GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES
Teachers Talk About Public Education Today

A Report from Public Agenda
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A Report from Public Agenda

By Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson
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Founded over a decade ago by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, 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 in-depth 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.
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Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today - Public Agenda © 1996
INTRODUCTION

Over the past six years, Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization focusing exclusively on public policy issues, has looked closely at Americans’ attitudes toward the public schools. In a series of in-depth studies, we have reported on the views of the general public, public school parents, and leaders from such sectors as business, government, media, and higher education.

What has emerged is a deeply disturbing picture of an American public and community leadership frustrated and angered by the state of public education. Mounting public concerns — documented by Public Agenda and other opinion researchers — have prompted increasingly frank, sometimes soul-searching, discussions among educators and concerned reformers based in government, business, and leading educational think tanks. Indeed, recent polls show that education has jumped to the top of the list of public concerns, the focus of what is in effect a national conversation on how to improve the public schools.

But discourse on how to improve public education that does not include the concerns and ideas of classroom teachers is incomplete and probably dangerously inadequate. In their daily interactions with students, teachers play the starring role in education. Most of us remember teachers who could excite us about learning and make us do our best, and we count them among the major influences in our lives.

In addition, those sincerely interested in improving America’s public schools cannot afford to discount the views of the classroom teacher. Teachers have first-hand experience with what really happens, day-in and day-out, in the nation’s classrooms. Thus, making good judgments requires weighing teachers’ testimony along with that of others.

Perhaps most important, many substantive elements of education reform — from higher standards to revamped curricula to new kinds of tests — will be toothless and ineffectual unless teachers understand them, believe in them, and make them work. Teachers may be allies, untapped resources, demoralized and beleaguered foot soldiers, or subversives undermining reform at every turn; but whatever their perspectives, they need to be understood and taken seriously.

Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today is Public Agenda’s effort to do just that. Our aim is to capture the voices of teachers in school districts across the country, spell out their concerns about the schools, and learn more about their perspective on various aspects of education reform.

Given the Circumstances is based primarily on results from two national telephone surveys of public school teachers conducted by Public Agenda in 1995. One survey, conducted as part of Public Agenda’s Assignment Incomplete study, measured the views of 237 teachers and was completed in May. A second, completed in December for this report, surveyed 800 teachers from grades four through twelve, as well as “oversamples” of black teachers and Hispanic teachers (see Methodology for full details). Both surveys asked teachers about issues covered in Public Agenda’s previous studies of Americans’ views on public education: First Things First (1994) and Assignment Incomplete (1995).

The project’s intent was two-fold. First, the surveys give voice to the classroom teacher’s perspective on education issues, issues that are provoking debate nationwide. How are public schools performing? What do children need to learn? What will help children learn better? What do schools need to be effective? What are the best strategies for change? Second, the surveys compare the views of teachers with those of the public, parents, and community leadership, uncovering areas of agreement and shared concerns, along with areas where teachers’ concerns and judgments differ.
As with other Public Agenda reports on education, we draw on our entire body of research over the past six years, attempting to synthesize what we have learned over time, rather than confining our report to findings from a single study. This body of work reflects over a dozen separate reports on education issues (see Related Publications, page 49), and well over 100 focus groups.

Given the Circumstances reports its findings in four chapters. Chapter One lays out teachers' judgments about how well public schools in their communities are performing and about specific changes to make them more effective. This chapter focuses particularly on teachers' concerns about discipline and order—an area where teachers' concerns are closely aligned to those of the public.

Chapter Two turns to academic issues. What, in the view of teachers, do children need to learn in school today? What is absolutely essential, and what less so? This chapter also looks closely at teachers' views on what is perhaps the key element of the nationwide reform movement—the drive to raise educational standards. Do classroom teachers support this movement? Are they champions of higher standards, or opponents? Or, does their commitment to higher standards lie somewhere in-between?

Chapter Three examines teachers' perspectives on what some have called the "values wars" surfacing in many communities nationwide—heated debates over which textbooks to use in a multicultural society and what values to emphasize when schools take on the tasks of sex education and AIDS prevention. This chapter also looks at the public schools' role in the acculturation of children new to the United States, a matter of increasing importance in school districts across the country.

Chapter Four is a special focus on the perspectives of African-American and Hispanic teachers currently working in public schools. Do black and Hispanic teachers share the concerns and judgments of teachers in general, or do they have distinctive points-of-view? To our knowledge, this special focus on the views of minority teachers is a first-of-its-kind study, one that we believe adds another important and too-often missing voice to the discourse on how to improve public schools.

**Are teachers champions of higher standards, or opponents? Or, does their commitment to higher standards lie somewhere in-between?**
CHAPTER ONE: Do Public Schools Work?

From Monday through Friday, for nine months of the year, some two-and-a-half million public school teachers serve on the front lines of education. How well, from their perspective, are the nation's public schools doing? What changes would teachers make to improve public education? What, in their view, would help them do their jobs? In Chapter One, Public Agenda describes teachers' judgments about the performance of local public schools and their priorities for change. This chapter pays particular attention to discipline and order — an issue which commands the concern of both teachers and the public, and an issue to which both respond in similar ways.

Finding: Contrary to Most Other Americans, Teachers Give Solidly High Ratings to Local Public Schools

Earlier Public Agenda research reported that the public and community leaders have deep reservations about the performance of their local public schools, with initial expressions of approval crumbling at the slightest probing. Teachers, in contrast, give the public schools in their communities high ratings. They believe that their local public schools generally outperform private schools — even on such specific criteria as high academic standards and preparation for college.

Teachers say that given societal pressures and a lack of parental involvement, the schools are doing as well as possible. They routinely criticize the "bad news bias" of the media and say that comparisons to other nations or to private schools are not useful.

In Assignment Incomplete, Public Agenda's 1995 survey of how Americans view public education, the public's initially positive evaluations of their local public schools disintegrated when people were asked about specifics. Majorities said that in their communities the private schools were outperforming the public schools, especially in the areas people consider most critical: School safety, higher standards, and order. Most parents with children in public school acknowledged they would move them to private school if they could afford to. But what do teachers think? Are they equally critical of how their schools are performing? And if not, why not?

High Grades From Teachers

Public school teachers firmly believe their local schools deserve good marks. Despite numerous commissions and reports questioning the performance of the public schools, mounting public disaffection, and increased discussion of private school alternatives, teachers hold fast to this conviction: Their communities have good public schools.

Eighty-six percent of teachers say public schools in their own communities do an excellent or good job, a view shared by a much smaller 55% majority of the public and 53% of community leaders. And while most Americans' evaluations of local public schools plummet when they compare them to private schools, teachers hold firm. More than three-fourths of teachers (76%) think their local public schools outperform the private ones, compared to just 33% of the public and 29% of community leaders.

Unlike the public, teachers stick with their positive evaluations even through specific, head-to-head comparisons between local public and private schools. Asked about a range of areas such as academic standards, order, and preparation for college, teachers say that public schools outperform private schools in 6 of 13 areas and equal them in 2 other categories (Table 1). In contrast, the public believes that public schools outperform private schools on just 2 of 13 measures.

More than three-fourths of teachers think their local public schools outperform the private ones, compared to just 33% of the public and 29% of community leaders.

* Throughout this report, data for the "general public" or "Americans" and for "teachers" comes from the Public Agenda surveys conducted for Fast Things Fast: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools (1994) and Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform (1995). Data for "teachers" comes from the surveys conducted for this report and for Assignment Incomplete.
These conflicting evaluations are often dramatic and occur in pivotal areas. When asked which schools are more likely to provide higher academic standards, teachers point to the public schools by a two-to-one margin (50% to 24%). The public holds an exactly opposite assessment, favoring the private schools by a 53% to 24% margin. Asked which schools are more likely to prepare young people for college, teachers choose the public schools by a 52% to 20% spread. Again, the public takes the opposite view — 45% to 27%. Asked which schools are more likely to provide safety and security, teachers are divided: About a third say public schools, another third say private schools, and 24% say they are the same. But the public clearly feels private schools are safer, with 51% picking private schools and only 20% picking public schools.

Some Private School Phrases

Teachers do believe that private schools excel in several important areas: Smaller class size, for example, as well as discipline and order (Table 1). Both teachers (60%) and the public (67%) believe private schools have the edge when it comes to smaller class size. By a 49% plurality, teachers say private schools are more likely to provide discipline and order in the classroom. The public concurs, but by a greater margin (61%).

Although they give credit to the private schools in a few areas, teachers usually stand fast behind the public schools. Why do their evaluations differ so dramatically from those of the public and community leaders? Focus groups conducted by Public Agenda for a number of education studies suggest several explanations for the good grades teachers give their schools.

Loyalty Under Siege

For one thing, it is perhaps natural for employees to defend the institution they work for, especially when it seems to be under siege. For many teachers, work is not merely a job but a calling which they answer. In their view, they face Herculean challenges and far too much uninformed criticism. Teachers often complain that the schools — and, by extension, they themselves — are unfairly blamed for problems beyond their control, and victimized by the media’s bad-news bias.

“Imagine the community blaming the teachers — we’re just battered in the newspapers,” said one teacher in Connecticut. “Every time there’s a problem, it’s the teachers’ fault.” A Minneapolis teacher voiced a similar sentiment: “Teachers have a real bum rap. Every single thing that happens in the system is the teachers’ fault.”

With so many outside critics “sniping” at the schools, many teachers seem fearful about supplying more ammunition. At the beginning of focus groups conducted by Public Agenda, many teachers were apprehensive about the sponsorship of the research and nervous about how their comments might be used. Some feared that any negative remarks they made would be taken out of context and used to expose schools to even more criticism. Some perhaps feared that negative remarks could lead to reprisals from “above.” A teacher from Arkansas explained her misgivings about just who exactly was behind the research: “When we were young, we used to say: ‘Don’t trust anybody over 30.’ Now it’s: ‘Don’t trust anybody downtown; don’t trust any administrator.’”

Not Bad, Given the Circumstances

Teachers in focus group discussions also justified their positive assessment of public schools by itemizing the many obstacles that stand in their path: Failing families, declining communities, inadequate resources, fractured school boards, and top-heavy bureaucracies that soak up their resources. One teacher from Connecticut said, “All the social problems of our communities have been thrown at the teacher. You have to be a psychologist, you have to be a nurse, you have to be a baby-sitter, and I’ve done all those jobs and more.” “The school system isn’t broken,” said a Seattle teacher. “Society is broken.”

The sense of “teaching under fire” leads some teachers to dramatically redefine their notion of success. “It’s a success if I can get a child to bring a pencil to class — that’s a success,” said one teacher in Birmingham. “There are some kids, if they bring a pencil and paper I’ll write a note home bragging on them. That’s a big deal.”
Absentee Parents

Another barrier frequently identified by teachers is lack of parental involvement. Teachers think that parents are the decisive factor in any child's educational success. They also think that in too many families parents are abdicating this responsibility. Asked to name the single most important thing public schools need to help students learn, the top response from teachers (31%) is "involved parents." When asked why students with high grades do so well, two-thirds (67%) of teachers say it is because their parents stress education.

"The single most important factor in a child's success in education is the parents," said a teacher in Grand Rapids. "After that, it's the teacher, but only after the parents. Time and time again, my students who aren't doing well — I'll never see their parents at conferences." Seven in 10 teachers (71%) and about 6 in 10 members of the public think that a student from a stable and supportive family attending a poor school is more likely to succeed than a student from a troubled family who attends a good school.

Teachers think that the lack of parental support and involvement affects far more than academic success. From the perspective of educators, some parents even undermine their effort to impart the standards of behavior and civility that a child needs to be a successful student or a successful adult. As one teacher from San Diego said: "When I have difficulty with a younger, I know I'm going to have difficulty with the parent." A school principal interviewed for another Public Agenda project recounted a story about a father who wanted to cover the costs of his son's vandalism by simply writing a check. The father could not understand the principal's insistence that the student be disciplined as well.

Many teachers believe that troubled families, distracted parents, and indifference to learning at home have become disturbingly commonplace. Asked where young people generally face the most pressure and stress today — at home, at school, among their friends, or in their neighborhoods — most teachers (56%) say "at home because of troubled families." The perspective of parents is less clear cut: Only 22% of parents and 27% of the general public point to the home as the place where kids face most stress. Eight in 10 teachers (80%) say that parents do a worse job today than when they were in school, while 55% of the public agrees. "Parenting is like an endangered species," said a Seattle teacher.

