (40% were in favor, 58% opposed) and school year (49% in favor, 48% opposed).

Single-Sex Classes

- A 1991 *Los Angeles Times* survey asked respondents about “special public schools for young black males” (the question included reasons to favor the idea—”on the grounds that this group has special serious problems that require a particular type of educational environment”—or oppose it—”on the grounds that it is unfair to girls and non-blacks and encourages segregation”): 32 percent felt strongly that such schools should be allowed, 20 percent felt (not strongly) that they should be allowed, 13 percent felt (not strongly) that they should not be allowed, and 28 percent felt strongly that they should not be allowed.
- A 1994 national survey of adult women by *Redbook Magazine* asked about single-sex education for women. When asked during what years they think it is most important for girls to have single-sex education, 39 percent say grade school, 37 percent say junior high, 5 percent say high school, 1 percent say high school, 5 percent say all years (total in favor: 86%) and 12 percent do not favor single-sex education.

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

The 1995 Gallup Poll included several questions on the inclusion of students with disabilities.

- Only 26 percent of the public believes that “children with learning problems” should be “put in the same classes with other students”; 66 percent believe that they should be “put in special classes of their own (8 percent don’t know). While there were few significant differences in the responses from different categories of people, there was a difference by age: “the older the person interviewed, the less likely he or she was to approve of inclusion. Only 15 percent of persons over age 65 favored the idea, while 34 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds did.”
- When asked about the effect on other students of “including children with learning problems in the same classrooms with other students,” 23 percent said it would have a positive effect, 37 percent said it would have a negative effect, and 36 percent said it “would make little difference (4% don’t know).
- When asked about the effect of inclusion on “children with learning problems themselves,” 38 percent said it would have a positive effect, 40 percent said it would have a negative effect, and 17 percent said it would make little difference (5% don’t know).

An earlier Gallup Poll (1992) asked about the inclusion of students with physical and mental disabilities.

- For “physically handicapped children,” 65 percent of respondents said they should be “put in the same classrooms with other students” while 27 percent said they should be “put in special classes of their own” (8% don’t know).
- By contrast, when the same question was asked about “mentally handicapped children,” only 22 percent said “the same classrooms,” while 67 percent said “special classes” (11% don’t know).

The recent Public Agenda Foundation report *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* summarizes their research on public opinion on the inclusion of children with disabilities as follows: “Most people want such children to receive an education that will help them achieve to the best of their ability, but many also worry that mainstreaming ‘takes away’ from the education of ‘average children’—both siphoning off funds and distracting teachers in class.”

- A 1994 Public Agenda study found that only 34 percent of Americans think that heterogeneous group (mixing students with different ability levels) will increase student learning. African American and white parents show equal skepticism (61% versus 62%). Moreover, 72 percent of the public believes that average learners get less attention in school than either fast or slow learners.

Alternative Schools for Disruptive Students

The 1995 Gallup Poll included the following questions on this topic:

- When asked about what to do with “a student in a public school in this community” who was “guilty of continually disruptive behavior in school,” 20 percent would prefer “expelling the student from school” while 77 percent would prefer “transferring the student to a separate facility for special attention” (2% prefer neither; 1% don’t know).
- When asked about a student who was “guilty of violence against another student or a teacher,” 31 percent would prefer “expelling the student from school” while 66 percent would prefer “transferring the student to a separate facility for special attention” (2% prefer neither; 1% don’t know).

Teaching Values and Morals in Schools

A 1995 Public Agenda survey asked respondents how important they thought various subject areas were for their local public schools to concentrate on teaching.

- While basic skills received the most support (rated “absolutely essential” by 92 percent) and computer skills ranked third (80%), all the other areas that received the highest rankings were related to values, not academic subjects: 83 percent said it is absolutely essential for schools to teach “good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined”; 78 percent said “the value of hard work”; 74 percent said “values such as honesty and tolerance of others”; 66 percent said “habits of good citizenship.”
- By contrast, no academic subject was considered as absolutely essential by more than 63 percent of respondents (American history/geography, 63%; science, 59%; advanced mathematics, 37%; world history/geography, 35%; classic literature, 23%; modern American literature, 22%).

Support for character education, while not universal, is significant.

- The 1994 Gallup Poll found that a plurality of the public support character education, with 49 percent in favor (but 39 percent against), while a majority (57%) of public school parents show support for the idea (with 34 percent opposed).
- A 1994 Princeton/*Newsweek* poll found strong support for “classes in ‘character education’ to help public school students develop moral values and ethical behavior”: 34 percent of the public are strongly in favor and 49 percent favor it, with only 16 percent opposed.

When the 1994 Gallup Poll asked the public to respond to a list of character traits that should be included in curriculum, respondents expressed strong support:

Respect for others:	94%
Industry/hard work:	93%
Persistence:	93%
Fairness in dealing with others:	92%
Compassion:	91%
Civility:	91%
Self-esteem:	90%
High self-expectations:	87%
Thrift:	74%

Teaching Basics

The 1995 Public Agenda report *Assignment Incomplete* includes an extensive discussion of their findings on public support for “the basics,” based on surveys and focus groups. Public support for “the basics” is overwhelming; in focus groups, the topic is always raised by participants. The support is a result of concern that some kids are slipping through the cracks, not even learning to read or make change; a high school diploma is seen as guaranteeing nothing. Despite concern among some reformers that public concern over “the basics” implies reactionary opposition to higher standards or challenging curricula, that does not seem to be the case. The public sees “the basics” as a floor, not a ceiling: “While some reformers fear that the public means ‘basics only,’ what the public really wants is ‘basics first.’” Reading, writing, arithmetic (and for many, computer literacy) are the absolute minimum, but there is recognition that education needs to provide other things as well.

When Public Agenda (1995) surveyed the public about whether certain subjects or topics were “absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important” for their local public schools to be teaching:

- “Basic reading, writing, and math skills” topped the list, rated as absolutely essential by 92 percent of the general public, 91 percent of parents, and 98 percent of teachers. In a separate survey of economic, political, civic, and educational leaders, 99 percent said “the basics” are absolutely essential.
- Good work habits (83%), values such as honesty and tolerance (74%), and good citizenship (66%) received high ratings. Except for computer skills (80%), no subject area even came close to “the basics” (the highest was American history/geography—63 percent).
- The American public sees learning in pragmatic terms; reading, writing, and arithmetic rank at the very top, while learning great literature is considered essential by less than one-quarter (23%) of respondents.

Teaching Writing Without Teaching Spelling

- A 1994 Public Agenda survey found that 60 percent of respondents reject the strategy of encouraging young writers to express themselves creatively, without requiring perfect spelling and grammar. Rather, they want the rules emphasized "from the beginning."

Teaching Math with Calculators

- According to a 1994 Public Agenda survey, most of the public (86%) feels that students should learn to do arithmetic "by hand" and memorize multiplication tables before using calculators, while only 10 percent believe that early use of calculators and computers is a better way to teach math concepts than memorization and hand calculation.
- By contrast, a 1993 Public Agenda survey found that 82 percent of math educators felt that "early use of calculators will improve children's problem-solving skills and not prevent the learning of arithmetic."

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