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First Things First

What Americans Expect from the Public Schools

A Report from Public Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

In this decade of highly contentious public policy debate, there is one area where leaders have reached a remarkable consensus: how to improve public education. In contrast to issues such as crime or welfare, where leaders are split by bitter ideological differences, there is a broadly endorsed bipartisan strategy for improving the nation’s public schools. Presidents Bush and Clinton, Republicans and Democrats, the nation’s governors, key business groups and corporate leaders, and leading educational experts have all championed a strategy that centers on raising academic standards, increasing coursework in science and math, and replacing “guesswork” multiple-choice tests with more challenging assessments that require children to demonstrate command of a subject and put their knowledge to use solving problems.

Standards-setting efforts are underway in more than 30 states—carefully planned initiatives to raise standards, clarify what students should learn, improve testing, and consequently change the classroom experience of the nation’s 40 million public school students. Moreover, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, signed by President Clinton in March 1994, will develop more challenging national performance standards defining what all students should know in core subject areas such as science, math, history, English, geography, foreign languages, and the arts.

Despite this extraordinary leadership consensus, progress has been disappointing. In some states, broadly backed reform proposals have simply come unraveled in the face of unexpected opposition from parents, teachers, and community and religious groups.

In Connecticut, an ambitious plan to raise achievement levels in the state’s public schools—developed over 18 months by the state’s Commission on Educational Excellence—died in the legislature, a target of resistance from the teachers’ union and vigorous opposition from organized parent groups in 60 communities. In the end, legislators did not even want to debate the proposal, seeing no point in committing themselves publicly to a plan that all agreed was doomed.

In Littleton, Colorado, a reform program calling for higher standards, new ways of measuring progress, and greater attention to reasoning and social skills was dramatically scaled back due to public opposition. School board meetings that had drawn 10 people attracted overflow crowds after schools began requiring students to demonstrate proficiency in skills for graduation instead of simply completing required courses. While educators hailed the new approaches, some parents saw the movement as an ill-conceived experiment that could damage their children’s future. After running a back-to-basics campaign, three newly elected school board members forced the superintendent to resign, and voted to restore the earlier system of graduation requirements.

Four years after passage, the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), aimed at raising standards in Kentucky schools, is neither widely understood nor accepted. KERA has attracted opposition from teachers and local school officials and from grassroots organizations such as America Awaken, Families United for Morals in Education, Parents and Professionals Involved in Education, and larger groups such as the Eagle Forum. The Kentucky legislature approved increased funding for KERA in 1994, but only after a highly publicized, bruising battle.

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The drive to improve students' academic performance has also hit unexpected detours in a number of districts where discussion about how to improve skills has taken a back seat to debates over what should be taught. Bitter controversies over the content of history and science courses, selection of textbooks and library books, and, most prominently, sex education and AIDS prevention policies have surfaced in communities in all parts of the country. In Oakland, California, high school teachers started the 1991 school year without social studies textbooks because of continuing controversy over what to teach in multicultural classrooms.

Former New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez left office amid disputes over an AIDS prevention program that included condom distribution and the "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum, which was designed to teach tolerance and included stories for first-graders such as *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *Heather Has Two Mommies* that sympathetically depict gay and lesbian families.

Advocates across the spectrum—promoting minority rights, women's rights, civil liberties and free expression, and traditional Christian values—have all become active in debates over what and how the schools should teach. At the very core of these controversies are clashes over "values"—what values Americans want to transmit to their children and what role they want the public schools to play in teaching those values.

In the summer of 1994, Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and education organization, developed and conducted an opinion research project to explore the public's perspective on these issues. The research focused specifically on the controversies causing turmoil in school districts across the country—proposals to raise academic standards and clarify learning goals, proposals to change the curriculum, proposals to change testing and grading, disputes over textbooks and lessons, disputes over sex education and AIDS prevention policies, and finally, questions about who should be making decisions on how to run the schools.