Comparing Apples to Oranges

Given the challenges public schools face in today's American society, many teachers believe that comparing public school performance to that of private schools — or to schools in other countries — is simply unfair. Private schools can pick and choose the best applicants, teachers say, while public schools cannot turn anybody away.

"In Middletown, there are two Catholic schools," said one Connecticut teacher, "and the public schools get the bad rap all the time. [They say] we're just not as good as the private schools, and that bugs me. I see great programs at both schools, and I also see the same problems. But when the private schools have a problem child, they have an option. We don't have an option — we're here to teach all the kids." In this study, the small number of teachers (10%) who believe that in their community private schools are better than public schools generally think this is because the private schools are more selective about which students they take in (58%). Only 3 in 10 (31%) say private schools are better because they educate more effectively.

Comparisons of American students to those of other industrialized nations often provoke a similar response. "These comparisons are totally meaningless," said a Seattle teacher. "You start using countries like Sweden and France, you're talking about very homogeneous countries, and in the United States, we are such a diverse society. I think you're comparing apples and oranges." Perhaps this explains why only 28% of teachers say they would be "very concerned" if "international test scores showed that American students were doing poorly," compared to more than half (56%) of the public and 63% of community leaders.
Views Not Easily Shaken

Critics of public education have their own rebuttals to each of the explanations advanced by teachers, and the debate will probably continue for some time. What is clear from the research is that public school teachers have taken their stand firmly. They are extremely reluctant to criticize public schools, even when pressed on specific comparisons. And teachers are not the only educators that rally to public schools’ defense. Results from a survey conducted for the 1995 Assignment Incomplete study show that school administrators (principals and superintendents) are also upbeat about the performance of their communities’ schools.1

- Finding: Teachers Say Schools Need More Money, Smaller Classes, and For More Discipline and Order

Teachers from across the country and at every level express concerns about three problems in their own local schools: Inadequate funding, overcrowded classes, and disorder. Overwhelming majorities of teachers say their schools do not get enough money to do a good job; that their classes are too crowded, and that disruptive students are now absorbing most of their attention.

Teachers’ “big three” concerns differ somewhat from those of the public. Both groups express serious concerns about order, but teachers express less concern than the public about how well schools teach basic academic skills or maintain student safety. Consequently, teachers and the public have different starting points. Teachers start with money, class size, and then order. For the public, safety, order, and the basics are the most serious problems.

Public Agenda’s 1994 study of public attitudes, First Things First, showed that Americans nationwide believe that three components are essential for sound education to take place: Safe schools, order in classes, and effective teaching of academic basics.2 At the same time, most Americans think the public schools fall short in precisely these areas. Majorities of the public believe drugs and violence are a problem in their local schools, that teachers are not doing a good job dealing with discipline, and that a high school diploma is no guarantee that a student has learned the basics.

Where do teachers stand on these issues? And how different are their concerns from those of the general public? Teachers have a different view of the most pressing problems facing local schools (Table 2). They start with concerns about the lack of resources and crowded classrooms, followed closely by concern about order. For teachers, school safety and effective teaching of the basics, while obviously important, are not at the top of their agenda for change.

Bigger Job, Dwindling Resources

Eight in 10 teachers (80%) say their own community’s public schools are not getting enough money to do a good job. This concern about money extends to teachers across the country — in high, middle, and low-income communities. Teachers simply do not believe they have the resources they need, given the challenges they face. “Society expects us to be able to handle all kinds of problems, but our resources just get smaller and smaller and smaller,” complained a teacher in Minneapolis. “If we’re going to take on the role of being everything to children, we’ve got to have the money to do it.” Even 64% of teachers who work in schools with more affluent student populations say money is a serious problem in their community.

In addition, about two-thirds of teachers (65%) say that classes in their schools are too crowded. Overcrowding seems to be a particular worry for teachers who work in urban or inner-city districts: 83% say overcrowded classes are a problem in their local schools.

The emphasis teachers place on funding and class size — two interrelated issues — emerged repeatedly in focus groups. To teachers like this one from San Francisco, there is a direct relationship between smaller class size, a better classroom environment, and improved performance: “Having smaller class sizes, that is going to solve so many problems right there. I can go so much faster with 15 — more than twice as fast with 15 kids — as I can with 30.”
The public is not entirely dismissive of the concerns teachers have over funding or class size, but its “first-things-first” agenda makes them less compelling or immediate. For example, 58% of the public agree with teachers that local schools are not getting enough money, and another 50% think classes are too crowded. But in the public’s mind, funding issues follow rather than precede the problems schools face with violence, order, and the basics.

Money or Discipline?

And there is some disagreement even among teachers about the relative importance of having more money. Asked what will do more to improve student achievement, more money and smaller classes or higher standards and more discipline, 57% of teachers opt for more resources, but as many as 4 in 10 (39%) say standards and discipline.

Furthermore, in focus groups teachers were often skeptical that more money will actually find its way to their classrooms. Many suspected the schools’ money is wasted by their school boards and central office administration. As one Birmingham teacher put it, “Anything that the administration or the board wants, they get. At the Board of Education, they have all type of equipment...you go into the schools, they have nothing. True enough, there needs to be more money in the schools, but it needs to be managed better, and it needs to be spent on the children instead of administration.”

Finding: Both Teachers and the Public Cite Lack of Order as a Top Problem and Back Similar Measures to Address It

Large majorities of teachers and the public name restoring order in schools as a top priority. What’s more, they share an agreed-upon agenda on how to accomplish this. Teachers and the public strongly support removing persistent troublemakers from class. Both overwhelmingly support keeping students on campus during lunch and banning smoking. And, although teachers downplay the threat of violence in their own schools, they are even more decisive than the public in supporting a proposal to ban kids caught with weapons or drugs from their schools’ campuses. Support for these measures, among both teachers and the public, cuts across different racial, economic, regional groupings and district-types.

At the same time, both teachers and the public are ambivalent about the need for dress codes, and both overwhelmingly reject reintroducing corporal punishment. Finally, both strongly support an environment that fosters self-esteem and makes learning enjoyable.

The emphasis on order is one area where the top concerns of teachers overlap with those of the public. Fully 81% of teachers say that the worst behaved students get the most attention in school. In focus groups, teachers regularly talked about the one or two unruly children who are so disruptive that they siphon off the teacher’s time and keep other students from learning. “There’s a lack of discipline, a lack of self-control that a lot of the children are coming in with,” said a Connecticut teacher. “A lot of my time is wasted with behavior problems instead of actually teaching.”

One teacher from Minneapolis reflected on her first three years of teaching: “What really threw me at the beginning was the lack of respect, the harassment, I was just overwhelmed by the disrespect students have for one another. The name-calling, it just flows off the tongue like they’re saying ‘Good morning, have a nice day.’”

— Minneapolis Teacher

I was just overwhelmed by the disrespect students have for one another. The name-calling, it just flows off the tongue like they’re saying ‘Good morning, have a nice day.’”

Discipline and Self-Control — Prerequisites for Life

Order and discipline are especially important to both teachers and the public because neither believes teaching or learning can occur without those preconditions in place. For teachers, children who are habitually disruptive — who talk out loud or out of turn or who have trouble sitting still — also lack the patience and discipline necessary to learn to read, write, add, and subtract, let alone to become responsible workers and citizens. As one teacher from Grand Rapids said, “You have to have structure in that classroom. If you let them come into that classroom any way they want to, you won’t be able to get anything done.” A Connecticut teacher made his resentment plain: “I see a lot of kids who are thugs who run the schools.”
Moreover, both teachers and the public believe that the schools' mission goes beyond academic instruction to teaching codes of conduct and behavior that benefit students in school and in a career. About 8 in 10 members of the general public and 9 in 10 teachers agree it is absolutely essential for the schools to teach “good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined” (Table 5).

This One Kid... 

When it comes to prescriptions, both groups want school policies to focus on the handful of students deemed truly troublesome. Almost 9 in 10 teachers (88%), as well as 73% of the public, think academic achievement would improve substantially if persistent troublemakers were removed from class (Table 3). As one Bridgeport teacher said, “I've been in the classroom, in the trenches, for 28 years. A great deal of my day is taken up with discipline. I have a lot to give. The other kids have a lot to give, and they have a lot to receive. And we get bogged down with this one student.”

Eight in 10 teachers would require students to remain on school grounds during lunch, a measure supported by 73% of the public (Table 6). An even greater number of teachers (94%) would ban student smoking anywhere on school grounds, and the public once again agrees (83%). Teachers would even curb romantic behavior among students, with 7 in 10 (69%) favoring a ban on kissing and hugging on school property. A smaller majority (56%) of the public concurs.

Civility, Not Military Discipline

What emerges repeatedly in the views of both teachers and the public is a strong desire to recreate a civilized atmosphere in the schools, an atmosphere where students respect rules of behavior and are in turn treated with respect and even caring. Despite their intense interest in order and discipline, neither teachers nor the public seem to want their schools to become carbon copies of military schools. Teacher opinion is divided, for example, over the wisdom of dress codes (Table 6). Forty-seven percent favor, and 51% oppose, requiring students to dress in standard clothing; the public also splits over the issue by a similar 49% to 50% margin. Fifty-two percent of teachers favor “requiring teachers to dress like professionals, with male teachers wearing jackets and ties,” but 45% oppose that suggestion. Similarly, 56% of the public supports the measure while 42% are opposed. Only 13% of teachers and 28% of the public support allowing “educators to paddle or spank students.”

“If anyone wants to get to youngsters and help them develop, that person has to show respect for them, and some way of helping that youngster direct himself,” said a veteran teacher from the San Diego area.

Teachers and the public also believe learning will be enhanced when it is enjoyable and when students feel that adults care about them. Three of four teachers (76%) — and about 9 in 10 members of the general public — want the schools to put more emphasis on making learning enjoyable and interesting to students. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (65%) would put more emphasis on building student self-esteem, and they are joined by about 8 in 10 members of the public.

Is Violence a Problem?

Teachers are less likely than the public to say that violence is a serious problem in their local public schools (Table 2). While 7 in 10 Americans (72%) say “too much drugs and violence” is a problem in local schools, only half (47%) of teachers agree. In focus groups, teachers often complained that media coverage of violent incidents in the schools is overblown. “When there's one gun in a high school, the average citizen starts to believe there's one in every school,” said a San Diego teacher. “The same with drug busts. They believe what they see on T.V.”

While several recent studies have suggested that — for the most part — American students are generally safe within public school walls, many Americans may not be assured by this survey’s finding: Almost half of America's teachers say violence and drugs are a problem in their schools. Focus group discussions with teachers and the public suggest they may have different thresholds for tolerating violence. Many teachers may have come to view one or two violent incidents over several years as expected and routine, rather than shocking.
One Hartford teacher, for example, seemed to have adjusted to a new reality: “We’ve had some violence in the high school, so now we have security guards. . . I feel very safe there; I don’t have a problem with security guards.” For members of the general public, on the other hand, the existence of security guards and metal detectors in public schools is all the evidence they need to drive the seriousness of the problem home. Rather than reassuring them, the presence of security guards may only serve to remind most Americans of how bad things have become.

Decisive Action Warranted

But while teachers express less concern than the public over violence and drugs in their schools, they are even more supportive of proposals to curb the problem. Fully 84% — compared to 76% of the public — think “permanently removing kids caught with drugs or weapons” will improve academic achievement (Table 3).

One teacher from Savannah voiced his frustration with what he saw as his community’s unending patience with “problem kids.” “I don’t know why the school system is so tolerant,” the teacher said. “In high school, a kid might be suspended five or six times in a nine-week period, but we can’t legally get rid of them.”

“We’ve had some violence in the high school, so now we have security guards...I feel very safe there; I don’t have a problem with security guards.”

— Hartford Teacher
In Chapter Two, we turn our attention to teachers' views about academic issues: What subjects should be taught, how they should be taught, and how much should schools expect from kids. This chapter reports on the subject areas teachers view as absolutely essential and those they consider less critical. Special attention is paid to how teachers respond to the principles and policies implied by the nationwide standards movement. Finally, this chapter raises questions about whether teachers are likely to be strong advocates of higher standards and discusses their attitudes about the intrinsic value of education and advanced knowledge.

- Finding: Teachers and the Public Agree on What Should Be Taught

Beyond agreeing on prescriptions to improve safety and order, teachers and the public have remarkably similar academic agendas for the nation's students. They both agree by nearly unanimous percentages that teaching basic academic skills is critically important. Strong majorities of both teachers and the public also think it is essential to teach computer skills. And, by similar majorities, both consider a grounding in science and American geography and history essential components of the curriculum.