**Ten Key Findings**

This report describes 10 key findings from Public Agenda's research—findings that have important implications for those aiming to improve education and regain broad public support for it. It updates Public Agenda's 1991 study, *CrossTalk: The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness* (conducted by Public Agenda for the Business-Higher Education Forum) which identified major communication gaps between experts and the public on education, worker training, and the economy. This report is, in essence, a report card from the public on the education reform movement that was just beginning four years ago.

The current study is based on a national telephone survey of more than 1,100 Americans, including 550 parents of children currently in public school. Detailed analyses of the views of white and African-American parents with children currently in public school, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians (also with children currently in public school) are a distinctive feature of the study.* Public Agenda also conducted focus groups in Birmingham (Alabama), Des Moines, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia. The methodology section on page 54 gives a more complete description of how the study was conducted.
In this report, we rely mainly on findings from the current study—both the national survey and focus groups. But we also refer, where illuminating, to findings from other Public Agenda research on education conducted for The Kettering Foundation, The New Standards Project, and The Annenberg/CPB Math and Science Project\(^1\) in the last three years, and to survey data from other sources—to confirm, elaborate, or provide context for the latest findings. We also draw on Public Agenda research now in progress for the William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund of New Haven, Connecticut and the Annie E. Casey Foundation of Baltimore.

Public Agenda’s work on this study was supported by a diverse group of foundations and organizations with an interest in education reform and improving the schools. We would like to express our gratitude to: The Annie E. Casey, Ashland Oil, BellSouth, Danforth, General Mills, MacArthur and Rockefeller foundations, as well as the Carnegie Corporation, and the Business Roundtable. Public Agenda is solely responsible for developing the lines of inquiry, designing the research instruments, and for analyzing and reporting the results.

\textit{This report is, in essence, a report card from the public on the education reform movement that was just beginning four years ago.}

* Throughout this report, references to “parents” indicates parents with children currently in public school.
FINDING 1:

First Things First: Safety, Order, and the Basics

For the large majority of Americans, too many public schools are not providing the minimum prerequisites for education—a safe, orderly environment and effective teaching of “the basics.”

It seems axiomatic to people that schools should be safe, orderly, and conducive to teaching and learning. But Americans in all parts of the country and across every demographic category say their local public schools are not providing this basic underpinning for sound education.

For a large majority of Americans, too many public schools are not meeting their most elemental goal: ensuring that the nation’s children master some basic, but essential skills—the ability to read and write English and to do simple arithmetic by hand, along with a “common knowledge” understanding of science, history, and geography.

This study captures decisively what opinion research on education has suggested during the last decade: Americans are concerned that too many public schools are so disorderly and undisciplined that learning cannot take place. And the public’s concern about discipline and order has been joined in the last few years by a disturbing new fear—that the schools are violent and unsafe.

For most Americans, three images sum up their sense that the public schools are failing: metal detectors in high schools, students outside schools smoking during school hours, and supermarket checkout clerks who can’t make change. People’s fears and frustrations, and their strongest desires for progress, center on three areas: safety, order, and the basics.

Safety

Almost three-quarters of Americans (72%) say “drugs and violence” are serious problems in schools in their area. Among African-American parents with children in public school, eight in ten (80%) say drugs and violence are serious problems in their local schools, compared to roughly six in ten (58%) white parents. Other recent public opinion surveys have uncovered similar fears about safety in the schools. In a 1994 Gallup survey, Americans most frequently named fighting, gangs, and violence—along with discipline problems—as the “biggest problem” facing the public schools.2

Some leaders have argued that people’s fears about drugs and violence are driven by media coverage and do not accurately reflect what is happening in most public schools. In this study, respondents were specifically asked about their own local public schools—not schools in general (people generally have more positive views about schools in their own community). Moreover, questions about safety and drugs were intermingled with questions about other school issues such as testing and teaching practices.

Thus, while people’s fears about safety may be magnified by the media, they are very real—and they go beyond generalized concerns about teenage crime or indiscriminate cynicism about public institutions. The perception that children are exposed to violence and drugs in the public schools is pervasive among African-American parents and that perception has seeped far beyond the nation’s large urban centers.
Living With Fear

A Public Agenda focus group in Danbury, Connecticut—conducted for a William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund project—suggests the degree to which fears about safety and drugs, regardless of whether they are real or exaggerated, can create an uncivilized, almost brutish, school environment even in middle-class neighborhoods. Questioned by the moderator, parents in Danbury repeatedly gave the local high school high marks for its teachers, principal, programs, equipment, and so forth. Most said their children were receiving a good education in a well-run and responsive public school system. But after some minutes of conversation, one father mentioned that his daughter routinely avoids using the restroom for fear of being accosted by a tough set of teenagers. The positive tone of the conversation quickly changed to one of anger and frustration, as more respondents shared stories about the fear and intimidation their children experienced. The parents had accepted the situation. They “lived with it,” but it also served as a symbol to them that the era of safety and security they knew in their youth had been irretrievably lost.

People’s fears about school violence and drug use lead them, not surprisingly, to support proposals to permanently remove from school grounds students caught with weapons or drugs. Seventy-six percent of those questioned backed this idea which won even higher endorsement from parents with children attending public schools—83% among African-American parents and 84% among white parents. As one Philadelphia parent put it: “You can’t just let things go the way they’re going now. If a student comes into school, and he’s carrying a weapon, the student’s got to go. There’s too much in this country of the rights of the few, you know, and not the rights of the many.”

Order

But safety is not the public’s sole concern. Most Americans are not convinced that schools adequately enforce the standards of behavior and cooperation that allow teachers to teach and children to learn. The public has consistently named lack of discipline as a major problem facing their local public schools for the past decade. This concern is echoed in the current study. Asked to name the most important factors needed for students to learn, people cite good teachers and an orderly, disciplined environment as the top two prerequisites. But more than half of the respondents (54%) say teachers are doing only a “fair” or “poor” job dealing with discipline (compared to only 36% who question teachers’ judgment on academic matters). More than half (52%) say it is a serious problem that their local public schools don’t teach good work habits, such as being on time and doing homework, and almost half (49%) say it is the worst-behaved students who are getting the most attention.

Comments from the focus groups underscore people’s concerns about basic order and discipline in the schools:

“At 12 in the afternoon, students are coming out to buy things from the store across the street as if school was letting out, and my question is, ‘Don’t teachers see these students out the window, outside the building?’ Nothing happens. I mean, they come and go as they please. I don’t want them to run it like a prison, but I think it’s a little too lax."

—Philadelphia father

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“If you send a fifth-grader to the principal because he’s in trouble—there’s a lot of students who say ‘Big deal! He (the principal) is not going to do anything.’”

—Des Moines mother

“Our Rotary Club honored some special students in the local high school. We had 30 boys and girls at this big dinner. Probably 50% of the boys in attendance had these baseball caps on. It was a formal sit-down dinner. All of us were dressed nicely. The superintendent of schools said, ‘Gee, I didn’t even notice that.’ The students feel they can do anything they want. If they don’t get properly disciplined or guided, how can they be educated?”

—Hartford senior citizen

“I think there have been some cases where the children are disciplined wrong, and lawsuits happen, so the teachers are afraid to do anything—to bring order or keep order. I think a lot of these children are just normal active children, but instead of disciplining them in a structured environment so that they [are] in a position [to] learn, they say, ‘Well, let’s turn it over to a doctor and put them on Ritalin or whatever.’”

—Minneapolis father

Americans do not dismiss the daunting challenges faced by schools attempting to educate children from neighborhoods plagued by poverty and crime and from families unable to provide the structure and support children need to achieve in school. People readily admit that ensuring a safe, orderly environment conducive to learning is a much more difficult task than it once was. A third of Americans (33%) say that teachers are doing a worse job than when they themselves were in school, but 55% say parents are doing a worse job. Even parents concede that parents are doing a worse job, with white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents agreeing in roughly equal numbers. Asked whether a student is more likely to succeed if he comes from a stable and supportive family but attends a poor school, or if he comes from a troubled family but attends a good school, six in ten Americans (61%) say the child with the stable family has the better chance.