An overwhelming 98% of teachers — and 92% of the public — say it is absolutely essential for local schools to teach basic reading, writing, and math skills.

Which subjects do teachers and the public believe are absolutely critical for every child? To map their priorities, this study presented teachers with a list of 16 subjects and asked which were "absolutely essential," which were "important but not essential," and which were "not that important" (Table 5). The list was designed to be diverse, including academic subjects ranging from basic skills to advanced mathematics, practical skills such as computer literacy, and social skills and norms such as good work habits or honesty.

The teachers' "bottom line" on where public schools should focus their energies is virtually indistinguishable from the public's. It is pragmatic, basic, and intended to give children functional preparation for the world they will one day face. In the foreground stand reading, writing, and math skills, which are almost unanimously seen as absolutely essential. Computer skills, along with American history and a grounding in science, follow. Subjects such as classic works of literature, and the history and geography of other areas of the world, fall near the bottom of the list.

The "Basics"

Standing at the pinnacle of academic priorities are the basics. There is simply no doubt in the minds of teachers or the public that teaching the "basics" is critical to the mission of the schools. An overwhelming 98% of teachers — and 92% of the public — say it is absolutely essential for local schools to teach basic reading, writing, and math skills. Without mastery of the "3 R's," teachers say, students cannot succeed in jobs or higher education. "The very least amount that we should require from our graduates," said a Cincinnati teacher, "are the basic educational factors — that they be able to read, that they be able to write legibly, that they be able to speak, and that they be able to do math."

Computers: The New Basic

The Assignment Incomplete study showed that computer skills had emerged for the public as a new basic requirement, and teachers seem to wholeheartedly agree. A strong majority of teachers (72%) joins the 80% of Americans who view teaching computer skills and media technology as "absolutely essential" components of today's academic curriculum (Table 5). "They're going to be more technically oriented in the future," said a teacher from Savannah. "That's where the money is going. Somebody has to be able to work these computers, and the curriculum needs to reflect that."
Other academic subjects are also viewed as essential. About 7 in 10 teachers (72%) see American history and geography as an "absolutely essential" part of the curriculum, a somewhat higher number than the general public (63%). Almost two-thirds of teachers (64%) add biology, chemistry, and physics to the list of required subjects; 59% of the public agrees.

Although some educators protest the additional burdens schools face because of modern social problems, teachers seem to endorse their need to do so. Six in 10 teachers (61%) and 64% of the public say it is "absolutely essential" that schools teach children "how to deal with social problems like drugs and family breakdown." Many teachers are willing to go even farther by providing social services at the school itself. Almost 6 in 10 teachers (58%) think the best way for schools to help children from troubled backgrounds is to "give them social services such as drug and child abuse counseling at school." Only 31% think it is better for schools to "shelter youngsters from social problems and keep them focused on their studies."

- Finding: Teachers, Like Much of the Public, Favor Traditional Approaches to Education

Teachers are often as wary as other Americans when it comes to teaching innovations now being tried in many school districts. A strong majority of teachers, including math teachers, reject the early use of calculators in mathematics instruction. Heterogeneous grouping — mixing slow and fast learners in the same classroom — is also controversial, with most teachers unenthusiastic as the public.

Teachers' views are at least partly determined by the grade level they teach. Elementary school teachers are far more supportive of heterogeneous grouping than are high school teachers. They are more likely than high school teachers to favor concentrating on creative writing and expression in the early grades, instead of focusing on correct spelling and grammar.

*First Things First* identified the widespread lack of enthusiasm among the public toward some teaching innovations that have been at the center of many reform efforts — early use of calculators, mixing students with different skill levels in the same classrooms, and focusing first on creative writing in the early grades instead of rules of grammar and spelling. Unfortunately for supporters of such proposals, teachers often express the same wariness.

*Math-by-Hand First*

Many reform proponents say that rather than memorizing facts, students should learn how to find the right answers whenever the need arises. In teaching math, this involves having children use calculators in early grades. Proponents believe that early use of calculators allows teachers to focus on math concepts and problem-solving. But, as Public Agenda's research shows, 86% of the public rejects the use of calculators in early grades, preferring that students first memorize multiplication tables and learn to do math by hand. In the public's mind, math skills already in decline will only plunge further if students become dependent on mechanical devices.

A strong majority of teachers stand with the public on this point: 73% want students to memorize the multiplication tables and do math by hand before using calculators. Only 23% think that using calculators from the start helps students better understand math concepts. "Once they get that math memorized, nobody can take it away from them," said one teacher from Grand Rapids. "They need those basic skills, and they just have to sit down and work hard at it."

Associations of math educators generally support the early use of calculators as an important component of instructional reform. But this support has apparently failed to win over even front-line math teachers, since 73% of them want students to memorize the multiplication tables before relying on calculators.

*Heterogeneous Grouping*

The proposal to mix slow, average, and fast learners in the same classroom — heterogeneous grouping — has been another centerpiece of reform in many schools. Proponents argue that slow learners will learn from fast learners, and fast learners will learn by helping their classmates. They also argue that grouping children by ability stigmatizes youngsters with poor skills. In the *First Things First* survey, only 34% of the public endorsed heterogeneous grouping as a way to improve learning (Table 3).
Heterogeneous grouping receives at best a lukewarm reception from teachers. Four in 10 teachers think that mixing slow and fast learners will improve student performance; 31% are equivocal; and 28% think it will not improve learning. Focus groups suggest that teachers and the public share similar concerns: They fear that high achievers and average students will be held back while teachers attend to the needs of low achievers; or that students with difficulties will never get the attention they really need. One Grand Rapids teacher put it this way: "That's what I have now — these kids are just kind of all put together. The faster kids go on and the slower kids just fall behind. I think this is why so many of them drop out — they just can't keep up."

**One Key Factor: The Grade They Teach**

Support for heterogeneous grouping varies strongly with teacher grade level. Six in 10 elementary teachers think heterogeneous grouping will improve academic achievement compared to only 3 in 10 high school teachers (27%). In focus groups, elementary school teachers worry that children will be pigeonholed too early. "When you track kids, and you keep them in that track for four years," one early-grade teacher said, "you are going to kill them, especially the lower level kids who just need some pushing. I wholeheartedly agree with mainstreaming kids — even those kids with behavior problems — and keeping them in regular classrooms as best as you can and having the faster learners work with the slower learners."

By contrast, teachers in higher grades often want to tailor academic instruction so that high achievers fulfill their potential and low achievers are not neglected, a twin goal they believe is far more difficult in a heterogeneous setting. Secondary teachers also express concerns about keeping order in heterogeneous groups. One middle-school teacher said: "I have some classes where the kids are just so gifted academically, and then I've got a couple of kids who are behavioral problems. [They are] in special ed because they are behavioral problems, and then they're mainstreamed into those classes. They're very disruptive. And what do I do? Do I sacrifice the whole class for this one individual? It's very, very hard."

**Replace Multiple Choice Tests?**

Many reformers think that new kinds of assessments — including a greater use of essay tests and portfolios of student work — are better measures of true learning than are traditional multiple choice tests. All too often, reformers say, standardized tests measure rote memorization and even guesswork. In the First Things First study, the public mildly endorsed using essays or portfolios instead of multiple choice tests (54%). But as a strategy to improve learning, this approach is far less compelling to most Americans than, for example, removing habitually disruptive kids from class.

Teachers are divided over moving away from standardized multiple-choice exams. Forty-seven percent say that such a change will improve learning (Table 3). About one-third (35%) are equivocal, and 16% think it will not improve learning. One Seattle teacher voiced his support, saying: "I don't think they [multiple-choice tests] are accurate measures of what's going on, nor are standardized tests. I think much of it is trivia, it's first level — regurgitation of knowledge, comprehension maybe." But the teacher next to him had qualms: "I have a terrible time grading written papers. Do I grade the grammar; do I grade everything? And then I get hung up because if I do it properly it takes me so many hours, and then I get frustrated. And by the time I get to the last papers, I'm not doing a very good job of it."

**Creative Writing vs. Grammar and Spelling**

Teachers are divided when they are forced to choose between two views of how to teach writing in the early grades. One view is that students should be encouraged to write creatively from the start, with less emphasis on grammar and spelling rules, so they will not be turned off to writing. The other view is that teachers should stress the rules of spelling and grammar from the very beginning. On the face of it, the public and teachers seem to stand on opposite sides: While 60% of the public wants to emphasize proper grammar and spelling from the start, 56% of teachers want to focus on expressiveness and creativity first. Perhaps surprisingly, English teachers are even more supportive than other teachers of departing from the traditional emphasis, with 64% opting for the expressive writing option.
"Grammar and spelling are important," said one English teacher in San Francisco, "but to me when I think of someone who writes well, grammar and spelling are not on the top of my list. What I want is a child who is fluent, can express himself or herself, and can get it out on paper. Once a child feels comfortable getting his or her thoughts down, then I'm going to start telling them, 'Let's work on your grammar, let's work on your spelling.'"

But the picture actually is more cloudy than it seems since elementary teachers again hold views rather different from colleagues in higher grades. While 74% of elementary grade teachers want to encourage students to write creatively before concentrating on grammar and spelling, only 45% of high school teachers agree. And although English teachers seem to support the more innovative approach, exactly half of the high school teachers surveyed say that unless students are taught grammar and spelling rules from the beginning, they will never be good writers. In focus groups, many high school teachers voiced frustration at the poor writing skills of their students. By the time students get to them, they said, it is too late to raise their basic skills to the requisite level. Social studies teachers form a notable pocket of resistance to the creativity-first approach: 57% of these teachers want correct grammar and spelling emphasized from the beginning.

Reform du Jour

While some teaching innovations are more acceptable to teachers than others, teachers often take a wait-and-see attitude toward reform proposals. Previous Public Agenda research has shown that many teachers have grown fatigued with the very concept of "reform." As past reform efforts have been abandoned in favor of newer approaches, and as key policies are repeatedly upended in several-year cycles, front-line teachers often adopt a "this too shall pass" perspective.

One teacher related her "survival strategy" for dealing with reform cycles. She had seen many school superintendents come and go, and their reform agendas along with them: "When you've been in the district 20 years or so, you just learn to go with the flow. It doesn't really matter who's doing what down there. You just kind of go with it."

The Checkered Past of Reform

Some teachers describe teaching innovations that they feel have hurt their students and failed the test of time. For example, a teacher in Savannah complained about the impact of changes in reading instruction: "They change so often from one series or method to another one. We have a group of children... All they did was give [them] words. Well, some of it would soak in, but some of them couldn't even respond to you. Children who are taught how to sound out words, how to read phonetically, those children do much better."

Other teachers distrust reformers who, in their view, are disconnected from the world in which they live: "I'm getting tired and frustrated trying [out the ideas in] people's master's and doctoral theses just to see if they work," said a Seattle teacher. And in the same group, another teacher pointed out that innovations have other, more political, hurdles to clear: "The few teachers who are trying to be creative catch flak all the time from parents saying, 'Wait a minute, we're trying to get Johnny to Harvard, and he has to reach these objectives, and you're trying to bring in something like thinking skills.'"

To reformers committed to these teaching innovations, the ambivalent reception from teachers has to be worrisome. Such changes will be difficult, if not impossible, to implement without teacher support. Moreover, teachers and the public may reinforce each other's suspicions, as each group responds to the anxieties of the other.
Finding: Teachers Support Higher Standards, But Raising Them Is Not Their Most Urgent Goal

Teachers broadly support proposals to raise standards. In decisive numbers, they oppose granting diplomas to students who have not mastered English. A solid majority wants to ensure that students master academic material at each grade level before they are promoted. Teachers expect higher standards to improve their students’ academic performance and show little interest in “watering down” standards for youngsters from the inner-city or other disadvantaged youth. In these areas, the overall attitudes of teachers and the public are closely aligned.

But even though large majorities of teachers voice support for higher standards, they do not generally see low standards — or youngsters finishing school without basics — as widespread or urgent problems. Teachers are generally satisfied with public schools’ performance in teaching academic skills. In contrast, the public and community leaders are significantly less pleased, and their dissatisfaction gives their support for higher standards an urgency and an edge. Although teachers’ support for higher standards is genuine, it is less intense than the public’s and less dominant in their thinking. Classroom teachers are receptive — even interested — but it is questionable whether they will be the driving force behind higher, more rigorous academic standards.