Americans don’t blame the schools for the problems they face, but neither do they think schools are employing the strategies most likely to work—the strategies most likely to achieve the best results for both troubled children and for those from stronger, more supportive homes.

The Prerequisite for Learning

Eighty-eight percent of Americans say that emphasizing habits such as being on time, and being dependable and disciplined would make a great deal of difference in how much students learn. Roughly three in four (73%) say taking persistent troublemakers out of class would be a very effective means of boosting academic performance in the schools. The same number (73%) strongly support the idea of keeping students on the school grounds throughout the day, a proposal which people may see offering two benefits: keeping students safe and keeping them more focused on academics.
Findings from this study suggest that the public preoccupation with order and discipline represents much more than the perennial discomfort of the middle-aged for "kids these days." People see order as a prerequisite to learning. They are convinced that a more orderly and disciplined public school environment would improve academic performance. As one Des Moines mother put it: "I think we have to get back the respect. They have to stop [allowing] classes [to be plagued] with interruptions, and if they had that, I think the students would learn more, too."

The Basics

Teaching the basics is the third element in people's triumvirate of goals for the public schools. Sixty percent of Americans say that "not enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing, and math" is a serious problem in their local schools—a finding, again, that is particularly revealing because people generally rate local schools more highly. Surveys have consistently shown that Americans believe schools nationwide should put more emphasis on basic academic subjects. At least 75% of Americans feel that more emphasis should be given to basic high school subjects such as science, English, and math.¹

In focus groups for this and other recent Public Agenda projects, people repeatedly expressed their frustration at children's lack of command of the basics.

"I have a twelve year old grandson—he's in accelerated classes—but if he didn't have a spell-proofer on his computer, he'd misspell a lot of words."

—Hartford grandmother

"It seems to me that when I went to school, we started with the basics, with the basic building blocks. You didn't start writing compositions until you had all the grammar down... Now, it's more like they get plopped down right in the middle and are told 'Write us a story and if the spelling isn't right, we'll take care of that later'... It's backward. It's like telling an auto mechanic, 'You don't have to worry about how the engine works and how the transmission works. We want you to fix these brakes on this car. If you mess up, that's OK, we'll take it back and work on it some more.'"

—Minneapolis father

"Education is becoming more about social issues as opposed to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some of it's fine, but I think schools need to stay with the basics... You can't get by in the business world on social issues if you can't add and subtract."

—Des Moines father

"They talk all the time about this 'whole child educational process'... It's not your business to make a 'whole child.' Your business is to teach these students how to read, how to write, and give them the basic skills to balance their checkbook. It's not to make new Emersons out of them."

—Minneapolis father

From the public's point of view, however, making sure public school children complete their education with a firm command of the basics is not a trivial or inconsequential goal.
It is not uncommon for some in the educational reform movement to refer to "the basics" with disdain, and numerous observers have interpreted the public's continuing focus on basics as evidence of lack of support for more rigorous and challenging coursework. From the public's point of view, however, making sure public school children complete their education with a firm command of the basics is not a trivial or inconsequential goal. It is the essential foundation on which children build their futures.

To many Americans, "education experts" seem to give surprisingly short shrift to basics—skipping over them to discuss issues such as the importance of "critical thinking skills," the need to learn teamwork, and other "higher-order" skills that are at the top of reformers' agendas. But when people talk about "the basics," they are not necessarily suggesting that children can't do more, or that higher levels of achievement are not desirable. What most people seem to mean is "first things first." Indeed, the vast majority of Americans (96%) support having "tougher, and more challenging courses" in the basics.5

In focus groups for this study and other Public Agenda education projects, people express a sense of frustration and even bewilderment at the inability of the public schools to make mastery of the basics commonplace among the nation's children. Most people wonder how it is possible, after 12 years of schooling, that so many children seem to have learned so little.
FINDING 2:

The Public and Higher Standards

Americans believe the higher standards promoted by leadership are necessary — indeed, the public strongly supports them—but they do not believe they are sufficient.