The movement to raise academic standards has been spearheaded by committed reformers, educators, and members of the business community. As First Things First suggested, and Assignment Incomplete confirmed, the American public is very receptive to tougher grading, withholding diplomas until students master required skills, and establishing clear guidelines about what students should learn and teachers should teach. But what about the teachers who must make higher standards a reality?

This study suggests that teachers support a variety of approaches to raising standards, and they support these measures in very large numbers. But reformers who have made higher, more rigorous standards the centerpiece of their efforts to improve education might be well advised to pause before cheering too loudly. Teachers’ support for higher standards comes with several important caveats.

Teachers and the Standards-Based Reform Agenda

A defining element of the standards movement is that all participants — teachers, students and parents — understand the school’s educational objectives, measure progress along the way, and subscribe to the consequences of success or failure. Teachers join the public and parents in accepting the need for each of these elements. Eight in 10 teachers support setting “very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject so the kids and the teachers know what to aim for,” a level of support that is almost identical to that of the public (82%) (Table 3).

What’s more, teachers think that higher standards must carry consequences. More than 8 in 10 teachers (83%) support withholding high school diplomas until students “clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well.” Eight in 10 teachers say that toughening their grading and being more willing to fail high school students is a good or excellent idea. Even in elementary grades, where some believe children need a gentler hand, 61% of teachers support a tougher approach to grading and a willingness to fail children who don’t learn, although elementary teachers are somewhat less likely to agree to this approach.

Rejecting Social Promotion

A teacher from the Seattle area spoke out against automatic promotions. “When you have a policy that there’s no failing, of course kids find out. [They think] ‘I don’t have to do anything to get through here.’ Then they run into some difficult tests in high school, and it is panicville.” A Hartford teacher also testified to the need for higher standards: “The thing right now is to have our students achieving at a higher level. The last mastery tests, our kids really did come in quite low. Now the question is how can we help our students achieve a higher level, reach the level of excellence everyone is talking about.”

Some teachers think that they — as a group — have relaxed standards and allowed some degree of grade inflation. A Birmingham teacher reported that he and a colleague were the only ones in their school to ever fail students. Most of his colleagues, he said, promoted any child who regularly showed up. Yet the vast majority of teachers responding to this survey reject that approach. Only 17% say students should be
passed on to the next grade simply because they attend class regularly and work hard. Almost 8 in 10 (78%) want students to be promoted "only when the students show they have learned the knowledge and skills" expected of them.

**Lower the Hurdle for Disadvantaged Children?**

Some observers fear that higher standards will be inherently unfair to inner-city youngsters and others with significant disadvantages. But if teachers had their way, there would be no watering down of standards for any student. Seventy-three percent of teachers think schools should expect inner-city children to achieve academic standards that are as high as the standards for affluent youngsters. Only 22% think the schools need to make allowances because these children come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, most teachers (59%) also reject tailoring curricular material to students' background, such as using street language to teach inner-city children (Table 3). Resistance to the idea of accommodating standards to the background of students is broad-based and holds constant for teachers from different demographic groups as well as those who work in different school settings.

**Will Higher Standards Turn Students Off?**

Teachers are even optimistic about the results of raising standards. Three out of 4 teachers think that children will pay more attention and study harder as a result. Even more importantly, the same percentage think students would learn more with higher standards in place. There is one negative trade-off in the view of some teachers: Almost half (49%) think more children will drop out of school as a consequence of higher standards. On the other hand, 68% of teachers reject the view that "more kids will dislike education and resist learning as a result."

**An Uncertain Trumpet: Will Teachers Lead on Standards?**

These findings suggest that there is a potential alliance among teachers, the public, and the reform movement for raising academic standards and putting some teeth behind them. But, these hopes should be tempered by serious caveats. While teachers are receptive to higher standards, this does not mean they will be forceful advocates leading the charge on their behalf. There is an enormous difference between receptivity and action, and between intellectual support and intense commitment to a cause. Many reformers regard higher standards as the centerpiece of their agenda: Raise standards, they believe, and education will be profoundly improved. But for most teachers, higher standards are a more peripheral proposal: A good idea, but one that does not address their immediate priorities.

As we saw earlier, teachers focus on what they consider the foremost needs of their public schools — pressures of social problems, lack of funding, overcrowded classes, and lack of parental involvement. Given all these problems, higher standards may seem nice but beside the point. One Seattle teacher responded in just that way to a standards-type proposal: "What do you mean by higher national standards? What about Head Start so that all children start school with a full stomach? What about giving them homes that are drug-free? Are those part of your national standards?"

"What do you mean by higher national standards? What about Head Start so that all children start school with a full stomach? What about giving them homes that are drug-free? Are those part of your national standards?"

— Seattle Teacher

**The Public's Views Are More Intense**

This may explain why teachers' support for some key components of higher standards is significantly less intense than the public's. Overwhelming majorities of both teachers and the public say students should not receive high school diplomas unless they demonstrate a clear command of English (Table 3). But while 76% of the public gives this measure the highest possible approval rating (a five on a one-to-five scale of support), only 54% of teachers do so. Another 29% of teachers give this measure a milder positive rating of 'four'.

Similarly, both teachers and the public support "raising the standards of promotion from grade school" and requiring kids to pass a test showing they've achieved those standards (Table 3). But while almost half the public (49%) gives this measure its highest approval rating, only one-third (33%) of teachers do. The
dispassionate about the importance of academic achievement to a person’s success. When it comes to defining top-notch academic performance and how far to push children on academic attainment, teachers’ judgments almost exactly match — but do not transcend — the public’s views.

- Finding: Teachers Are Lukewarm About the Value of Advanced Learning. They Do Not Believe That Top-Notch Academic Attainment Is Especially Important to Success

Teachers are not ardent advocates of especially rigorous education. Only a small percentage think a high quality education is the most important determinant of career success — a percentage lower than that of the general public. Teachers appear more concerned with their students’ social skills and adjustment than with their attaining top grades and test scores. Half of teachers view highly educated people with some misgiving, seeing them as either “book smart” and impractical or as elitist snobs. In addition, few teachers see traditional high-level academic subjects — from the literary classics to advanced mathematics — as essential components of the curriculum, even when they themselves teach in that area.

Public Agenda’s Assignment Incomplete study reported that the public places a premium on educating well-rounded, socially-adept young people who know how to get along with others. The public also shows some disdain and discomfort with “too much” book learning. Somewhat surprisingly, many teachers echo these sentiments.

A Love of Learning?

On the surface, there seems to be a gap between how teachers and the public view the pursuit of knowledge. Teachers are more likely (by 76% to 57%) to say that it is absolutely essential to transmit “curiosity and a love of learning” to students (Table 5). And more than half the teachers (54%) say teaching children to be life-long learners is more important than teaching them practical skills for the job market, compared to 4 in 10 members of the general public.

As one Connecticut teacher put it, “I think one of the goals of education should be to instill in a person a desire to love to learn. I learned as a child that your education will never let you down. [Once] it is in you, no matter what you do with it, you are successful.”

Teachers Do Not Put Education on a Pedestal

But a closer look shows that teachers are surprisingly dispassionate about how important a role education can play in a person’s life and career. Of four factors that might determine career success, teachers place an excellent academic education a distant third, with only 21% saying it is the most important factor (Table 7). Persistence and inner drive, and knowing how to deal well with people, rank first and second, respectively. The public is slightly more convinced than teachers (by a 27% to 21% margin) that a quality academic education can determine career success.

“I know academics are important,” said one teacher in Birmingham, “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. Social skills are important.”

Teachers also seem to have their doubts about whether school is important because of what students actually learn or because it is a method of certification sought by employers. Only a third (34%) say school is important because students acquire knowledge and skills that will help them on the job. Close to 6 in 10 teachers (57%) say school is critical to getting a good job because employers are reluctant to hire people who lack a high school diploma. Nor are teachers forceful in believing that high academic achievement will translate into better jobs. Only about one-fourth (27%) think “A” students are “much more likely” to get good jobs, while 46% say they are “somewhat more likely” to do so.

Fear of the Nerds?

One startling finding is that the public is more concerned about academic stragglers than are teachers. Teachers tend to worry more about students who succeed academically but struggle socially than about students who struggle academically but succeed socially. Half the teachers surveyed (53%) would worry
about an “A” student with two or three friends while only 3 in 10 (29%) would worry about the “C” student with many friends. This is especially startling when contrasted with the views of the general public: Here a plurality (45%) of the public worries about the popular “C” student while 38% worry about the more shy “A” student.

In Assignment Incomplete, the public expressed deep misgivings about people who paid so much attention to academic learning that they lack good judgment or, worse, put on airs. These widespread public views enjoy a surprising resonance among teachers as well. About half the teachers (52%) say, “People who are highly educated often turn out to be book smart but lack the common sense and understanding of regular folks.” Half of teachers (52%) also say that those who are highly educated “often think they are better than others.” To be sure, the general public subscribes to both these views in greater numbers (about 7 in 10), but the fact that half of America’s teachers join them is telling.

**Advanced Subjects: Important, Not Essential**

The curricular priorities of teachers and the public offer little comfort to humanities professors or to those who would like to see a return to traditional liberal arts education. Only about one-fourth of both groups believe teaching “classic works from such writers as Shakespeare and Plato” is absolutely essential (Table 5). Even teaching more contemporary works — the writing of modern American authors such as Steinbeck and Hemingway — is seen as absolutely essential by only about one-quarter of teachers and the public. And although teaching American history and geography was viewed as critical by majorities of teachers and the public, teaching the history and geography of such places as Europe and Asia is seen as secondary. Only 4 in 10 teachers (41%) and 35% of the public regard these areas as absolutely essential to teach.

It is not that either teachers or the public reject these subjects entirely. After all, teachers and the public were asked to choose among what was “absolutely essential” to teach students, what was “important,” and what was “not important.” When the “absolutely essential” response category is combined with the “important” response category, no subject area receives the support of less than three-quarters of teachers or the public. These evaluations may be understood as a sober, practical judgment on where to focus the schools’ scarce energies and what is essential to prepare students for the real world.

It may also be useful to contrast these findings with the widespread agreement that teaching computer skills is “absolutely essential.” Teachers and the public may believe that for most students the consequences of not knowing Shakespeare or Plato are less than the consequences of not understanding computers — and they may be right. It is also worth noting that sports and athletics are absent from the “critical to teach” lists of both teachers and the public. In focus groups, people sometimes voice passionate support for sports because they keep some children in school and teach teamwork, the discipline of practice, and the value of hard work. But when asked if sports are an “absolutely essential” component of what their schools should teach, only 23% of the public and 14% of teachers respond affirmatively.

**Teachers vs. Other Professionals**

These evaluations reflect a broad consensus between the public and teachers — and even among community leaders — on the essentials of education. But they also suggest that teachers, even the specialists among them, are not ardent advocates of advanced education or of high academic achievement. Other professionals, such as those in law or medicine, seem to hold their own work in the highest esteem, and often evoke powerful images to describe their efforts — the pursuit of justice or the preservation of life.

Journalists, to take another example, are staunch defenders of the value and role of a free press in a democracy. But math teachers are not more likely than other teachers to say advanced mathematics are absolutely essential to teach students. Social studies teachers are not more likely than their colleagues to say that the geography and history of Europe and Asia are absolutely essential to teach. And English teachers do not rally to the cause of teaching the classics or modern American writers in numbers much greater than other teachers.

Teachers do not seem to be forceful advocates of advanced learning and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. In fact, their viewpoint is remarkably similar to the public’s. And while this suggests that the public and educators — at least in this area — are on the same wavelength, one might have expected teachers to more vigorously champion the value of advanced knowledge.
CHAPTER THREE: Teaching Values

This section examines teachers' views on values-related issues that drive a growing number of school district controversies — issues concerning race relations, sex education, personal ethics, and political beliefs. What values do teachers consider appropriate for schools to impart through lessons and textbooks? What areas do they want schools to shun? What role do they think public schools should play in fostering a common American identity, for both regular students and new arrivals?

- Finding: Teachers and the Public Agree on What Values Should Be Taught — Honesty, Responsibility, and Respect for Others

Teachers are strong believers in passing mainstream values along to students, and like the public, they consider this an important part of education. Hard work, personal responsibility, and honesty are high on the list of these mainstream values, as are tolerance and diversity. When it comes to divisive issues such as sex education, however, teachers become more cautious.

News from the education front often features controversies over values: Disputes over sex education and AIDS prevention strategies, for example, and controversies over how to present history and which textbooks to use. Sometimes these debates consume so much of a district's energy and good will that the education of children seems to take a back seat. Yet, as First Things First pointed out, most Americans do not consider these issues to be especially pressing — at least compared to issues such as safety, order, and the basics. Moreover, Americans agree by overwhelming majorities on the core values they want their schools to teach.

This study shows that teachers are strikingly similar to the public in supporting the school's role in teaching such core values as tolerance, honesty, hard work, and respect for diversity. Teachers also join the public in wanting to avoid lessons which promote divisiveness, intolerance, and discord. Thus, while the "value wars" which pop up in school districts around the country are real, and certainly important to the parties involved, they do not reflect broad or fundamental divisions between the public and teachers.

Teaching Values: A High Priority

Teachers do not discount the importance of teaching mainstream values. In fact, approximately half of America's teachers (51%) say that values are more important to teach than academics, with another 9% finding values and academics equally important. First Things First found that an even higher percentage of the public (71%) believes that it's more important to teach values than academics. Thus, it would seem that arguments over value-free curricula have little applicability to the public or teachers. Of greater interest is which values to teach and whether there is common ground between teachers and the public on this question.

Top-Tier Values: Work Hard, Be Responsible, Tell the Truth

Americans often complain about a declining work ethic and expect the schools to help in countering this trend. Teachers reflect such concerns as well, believing that the lack of a work ethic severely limits students' accomplishments. "Apathy is the operative word," said one teacher from Westchester County, New York who taught in an affluent community, "The vast majority of students are difficult to motivate, and they are not driven to succeed on their own."

"Apathy is the operative word. The vast majority of students are difficult to motivate, and they are not driven to succeed on their own."

— Westchester (NY) Teacher

Teachers and the public alike place a premium on instilling good work habits in students. About 9 in 10 teachers and members of the public want schools to emphasize such habits as "being on time, responsible,
and disciplined” (Table 3). Eight in 10 teachers (83%) think it is absolutely essential to teach the value of hard work, a sentiment shared by 78% of the public (Table 5).

This Michigan teacher’s comments reflect the feelings of the public as much as those of teachers: “You still need to get some blisters on your hands to appreciate some things from good, old-fashioned hard work. You have to learn to put your effort toward something.” One teacher in Savannah praised the effect that a business mentor had on his kids: “It gives them a chance to see what this man went through, the hard work, the dedication. School is not just about math and reading; it’s also about teaching you responsibilities.”

As many teachers and members of the public view the world, learning self-discipline and a strong work ethic is even more important than acquiring a good education. When asked about the most important factor in determining career success, twice as many teachers pick persistence and inner drive as choose a quality education (Table 7). About the same plurality of the general public – roughly 4 in 10 – agrees that persistence matters most.

When it comes to “honesty and the importance of telling the truth,” there’s no issue at all. Some 95% of teachers and the public, believe such values should be included in the classroom (Table 4). “We don’t tell lies in our class,” said one elementary school teacher in Savannah. “The children have to learn that there are certain things that they can do and certain things that they cannot do. I think you have to take a stand as long as they’re with you.”

More Top-Tier Values: Tolerance Amid Diversity

Tolerance is among the most vaunted of American traditions. Especially when compared with other countries, the U.S. has a reputation for accepting people from different backgrounds and assimilating them into American society. When it comes to having the public schools foster and reinforce such values, both teachers and the public are unequivocal.

Virtually all teachers (96%) think it is appropriate to teach “respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background,” a similar percentage of the public (95%) concurs. Teaching values that include “tolerance of others” gains the support of 82% of teachers and 74% of the public.

When differences do arise between people, Americans want them resolved in a peaceful manner. Almost all teachers (95%) and 93% of the public want schools to assume the job of “teaching kids to solve problems without violence.” Clearly, civility is a prized national asset.

But how firm are these sentiments? Do they amount only to reflexive incantation of popular clichés or do they hold up in concrete situations? This study tested the resolve of teachers, and the public, by presenting them with three scenarios. What should a teacher do, we asked, when passing a group of students in a public school playground and those students are teasing a child about his race? Or his religion? Or the fact that his mother or father is homosexual? In all three scenarios, teachers wanted not only to stop the teasing but to teach tolerance as well.

Fully 85% of the teachers surveyed opted for the most active response to teasing about race: Breaking up the situation and teaching the students that teasing about race is wrong. Only 13% would stop at simply breaking up the situation, and only 2% would let the children work the problem out themselves. A similar percentage of teachers (82%) would opt for the most active response when the teasing was about religion while a slightly smaller majority (73%) would do so when the teasing involved a homosexual parent.

Avoid Discord and Divisiveness

It is important to note that neither teachers nor the public define tolerance to mean that anything goes within the confines of the classroom. Both groups generally prefer to avoid divisive lessons. For example, 86% of teachers would not invite a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened, while 8 in 10 would reject a guest speaker who advocates black separatism.

Eighty-six percent of teachers would not invite a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened, while 8 in 10 would reject a guest speaker who advocates black separatism.
There is little enthusiasm among teachers for another theme that touches upon racial matters. Only 13% think it is appropriate to argue that “racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today,” a proportion even lower than the 29% of the public who found it appropriate to do so. Black teachers are only slightly more likely (22%) to consider this an appropriate theme to teach.

It is understandable that teachers are reluctant to take sides on controversial issues. Whereas most citizens can say “how things should be” with little consequence, teachers must be concerned with alienating parents and significant groups within their community. Teachers have a built-in exemption for delegating the most troublesome, potentially divisive topics: They can argue that some things are best left for parents to deal with at home, and few would disagree with them.

A Cautious Approach to Sex Education

This may explain why just 44% of teachers, compared with 61% of the public, favor “teaching respect for people who are homosexual” (Table 4). The context here is important: As seen above, most teachers would intervene in a reactive situation in which a child is teased about a parent’s homosexuality. But proactively teaching respect for homosexuals may be seen as advocacy, and a large number of teachers may be wary of provoking the controversy this might attract.

The same dynamic may be at play on family issues. While 52% of the public considers it appropriate for textbooks and lesson plans to teach that “two-parent families are the best way to raise children,” only 26% of teachers agree. With the growth in single-head households, teachers may be reluctant to advocate more traditional family roles for fear of giving offense.

Like the public, most teachers would prefer that schools avoid making moral arguments involving sex outside marriage. Only 2 in 10 teachers (19%), and 1 in 4 members of the public, want sex education classes to “teach that sex outside the marriage is always wrong.” Four in 10 teachers favor the approach that “sex outside marriage is something that people have different views on, and there is no single right answer.” Roughly the same proportion want “teach only health and reproductive issues and not deal with moral judgments at all.” This is an area where many teachers apparently would not mind a more limited mission. “In Savannah, the community is handing us the responsibility for things like [students] sex life,” said one teacher, “Where did we become responsible for what they do at 10 o’clock at night?”

Some of the most bitter and well-publicized controversies in public education have been tied to sex education issues. But, as we saw in First Things First, such controversies are not consuming the public’s attention. Only about one-fourth of Americans say that the “schools are too graphic and explicit when teaching sex education.” Teachers responding to this survey are even less concerned: only seven percent say their schools have gone too far (Table 2).

Disagreement Over Religion

Finally, both teachers and the public split on religious issues. While 36% of teachers say it is appropriate to teach in a science class that, “The biblical view of creation and Darwin’s theory of evolution are equally valid,” 42% say it is not. Of the public, 38% say such lessons are appropriate and 36% disagree (Table 4). Science teachers hold only slightly different views: 40% think it is appropriate to teach the two views in a science class, while 48% think it is inappropriate to do so.

- Finding: Teachers Believe in Teaching Democracy and Helping Newcomers Adopt a New Way of Life

Strong majorities of teachers and the public favor teaching that democracy is the best form of government and promoting habits of good citizenship such as voting. Both groups overwhelmingly reject separate schools for children from different cultural backgrounds. Clear majorities of teachers and the public want public schools to help new immigrants assimilate as quickly as possible, by learning America’s language and culture.
The previous section highlighted the priority teachers and the general public place on teaching mainstream values. In this section teachers and the public go further: They want public education to actively promote democratic ideals and cultural assimilation. Articulating broad cultural mandates for the public schools may not come naturally to citizens. But, almost instinctively, the public joins teachers in defining the mission of the schools to include imparting democratic values and practices to students.

Teach the Democratic Tradition

Some commentators complain that moral and political relativism are so prevalent among American educators that young people’s faith in the nation’s democratic tenets is being undermined. But teachers and the public do not seem hesitant about teaching democratic values and habits in school. About 7 in 10 teachers and members of the general public approve of “stressing that democracy is the best form of government,” rating this a four or five on a five-point scale of appropriateness (Table 4).

Support for teaching the democratic tradition goes beyond affirming its ideals. Americans want the public schools to educate youngsters to put these ideals into practice. Almost 8 in 10 teachers (77%) approve of teaching “habits of good citizenship, such as voting and caring about the nation,” two-thirds of the public agrees (Table 5).

A Strong Preference for Assimilation

As outlined earlier, teachers and the public are unequivocal in wanting public schools to foster and reinforce tolerance among students for people of diverse backgrounds. But how do teachers respond when preserving the unique cultural heritages of students is weighed against the concept of America as a “melting pot?”

Almost 8 in 10 teachers (78%) approve of teaching “habits of good citizenship, such as voting and caring about the nation.”

Several experimental public schools today exclusively serve unique demographic segments of the student population, the theory being that their backgrounds require specialized instruction in a specialized setting. States such as New York, California and Texas have opened “newcomer” schools which serve new immigrants and tailor instruction to the many languages and nationalities that are represented. Several heavily African-American districts in Baltimore and Detroit have experimented with single-sex schools and classes. Many of these schools have been embroiled in controversy, with critics charging that they isolate their youngsters from the mainstream.

Americans generally oppose providing separate educational facilities to children from different backgrounds. Only 6% of teachers and 9% of the general public think that “kids who come from unique backgrounds and cultures should be taught in separate public schools that better understand their needs.” Instead, 92% of teachers and 86% of the general public want “kids from all backgrounds taught in the same public schools so that they learn to get along with each other.”

While some Americans live in neighborhoods populated by people with cultural backgrounds similar to themselves, and this practice often results in “segregated” public schools, people seem to object to active, formally-sanctioned separation of students. Children — and adults — do enough of this on their own, the public appears to feel, without the schools’ help. The notion of separate schools also works against one of the few areas where Americans think the public schools do a better job than the private schools — teaching students how to live together in a diverse society (Table 1).

What About Immigrants?

The championing of common public schools for all students extends to new immigrants. Teachers and the public want the schools to hasten the assimilation of new arrivals, even at the cost of neglecting their original culture. Seventy-three percent of teachers and 68% of the public think the public schools’ primary goal should be to “help new immigrants absorb language and culture as quickly as possible, even if their native language and culture are neglected.” Only 20% of teachers and 24% of the public prefer the opposite approach: “Help new immigrants maintain their own language and culture even if it takes them longer to absorb America’s language and culture.”
This trade-off might be artificial to education experts who argue that the old and new cultural identities of students can thrive simultaneously. But in the face of a potential tradeoff, teachers and the public want to err on the side of assimilation. Whatever their motive, Americans think that basic language skills are an essential prerequisite to life in mainstream society, and they look suspiciously at anything which endangers those skills.

Teachers see public schools as an indispensable institution that levels the playing field from one generation to the next and facilitates acculturation. Almost two-thirds of teachers (64%) say that “to ensure a common American culture and identity it is essential that most kids in our society attend the public schools and not the private schools.” The American public, however, is equivocal on this point: 42% agree with teachers, but another 38% say “our common American culture and identity would not be endangered if most kids attend private schools,” and a relatively high 18% are not sure.

The public’s lack of consensus on this point should not be surprising. Ordinary citizens do not typically evaluate the role of schools in broad sociological terms. Rather, they assess the schools’ performance on more straightforward criteria — teaching basic skills in an orderly, safe environment, or preparing young people for college. What’s more, at the current time, they say private schools are more effective in precisely the areas needed to reinforce the common culture — teaching all youngsters basic skills and sharing mainstream values.

To this point, this study has examined the attitudes of public school teachers in general. But what about African-American and Hispanic teachers? Where do they stand on these issues? We conclude this report with answers to those questions.