Like leadership, the public has its own very clear agenda for improving the schools. There is extraordinary agreement among all segments of the population—in all parts of the country and across ethnic and racial lines—on what helps children learn and what schools need to do to improve student performance. Like leaders, people believe that academic standards should be raised, that schools and teachers should be clear and specific about what they expect children to learn, and that schools should hold students accountable for doing their best.

But for the public, raising standards is only half an answer. Since Americans are most concerned about whether schools furnish a safe, orderly environment in which children learn the basics, leadership’s education agenda sometimes seems mystifyingly incomplete.

The public endorses leadership ideas about higher standards and more science and math—and they increasingly assent to leadership arguments that the workers of tomorrow need new, more advanced skills. But education reform may seem misdirected and unresponsive to many Americans unless it addresses their chief goals for the nation’s children: safety, order, and mastering the basics.

There can be very little doubt that the American public supports the goals leaders have set for raising academic standards in the public schools. Surveys conducted in the last decade have repeatedly shown support for requiring students to pass an exam to qualify for a high school diploma. Six in ten (61%) Americans questioned in this study say academic standards are too low in their own local schools, a figure that rises to seven in ten (70%) among African-American parents with children currently in public school.

Even more significant, people overwhelmingly endorse measures designed to set and enforce higher standards. Almost nine in ten respondents (88%) support not allowing students to graduate from high school unless they demonstrate they can write and speak English well, and 82% support setting up “very clear guidelines on what students should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject.”

More than two-thirds (70%) want to raise standards of promotion from grade school to junior high and let students move ahead only when they pass a test showing they have reached these standards. People say they believe all of these measures would be highly effective in improving students’ academic performance; support is strong among the general public and among white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents.

Rejecting Social Promotion

Moreover, public support goes beyond lip service. People say the schools should follow through: enforce the standards and hold students accountable for mastering skills—not just for trying hard. Eighty-one percent say schools should pass students only when they have learned what was expected; only 16% say it is better to pass students if they have
made an effort and tried hard. Seventy-six percent of Americans say teachers should
toughen their grading and be more willing to fail high school students who don’t learn.
People are somewhat less willing to see this “tough-love” approach applied to grade
school students; nevertheless, 60% say we should do so.

Public Agenda explored public reactions to education standards in a 1993 series of focus
groups conducted for The New Standards Project. That study also revealed broad and
spontaneous support for the notion that higher expectations produce better perform-
ance. For parents, teachers, students, and members of the general public questioned
in those focus groups, the premise made common sense: if you ask for more, you get
more.

The public’s strong endorsement for higher standards is also a manifestation of its
concern about basics. The current study presented respondents with 10 different propos-
als for improving student achievement—ideas that included removing troublemakers
from classrooms, reintroducing spanking, and adapting teaching styles to students’
cultural backgrounds. Respondents rated each idea from one to five, based on its effec-
tiveness in improving academic performance, with five being the most effective. At the
very top of the list—with 76% of respondents giving it the top rating—is a proposal that
responds to the public’s dual concerns about the basics and the importance of standards:
a proposal that would deny students a high school diploma unless they clearly demon-
strate they can write and speak English well.

The chief difficulty faced by education reformers is not resistance to the call for higher
standards. Americans broadly embrace the need for higher standards, rigorously en-
forced. Rather, the difficulty is that the call for higher standards can seem inadequate to
people given the depth of their concern about matters that they see as much more
fundamental: safety, order, and the basics.