Seventy-three percent of teachers and 68% of the public think the public schools’ primary goal should be to “help new immigrants absorb language and culture as quickly as possible, even if their native language and culture are neglected.”
CHAPTER FOUR: Special Focus on African-American and Hispanic Teachers

This section revisits many of the issues addressed earlier from the perspective of African-American and Hispanic teachers. The emphasis is on comparing the views of minority teachers to those of their white colleagues. What do minority teachers see as the critical problems facing their schools? How would they respond to these problems? What are their views toward higher academic standards? And do they want the schools to promote the same values as white teachers?

To summarize: Black and Hispanic teachers struggle with the same issues as their white colleagues. Their list of top concerns is longer than that of white teachers, and they seem somewhat more dissatisfied with the performance of their schools. But for the most part, they share the same prescriptions, the same support for higher standards, and the same values as other teachers.

There are areas where the views of minority teachers seem to diverge from the views of whites. But these differences may be partly due to factors other than race and ethnicity, such as differences in school district type. Finally, although this study breaks out the views of black and Hispanic teachers throughout this chapter, it is interesting to note that they tend to converge on all but a few questions.

- Finding: Minority Teachers Are Less Satisfied with Their Schools' Performance

Thirty-eight percent of white teachers rate their schools as excellent; only 18% of black teachers and 17% of Hispanic teachers rate their schools the same way.

In Chapter One, we saw that teachers are firm in their conviction that their schools perform well, while the public — and community leaders — are far more critical. African-American and Hispanic teachers are significantly less enthusiastic than white teachers about the performance of their local public schools, although most still give their schools good ratings. While 87% of white teachers say their schools do a good or excellent job, about two-thirds of black and Hispanic teachers (67% and 65%, respectively) support that assessment. Most of the difference occurs over how often they apply an "excellent" rating: 38% of white teachers rate their schools as excellent; only 18% of black teachers and 17% of Hispanic teachers rate their schools the same way.

Black and Hispanic teachers also give their own profession more equivocal marks than their white counterparts. Half (52%) the white teachers surveyed say that teachers do a better job than when they were in school; 35% of black and 39% of Hispanic teachers agree. Twenty-two percent of black teachers, and 16% of Hispanic teachers, say teachers today do a worse job; 9% of white teachers agree.

- Finding: Black and Hispanic Teachers Are More Concerned About Violence and Ineffective Teaching of Basics

The top concerns of black and Hispanic teachers are a combination of those bothering their white counterparts and those bothering the public. Minority teachers agree with white teachers that school funding, overcrowded classrooms, discipline, and order are problems at their schools. But they also add safety and achievement of the basics to their list of priorities, concerns that are uppermost in the mind of the public. Concerns about classes and textbooks that stereotype minorities — while not insignificant — are far down the list of problems about which minority teachers worry.

Shared Concerns Over Money, Class Size, and Order

School funding is as important to black and Hispanic teachers as it is to white teachers. Seventy-seven percent of black teachers and 80% of Hispanic teachers say their schools are not getting enough money to do a good job, almost identical (80%) to the response of white teachers (Table 2). Minority teachers are
even more concerned about overcrowded classes: 80% of Hispanic teachers and 70% of black teachers said this was a problem in their schools, compared to 64% of white teachers.

Minority teachers join white teachers and the public in listing order and discipline as a top concern. Both see them as essential preconditions for teaching to take place. Strong majorities of black (72%) and Hispanic (75%) teachers say that the worst-behaved students are getting the most attention, and 82% of white teachers agree. In comparison with these problems, concerns about stereotyping in textbooks again are down the scale, although they do exist: 39% of black and 29% of Hispanic teachers say this is a problem in their schools.

**Far Greater Concern About Crime and the Basics**

Minority teachers express far greater concern about the threat of crime in their schools than do white teachers. Six in 10 black teachers (61%) and 7 in 10 Hispanic teachers (71%) say that drugs and violence are a problem in their schools (Table 2). In contrast, only 47% of white teachers identify drugs and violence as a problem. Black and Hispanic teachers are thus closer to members of the general public, 72% of whom thought crime was a problem in their local schools.

Black and Hispanic teachers are also closer to the public view that students are not mastering the academic basics. Forty-four percent of black and 46% of Hispanic teachers say a high school diploma is no guarantee that students have acquired basic skills, numbers comparable to the public’s 47%. In contrast, only 31% of white teachers voice that view.

- **Finding: Minority Teachers Strongly Support a Variety of Measures to Restore Safety and Order to the Schools**

In Chapter One, we saw that strong majorities of the public and of teachers support proposals to create a safe and orderly atmosphere in their schools. Both black and Hispanic teachers join them, offering similar levels of support.

Decisive majorities of black and Hispanic teachers support a measure to permanently remove from school grounds students caught with drugs or weapons, with about three-fourths of both groups saying this would improve academic achievement (Table 3). Eighty-five percent of white teachers, and 76% of the public, agree.

Black and Hispanic teachers both support a series of specific measures to foster order in the schools and do so by majorities comparable to those of white teachers and the public. Strong majorities of black and Hispanic teachers favor removing persistent troublemakers from the classroom, requiring students to stay on school grounds throughout the school day, and banning student smoking on school property. Minority teachers also support a ban on hugging and kissing in numbers close to those of their white counterparts (Table 6).

**Minority Teachers Go Further**

Black and Hispanic teachers go even further, being somewhat stronger proponents of dress codes for themselves and their students than their white colleagues or the public. They are also strong supporters of making learning an enjoyable experience and building students’ self-esteem.

Sixty-four percent of black teachers and 60% of Hispanic teachers favor requiring their students to dress in standard clothing (Table 6). Seventy-two percent of black teachers and 60% of Hispanic teachers favor requiring teachers to dress like professionals, with male teachers wearing jackets and ties. The broad sample of teachers and the public are evenly divided on the desirability of these policies. It is noteworthy that African-American parents surveyed in the *First Things First* study are also stronger supporters of dress code policies than white parents.15

At the same time, minority teachers are even more supportive than white teachers of making learning enjoyable — 86% of black teachers, 79% of Hispanic teachers, and 76% of white teachers support this philosophy. They are also more responsive to the notion of building students’ self-esteem, with 82% of black teachers, 80% of Hispanic teachers, and 64% of white teachers in agreement with this principle.

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15: Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today
Finding: Minority Teachers Share the Same Agenda as White Teachers, but Want More Emphasis on Social Problems

In Chapter Two, we saw that teachers and the public converge around an academic agenda that is pragmatic, basic, and intended to prepare students for the “real” world. While black and Hispanic teachers share this perspective, they place more emphasis on helping students deal with social problems. Black teachers place a higher premium on teaching practical job skills.

Black and Hispanic teachers’ hierarchy of “absolutely essential” subjects is virtually indistinguishable from that of white teachers and the general public (Table 5). Basic academic skills lead, with a nearly unanimous percentage of minority teachers endorsing them as absolutely essential. The basics are followed by computer skills, then by American history and geography, and then by science subjects such as biology and chemistry. The percentages of black and Hispanic teachers saying these subjects are absolutely essential do not vary from those of white teachers or the public by more than a few percentage points.

Minority teachers also match other teachers and the public in the subjects they see as less critical: The history and geography of other areas of the world, for example, or classic literary works, or sports and athletics. Once again, black and Hispanic teachers do not diverge by more than several percentage points from the views of the other groups.

Some Differences Exist

Minority teachers do differ in two important respects. One is the greater emphasis they place on teaching children how to deal with social problems such as drugs and family breakdown — 76% of black and 71% of Hispanic teachers say these are absolutely essential to teach, compared to 60% of white teachers and 64% of the public (Table 5). The other is the particular interest of black teachers in practical job skills — 74% say these skills are absolutely essential to teach. Here, 54% of white teachers agree, as do 61% of Hispanic teachers.

While race and ethnicity may explain these special concerns, school locale may help explain them as well. Minority teachers in our sample are more likely than white teachers to work in urban or inner-city settings — 50% of black and 41% of Hispanic teachers surveyed work in urban/inner-city districts, compared with 18% of white teachers. Minority teachers are also more likely to work with economically disadvantaged student populations — 54% of black and 45% of Hispanic teachers surveyed say they work in schools where all or most of the students are poor, compared with 30% of white teachers.

Black and Hispanic teachers are not nearly as critical of how their schools teach “absolutely essential” subject areas as are the public and community leaders. However, minority teachers do provide somewhat lower ratings than white teachers. Majorities of black and Hispanic teachers still maintain that their schools do an excellent or good job of teaching such subjects as basic academic skills and American history and geography, but their positive evaluations are usually 10 or more percentage points below those of white teachers.14

Finding: Minority Teachers Also Wary of Teaching Innovations

Minority teachers are often as wary of teaching innovations as their fellow teachers and the public. Minorities are “traditionalist” in choosing between doing early math by hand or using calculators. Both black (79%) and Hispanic (74%) teachers think students should memorize the multiplication tables and learn to do math by hand before using calculators. Seventy-two percent of white teachers and 86% of the general public concur. Like white teachers, minority teachers split on whether replacing multiple-choice tests with essay questions will improve learning: 48% of both black and Hispanic teachers, and 47% of white teachers, think that it will (Table 3).

Minority teachers do differ from other teachers in two areas. One, they are modestly more likely to opt for teaching the rules of grammar and spelling before going on to creative writing. And two, they are more supportive of heterogeneous grouping of students. Half of the black teachers surveyed and 46% of the Hispanic teachers say students should be taught the rules of grammar and spelling from the beginning,
before they go on to creative writing. This compares to 39% of white teachers. About half the teachers who are black (53%) or Hispanic (48%) think mixing fast and slow learners in the same class will improve student achievement, compared to 40% of white teachers.

While race and ethnicity may count for the difference in opinion over heterogeneous grouping, another explanation is that minority teachers in our sample are more likely to work in the elementary grades. As we saw in Chapter Two, elementary grade teachers are more supportive of heterogeneous groupings. Forty-five percent of black teachers and 54% of Hispanic teachers responding to our survey work in the elementary grades, compared to only 27% of white teachers.¹⁵

- Finding: Black and Hispanic Teachers Express Support for the Principles of Higher Standards

As reported in Chapter Two, teachers support higher standards and expect higher standards to raise the academic achievement of their students. Minority teachers support higher academic standards in percentages that are comparably high. And like other teachers, they want standards to be backed up with consequences and reject lowering the academic hurdle for inner-city students.

Eighty-five percent of black teachers and 79% of Hispanic teachers support establishing “very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject so the kids and the teachers know what to aim for” (Table 3). They agree with the 8 in 10 white teachers who think that this approach will improve their students’ academic achievement.

As with other teachers, minority teachers want to “put some teeth” behind academic standards and firmly resist lowering the standards for inner-city children. Approximately three of four Hispanic and black teachers would not allow youngsters to graduate from high school “unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well.”

Minority teachers are also clear in rejecting social promotion. Eighty percent of blacks and 71% of Hispanics say students should be promoted only when they’ve learned the knowledge and skills required; fewer than 20% say students should be promoted because they attend class regularly and work hard. A proposal to raise the standards of promotion from grade school to junior high and require students to pass an exam that measures their achievement on those standards gains the support of about 6 in 10 black, Hispanic, and white teachers.

Black and Hispanic teachers, who tend to work in inner-city districts, want inner-city students to face the same academic expectations as other students. Seventy-one percent of black teachers and 77% of Hispanic teachers believe inner-city children should be expected to achieve academic standards that are as high as children from affluent backgrounds. No more than one-fifth of both groups want allowances made because inner-city kids come from disadvantaged backgrounds. And, like their white colleagues, black (67%) and Hispanic (56%) teachers reject the notion of using street language to teach inner-city children.

Raising Standards: How Urgent?

In Chapter Two, we questioned whether teachers feel a sense of urgency on higher standards, given that half (49%) do not think low standards are a problem in their districts. Minority teachers are also divided over whether academic standards are too low. Black teachers split about evenly, with 51% saying low academic standards are a problem and 48% saying they are not. A slight majority of Hispanic teachers (56%) thinks standards are a problem in their schools (Table 2). Minority teachers may have another reason to hesitate. With a longer list of problems troubling them, including the threat of violence, the pursuit of higher standards may appear less urgent.
Finding: Minority Teachers, Like Whites, Want Schools to Teach Honesty, Responsibility and Respect for Others

Minority teachers are even more attuned to the importance of teaching values in the schools than are white teachers. Almost two-thirds (65%) of black teachers and 62% of Hispanic teachers say values are more important to teach than academics. This compares with 50% of white teachers. Interestingly, minority teachers are also more likely to cite the schools for failure to teach religious values: 40% of black teachers, 32% of Hispanic teachers, and 19% of white teachers say this is a problem (Table 2).

Once again, these differences may be partly driven by demographic factors other than race or ethnic identity. Half the black teachers and 38% of Hispanic teachers are from the South, where affinity for traditional and religious values is often stronger; by contrast, only 20% of white teachers surveyed are from the South.

Teaching respect for others, regardless of race and ethnicity, receives the nearly unanimous support of black, Hispanic, and white teachers (Table 4). Teaching honesty and tolerance of others is approved by overwhelming majorities of black (88%), Hispanic (79%), and white (82%) teachers. Whereas 73% of white teachers favor teaching that democracy is the best form of government, somewhat lesser majorities of black (64%) and Hispanic (60%) teachers concur.

Ill-Advised Lessons

The different teacher groups also agree on the lessons they view as ill-advised. Their guidelines seem to reflect a desire to avoid introducing extremist views that have the potential to inflame and divide. Fully 85% of blacks, 76% of Hispanics, and 80% of white teachers say it would be inappropriate to invite a guest speaker who advocates black separatism. Strong majorities of the three groups likewise reject bringing in a guest speaker who argues the Holocaust never happened. And at least 7 in 10 members of each group consider it inappropriate to teach that "Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans."

As noted above, minority teachers express some concern about classes and textbooks that stereotype minorities and women. Four in 10 black teachers (39%) and 3 in 10 Hispanic teachers (29%) — compared to fewer than 2 in 10 white teachers — say this is a problem (Table 2).

Minority teachers are more sensitive to issues touching upon race and stereotyping. It would be surprising if they were not. Overall, however, their values are similar to their white colleagues, with whom they share a desire to avoid the more turbulent and divisive issues of race. When it comes to public education generally, the priorities, prescriptions, and values of African-American and Hispanic teachers reflect a broad commonality and consensus among America’s teachers.
Reform of America's public schools continues to be contentious. Whether a spillover from today's highly-charged political climate, or a sign that contemporary reformers are more persistent and determined than their predecessors, we continue to see fractious debates in community after community. As these debates pit parents against school boards, advocates of private solutions against defenders of the current system, or even one group of reformers against another, there is growing bitterness among the participants and mounting despair among the public.

One signal of today's more negative environment, identified in past Public Agenda research, is that increasing numbers of educators and members of the public each believe the other has violated the unwritten contract long existing between them. Under this contract, educators agreed to educate America's children, and the public agreed to support them in their work. Today, neither group believes that the other is holding up its end of the bargain.

Public Agenda undertook *Given the Circumstances* in part to see whether there is a basis for renewing the compact among teachers, parents, and other members of the public. The study shows — as previous research had suggested — that teachers and the public-at-large hold some contrary views, especially in their assessment of how well public schools are doing. Teachers strongly defend the public schools, and believe they do their job well under the circumstances — a judgment that will undoubtedly unsettle many reformers. But surely it is not surprising that teachers are loyal to the institution to which they have devoted their working lives. Imagine the demoralized, almost hopeless, environment that would exist otherwise.

**Some Areas of Agreement**

Despite their different starting points, teachers and the public do seem to share a remarkably lengthy and detailed agenda for action. Both agree on the essential elements of the curriculum. Both are convinced that higher standards will benefit children from all backgrounds. Both believe that restoring order and discipline in public schools is an urgent priority, and both support removing disruptive students from regular classes as a means to do so. Both question the usefulness of some newer teaching techniques, and both see fostering such qualities as persistence, inner drive, and respect for others as an integral aspect of education.

Do these areas of agreement provide a basis to renew the broken contract — or at least to launch more productive conversations? These shared priorities and concerns do seem to suggest some very practical, concrete starting points for renewed discussion. Moreover, the residual trust between teachers and parents may offer the key to getting the conversation back on track. As the *First Things First* study showed clearly, most Americans place teachers and parents at the very top of the list of those they trust to make sound decisions about schools.

**Champions of Knowledge?**

*Given the Circumstances* offers some hope for those seeking consensus and perhaps even progress on education reform. But it also contains some disappointing news for those who believe that the nation's prospects — and those of the next generation — are in jeopardy unless public schools make a renewed commitment to high-levels of knowledge and learning.

To the surprise of many readers, I expect, *Given the Circumstances* suggests that classroom teachers are not fierce champions of high-level academic learning. Far from being strong advocates of higher standards, advanced knowledge and study, and top-notch academic attainment, teachers seem tepid in their support. They do not endorse raising standards as vigorously as the public does. Less than half of social studies
teachers think world history and geography are crucial subject areas. Only about a third of English teachers say Shakespeare and Hemingway are essential areas of study. Of four factors that might determine career success, teachers put "an excellent academic education" a distant third, with only 21% saying it is the most important factor.

All of which prompts the question: If teachers are not ardent proponents of knowledge and learning, if they subscribe to the notion that well-rounded is better than well-educated, what can we expect from students or parents? Unless we wish to dismiss its importance altogether — and we clearly do not — someone must stand up for knowledge. Where else can students turn for inspiration about its importance and excitement?

Educational Triage

In one sense, of course, teachers are correct: persistence, inner drive, knowing how to deal well with people are vitally important skills. Our children certainly need them. It may also be true, as teachers in focus groups repeatedly stress, that demands to be psychologist, nurse and baby-sitter — as one teacher put it — simply sap the academic energies of even the most motivated teachers. High standards, advanced knowledge, top-notch academic mastery seem to be routinely sacrificed in an ongoing educational triage. Indeed, reformers pushing hard for higher standards may want to consider carefully teachers' calls for a more orderly, civilized, and disciplined school environment. From the teachers' perspective, order and civility form the infrastructure that good teaching builds on.

Public Agenda's purpose in preparing this study is simply to add one more perspective — an inarguably important one — to the nation's discourse on how to improve the public schools. Reform has never been easy — in education or any other area. But without honest discussion, without clear communications, without listening as well as advocating, reform will be impossible, and much will be lost as we all go our separate ways smug in the correctness of our views.

Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director, Public Agenda
“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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A better education for kids with special needs, such as the physically handicapped</th>
<th>TEACHERS</th>
<th>GENERAL PUBLIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An environment that teaches kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better teachers</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried and true teaching techniques</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A better preparation for college</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher academic standards</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More safety and security</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A school policy that removes kids who are routinely disruptive</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good work habits</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More discipline and order in the classroom</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An environment that promotes such values as honesty and responsibility</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller class size</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An appreciation for religious values</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for this table taken from the Assignment incomplete survey, conducted May, 1995. That survey did not include examples of black and Hispanic teachers.

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

* Question wording was tailored to fit respondents’ point of comparison. “Private schools” column in table represents combined private school responses.
TABLE 2: Problems Facing Local Schools

"Here are some problems different public schools may or may not have. Please tell me how serious a problem each is in your own community’s public schools. (INSERT PROBLEM) Is that problem very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or is that not a problem at all in your community’s public schools?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGES SAYING “VERY SERIOUS” OR “SOMewhat SERIOUS” PROBLEM</th>
<th>TEACHERS OVERALL</th>
<th>GENERAL PUBLIC TEACHERS</th>
<th>BLACK TEACHERS</th>
<th>HISPANIC TEACHERS</th>
<th>WHITE TEACHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools are not getting enough money to do a good job</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes are too crowded</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic standards are too low and kids are not expected to learn enough</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There's too much drugs and violence in the schools</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids are not taught enough math, science and computers</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools don't teach kids good work habits, such as being on time to class and completing assignments</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are more concerned with making kids feel good about themselves than with how much they learn</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is not enough emphasis on the basics, such as reading, writing and math</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools are not clear and specific enough about what they want kids to learn</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools fail to teach religious values</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are more interested in being popular than in requiring respect and discipline</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes and textbooks stereotype minorities and women</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools are too graphic and explicit when teaching sex education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for teachers taken from survey for this report. Data for the general public taken from the first Things First survey (1994).
"Now I’m going to read you some ideas for changing the way public schools teach. For each, I’d like you to tell me if you think it would improve kids’ academic achievement. Use a 5 point scale where 5 means that it would improve academic achievement a great deal, and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all. How about:"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGES GIVING THE ITEM A 4 OR 5 RATING</th>
<th>TEACHERS OVERALL</th>
<th>GENERAL PUBLIC</th>
<th>BLACK TEACHERS</th>
<th>HISPANIC TEACHERS</th>
<th>WHITE TEACHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable, and disciplined</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanently removing from school grounds kids who are caught with drugs or with weapons</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not allowing kids to graduate from high school unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject so the kids and the teachers will know what to aim for</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising the standards of promotion from grade school to junior high and only letting kids move ahead when they pass a test showing they have reached those standards</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacing multiple choice tests with essay tests to measure what kids learn</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixing fast learners and slow learners in the same class so that slower kids learn from faster kids</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting how schools teach to the background of students, such as using street language to teach inner-city kids</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing educators to paddle or spank students</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for teachers taken from survey conducted for this report. Data for the general public taken from the First Things First survey (1994).
“I am going to read you some descriptions of class textbook and lesson plans and ask you to rate how appropriate they would be for your community’s public schools. Please use a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 means it is highly appropriate and 1 means it is not at all appropriate. How about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPROPRIATE: PERCENTAGES RATING ITEM 1 OR 2</th>
<th>APPROPRIATE: PERCENTAGES RATING ITEM 1 OR 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background</td>
<td>96% 95% 95% 89% 97% 1% 2% 3% 5% 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching honesty and the importance of telling the truth</td>
<td>95 95 94 90 96 1 2 3 5 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids to solve problems without violence</td>
<td>95 93 96 91 96 1 3 2 5 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing that democracy is the best form of government</td>
<td>72 70 64 60 73 8 9 13 12 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching respect for people who are homosexual</td>
<td>44 61 48 49 44 28 18 31 26 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching in a science class that the biblical view of creation and Darwin’s theory of evolution are equally valid</td>
<td>36 38 29 38 36 42 36 40 32 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that two-parent families are the best way to raise children</td>
<td>26 52 31 31 26 47 25 42 42 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguing that racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today</td>
<td>13 29 22 16 13 60 44 51 59 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in a guest speaker who advocates black separatism</td>
<td>6 10 5 11 6 80 71 85 76 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans</td>
<td>6 14 5 9 6 75 66 73 70 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened</td>
<td>5 8 5 7 5 86 81 88 79 86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* KEY: T = Teachers, GP = General Public, BT = Black Teachers, HT = Hispanic Teachers, WT = White Teachers

Data for teachers taken from survey conducted for this report. Data for the general public taken from the First Things First survey (1994).
“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. How about teaching:"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGES SAYING &quot;ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL&quot;</th>
<th>TEACHERS</th>
<th>GENERAL PUBLIC</th>
<th>BLACK TEACHERS</th>
<th>HISPANIC TEACHERS</th>
<th>WHITE TEACHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic reading, writing and math skills</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of hard work</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values such as honesty and tolerance of others</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habits of good citizenship such as voting and caring about the nation</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity and a love of learning</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer skills and media technology</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American history and American geography</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology, chemistry and physics</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to deal with social problems like drugs and family breakdown</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical job skills for office or industry</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The history and geography of such places as Europe or Asia</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced mathematics such as calculus</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic works from such writers as Shakespeare and Plato</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern American writers such as Steinbeck and Hemingway</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports and athletics</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Here are some policies your community’s public schools might consider adopting. Would you favor or oppose [INSERT ITEM]? Is that strongly or somewhat?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGES RESPONDING “STRONGLY FAVOR” OR “SOMewhat FAVOR”</th>
<th>TEACHERS</th>
<th>GENERAL PUBLIC</th>
<th>BLACK TEACHERS</th>
<th>HISPANIC TEACHERS</th>
<th>WHITE TEACHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banning smoking anywhere on school grounds by students</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring kids to stay on school grounds throughout the day, with no choice of being off-campus for lunch</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banning hugging and kissing between students on school grounds</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring teachers to dress like professionals, with male teachers wearing jackets and ties to set an example for kids</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring kids to dress in standard clothing, such as a button-down shirt and slacks for boys</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for teachers taken from survey conducted for this report. Data for the general public taken from the First Things First survey (1994).

“T’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?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGES SAYING “MOST IMPORTANT”</th>
<th>TEACHERS</th>
<th>GENERAL PUBLIC</th>
<th>BLACK TEACHERS</th>
<th>HISPANIC TEACHERS</th>
<th>WHITE TEACHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being persistent and having inner drive</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing how to deal with people well</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting an excellent academic education</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing the right people and having the right connections</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2. Although both teachers and the general public show concern over American students’ competitiveness, it is the difference in degree of their concern that is significant. Exact question wording: “How concerned would you be if international test scores showed that American students were doing poorly in comparison with students from many other countries?” Would you be very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned or not concerned at all? Results: General public — very concerned 56%, somewhat concerned 32%, not too concerned 7%, not concerned at all 4%. Teachers — very concerned 28%, somewhat concerned 45%, not too concerned 19%, not concerned at all 8%.

3. When asked, “Overall, would you say that the public schools in your community are doing an excellent, good, fair, or poor job,” only 16% of the general public said “excellent,” whereas 42% of teachers and 38% of school administrators said “excellent.” When asked, “In your community, is it the public schools or the private schools which generally provide a better education,” only 33% of the general public responded “public schools,” while 75% of teachers and 83% of administrators responded “public schools.”

4. Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools (Public Agenda, 1994).

5. For example, a 1995 Office of Technology Assessment report which drew on a number of past studies found students are at far more risk of death or serious injury when they are off school grounds (reported in the New York Times, Nov. 19, 1995).

6. For further information on the attitudes of diverse groups toward math reform, see Math Leads the Way: Perspectives on Math Reform (Public Agenda, 1993).


8. Elementary school teachers are somewhat less likely than high school teachers to approve of a “get tougher” approach for younger kids (the margin is 53% to 65%). Elementary school teachers are also less likely to approve of a “get tougher” approach for high schoolers — 71% say it’s a good or excellent idea compared with 84% of high school teachers who feel that way.

9. National telephone survey of 1,000 adults, conducted December, 1995 for upcoming study on welfare. Exact question wording with results for the general public: “I am going to read five areas of government responsibility. Please tell me in which area it is most urgent for the government to change the way it does things. Is it most urgent to change... how the government deals with other nations (7%), how the government deals with crime (18%), how political leaders are elected (6%), how the public schools are educating kids (33%), how the government runs the welfare system (33%).” Responses of “don’t know” totaled 3%.

10. Forty-one percent of social studies and history teachers say that teaching “the history and geography of such places as Europe or Asia” is absolutely essential,” matching the 41% of teachers in general. Thirty-three percent of math teachers say that teaching “advanced mathematics such as calculus” is absolutely essential, approximately the same as the 36% of teachers in general who take this position. And 30% of English teachers say that teaching “modern American writers such as Steinbeck and Hemingway” is absolutely essential, only marginally more than the 23% of teachers in general who feel this way.

11. Exact wording of questions (with results for teachers): “If a teacher passes a group of kids in a public school playground who are teasing another child about the fact that his mother or father is a homosexual, should the teacher: let the kids work it out themselves (33%), break up the situation and leave it at that (23%), break up the situation and emphasize that teasing about homosexuality is wrong (73%).” “If a teacher passes a group of kids in a public school playground who are teasing another child about his race, should
the teacher: let the kids work it out themselves (2%), break up the situation and leave it at that (13%), break up the situation and emphasize that teasing about race is wrong (85%).” “If a teacher passes a group of kids in a public school playground who are teasing another child about his religion, should the teacher: let the kids work it out themselves (3%), break up the situation and leave it at that (15%), break up the situation and emphasize that teasing about religion is wrong (82%).”

12. Due to the low incidence rates of minority teachers, it would have been prohibitively expensive to interview black and Hispanic teachers randomly. As a consequence, the black and Hispanic teacher oversamples were based on a targeted, not a random, sample. Please refer to the Methodology section for a full explanation of how these samples were constructed.

Hispanics can be any race. For the purposes of our study, we asked respondents to self-identify by asking them, “Do you consider yourself: White, Black or African-American, Hispanic, or Asian or Pacific Islander.” References to race or ethnicity rely on how respondents define themselves.

It should be noted that minority teacher attitudes are not available for some of the items discussed in the previous chapters. This is because some of the teacher attitudes reported were captured in an earlier survey for the report Assignment Incomplete which did not include oversamples of minority teachers (see Methodology for more details.)

13. In the First Things First survey, 71% of African-American parents said they favored “requiring teachers to dress like professionals” compared to only 47% of white parents and 56% of the general public. Sixty-four percent of African-American parents said they favor requiring kids to dress in standard clothing versus 41% of white parents and 49% of the general public.

14. Exact question wording: “How good a job are the public schools in your community doing at teaching...[ITEM]? Would you say excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” Percentages saying “Excellent” or “Good” for “basic reading, writing, and math skills.” White teachers — 85%, Black teachers — 69%, Hispanic teachers — 72%. Percentages saying “Excellent” or “Good” for “American history and American geography.” White teachers — 82%, Black teachers — 60%, Hispanic teachers — 65%. Note that these questions were asked only of those teachers who had earlier said that teaching these subject matters is “absolutely essential.”

15. In the First Things First survey, African-American parents supported heterogenous grouping in approximately the same numbers as did the general public and white parents. Thirty-nine percent of African-American parents support the idea, as do 38% of white parents and 34% of the general public. This supports the contention that it is the level of school taught rather than race which drives teachers’ perceptions on this issue.
METHODOLOGY

Given the Circumstances draws upon findings from two separate telephone surveys conducted with public school teachers in 1995. The main survey, conducted specifically for this study, reports the attitudes of 1164 public school teachers interviewed by telephone throughout the continental United States. The other supplemental survey was part of Public Agenda's 1995 study, Assignment Incomplete, and gauged the views of 237 public school teachers.

Given the Circumstances also refers to findings from a mail survey of community leaders done for the Assignment Incomplete study. Finally, it draws on the dozens of focus groups Public Agenda has conducted with teachers across the country in recent years for a variety of research projects.

About the Survey

The main survey underpinning the analysis for this study is based on telephone interviews with 1164 public school teachers. Of this 1164 total, 800 interviews were conducted with a representative, randomly drawn sample of public school teachers, grades 4 through 12. The remainder comprise the black and Hispanic teachers’ oversamples. The survey instrument was designed by Public Agenda. Interviews were conducted by Eastern Research Services, and averaged 28.5 minutes in length. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

The 800 random sample interviews were conducted between October 9th and October 26th 1995. A random sample of teachers with phone numbers at their schools was drawn by Quality Education Data, one of the pre-eminent sources in the school data field. The survey was then fielded using an approach similar to that used by Louis Harris and Associates for interviewing teachers. Teachers were called at their schools and asked for by name. If they were reached directly they were asked to participate in the survey. If they were unable to be interviewed immediately they were asked to make an appointment to be interviewed at a later time either at school or at their home. Teachers at their schools who were not able to come to the phone were left a message asking them to call the nonprofit, nonpartisan Public Agenda at a toll free 800-number to participate in a national survey of teachers about education. In all cases, teachers were screened by being asked, "Are you a public school teacher who teaches in a classroom?" to ensure that only current public school classroom teachers were interviewed for the study. The margin of error for this portion of the sample is plus or minus 3.4%.

About the Oversamples of Black and Hispanic Teachers

The percentage of black and Hispanic teachers is generally low (about 8% for black teachers, 3% for Hispanic teachers), and, of the sample of 800 respondents, only 37 teachers identified themselves as black or Hispanic. To assess the views of black and Hispanic teachers with greater confidence, an additional 364 interviews were conducted with targeted samples of minority teachers. The study thus analyzes the views of 200 black and 201 Hispanic public school teachers.

The 364 black and Hispanic oversample interviews took place between October 23rd and November 2nd, 1995. A targeted sample was employed because, as mentioned above, the incidence of minority teachers was prohibitively low. The targeted sample was constructed from Survey Sampling's “Low Incidence Targeted Sample” data base. The targeted sample provided home phone numbers of people who had identified themselves as teachers within approximately the past year, and who lived in neighborhoods with at least 10% black or Hispanic residents. Margin of error statistics are less appropriate when discussing these oversamples because they were based on targeted samples drawn from self-selected respondents. Nevertheless, generalizations about black and Hispanic teachers in this report are strongly suggestive.
Oversample respondents were called at home and screened with the question, “Are you a public school teacher who teaches in a classroom?” as well as a question about their race and ethnicity. If they said they were a public school teacher and identified themselves as either black or Hispanic, they qualified for the study.

About the Supplemental Teachers Survey

Some of the results reported in Given the Circumstances are based upon a supplemental survey of teachers conducted as part of Public Agenda’s 1995 study Assignment Incomplete. This random sample of 237 public school teachers was drawn and interviewed using the same techniques as were used with the main Given the Circumstances random teachers sample, described above, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 7%.

Survey of Community Leaders

This study also draws upon a mail survey of a nation-wide sample of community leaders, conducted for Public Agenda’s Assignment Incomplete study. That survey was mailed to 3,650 economic, political, civic, and educational leaders in early May 1995 and netted 1,151 returns - an overall response rate of 32%. Of the 1,151 leaders, 734 were non-educators, and it was this portion of the leadership results that are reported on in Given the Circumstances. They include 261 leaders from the economic sector (e.g. directors of Chambers of Commerce, union presidents); 165 leaders from the political sector (e.g. mayors, state legislators); 207 civic leaders (e.g. police chiefs, heads of foundations); and 101 leaders from other (non-educator) categories.

Focus Groups

To inform this study, Public Agenda has drawn upon the many focus groups it has conducted with teachers across the country in recent years for a variety of research projects. (See, for example, Public Agenda’s Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts; Effective Public Engagement: The New Standards Project; and The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education.) While focus groups do not produce quantifiable results in the way surveys do, they allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of complex issues that is extremely valuable in designing and interpreting surveys. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them when they gave voice to the attitudes captured statistically through the surveys.
"Committed to Change: Missourians and Public Education. 1996. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Missouri Partnership for Outstanding Schools, this report describes how the citizens of Missouri feel about public education. The gaps among educators, community leaders, and the public, including a special focus on African-Americans, are outlined. How Missourians feel in comparison to citizens of Connecticut and the nation at large is also included. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $10.00.

"Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform. 1995. A follow-up study to First Things First, this report examines 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. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $10.00.

"The Basics: Parents Talk About Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and the Schools. 1995. This focus group study further explores the public’s concern with the basics and the differences in attitudes between college and non-college educated parents. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $7.50.

"Professional Development for Teachers: The Public’s View. 1995. This report indicates the potential for both support and disappointment with professional development for teachers. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $7.50.


"Accomplishing Reform with Public Engagement: A Map of the Process. 1995. Prepared by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, this map addresses citizens and community groups who want to undertake reform but believe that the public should or needs to be their partner for real change to occur. Roadblocks a community might encounter are flagged. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $7.50.

Contested Values: Tag of War in the School Yard. 1995. Prepared by Public Agenda for the National Issues Forums, this citizen discussion guide focuses on the debate over which values American children should be taught in public schools. Written for the general reader, the 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

Preserving the Higher Education Legacy. 1995. A follow-up study to The Closing Gateway (1993), this report is based on a series of in-depth interviews with California leaders who cite rising costs and declining access as problems for higher education. Copies of this report are available from the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, #704, San Jose, CA 95113. Fax requests to 408-287-6709. Ask for Report #95-3.

"First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools. 1994. Based on a national study of over 1,100 members of the general public, including 550 parents of children currently in public school, this report examines public attitudes about values issues in public schools as well as views on reform efforts. The study also offers detailed analyses of the views of white and African-American public school 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.

Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation. This study reports the results of over 200 face-to-face interviews with teachers, principals, administrators, school board members, parents, and business executives in four typical school systems undergoing reform. It reveals a significant barrier to educational reform — political gridlock among education stakeholders — and describes the substantial in-fighting and communication gaps among these groups. The report can be ordered from Public Agenda for $10.00.

Effective Public Engagement. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for The New Standards Project. Based on focus groups with teachers, parents, high school students and members of the general public, this study explores responses to and concerns about implementing higher standards. This handbook suggests ways to address people's reservations about standards, but it is useful for anyone interested in communicating about education reform. To order, write or call The National Center on Education and the Economy, 700 11th Street NW, Suite 750, Washington, DC 20005. Tel: (202) 783-3668. The report is $5.00 for New Standards Project partners, $25.00 for non-partners.


Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics. 1992. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation. Based on a survey of teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, and business executives from major corporations, the study reports consensus among the groups over the goals of K-12 education but strong differences in their evaluations of the performance of the schools. The report is $8.50 and can be ordered from Public Agenda.


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