Among the National Education Goals originally endorsed by President Bush and the
nation’s governors—and reconfirmed by President Clinton—is the statement that “every
school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized pres-
ence of firearms and alcohol and will offer the disciplined environment conducive to
learning.” But education experts, government, local school districts, and the array of
foundations and “think tanks” working on reform have emphasized this goal less than
the others. In contrast, it is at the top of the public’s agenda—along with standards. It
has been there for a while, and from the public’s perspective, the situation has gotten
worse, not better.
FINDING 3:

Public Response to Teaching Innovations

The leadership agenda for education reform faces an additional stumbling block—widespread discomfort with new teaching methods that often accompany reform.

The national education reform movement risks losing public support if it ignores the public’s concerns about safety, order, and basics. But there is another element of reform that leads many Americans to question whether those “in charge” really share the public’s goals.

Among opinion leaders in government, business and education, the drive to raise academic standards and clarify outcomes has been tied to a number of other teaching reforms: reforming math education to focus on concepts and problem-solving (accompanied by use of calculators) rather than on rote learning of arithmetic; teaching composition by challenging students to use the written word early, widely, and creatively with less emphasis on grammar and spelling; ending the “tracking” of students which groups students by skill levels, and moving to heterogeneous grouping in which students of different skill levels are taught together; and replacing standardized, multiple-choice tests with new, more “authentic” assessments that ask students to solve problems and demonstrate that they know how to use what they have learned.

But this study and others Public Agenda has conducted in the last two years suggest that the large majority of Americans are uncomfortable with many of these changes. Overall, the public seems to have a more traditional view of what should be happening in the classroom. They want to see students learning some of the same things—in the same ways—that they learned in school.

Ideas such as using calculators to teach math, teaching composition without teaching spelling, and grouping students with different skills together in one class don’t make intuitive sense to most Americans. And they seem to have another, more important strike against them: most Americans don’t seem to think they are working very well.

New Approaches to Teaching Math

Eighty-six percent of respondents say students should learn to do arithmetic “by hand”—including memorizing multiplication tables—before starting to use calculators, while only 10% believe that students “who use calculators and computers from the start learn to understand math concepts even better than those who spend a lot of time memorizing tables and doing math by hand.”

Skepticism about early use of calculators extends from the general public to public school parents, across all age groups and other demographic categories. The public’s view is nearly the opposite of that of professional math educators. In a 1993 study conducted by Public Agenda for the Mathematical Science Education Board and WQED, Pittsburgh, 82% of math education professionals responding said that “early use of calculators will improve children’s problem-solving skills and not prevent the learning of arithmetic.” Only 12% shared the public’s doubts about using calculators in the early grades.
In focus groups for this study and other Public Agenda projects on education, the inability of some children to do simple arithmetic without a calculator was frequently offered as foolproof evidence of educational failure. It may be that today’s math education reformers are paying the penalty of perceived failure in the past. American parents witnessed the rise and fall of the “new math,” and they seemed to draw from that experience a renewed devotion to the “tried and true.” Whatever the source of people’s skepticism, this study makes it clear that some aspects of math education reform face an exceedingly uphill battle and may, in fact, poison the waters for other, more broadly accepted elements of the reform movement.

New Approaches to Teaching Composition

Sixty percent of Americans reject the educational strategy that encourages children to write creatively and express themselves from the beginning, without much attention to spelling and grammar. Instead, most people endorse the idea that, “unless they are taught the rules from the beginning, they will never be good writers.” Grammar and spelling mistakes—like the inability to do arithmetic without technological help—were frequently cited in focus groups as evidence of public school failure.

“My son is in third grade and he’d come home, and we’d see his journals. He wasn’t getting the basics. He would just ramble—not complete sentences, not even complete thoughts. Sure, it’s creative, and they should try to help him be creative. But also, students need the structure.”

—Minneapolis father

“In my job, I work with younger people, and they give me written work which I am supposed to type. I didn’t go to college, but what I see coming from these people is probably about eighth-grade level, as far as spelling and sentence construction.”

—Hartford man

The implication here is that children’s command of spelling and grammar—of proper English—is an important form of “authentic” assessment for the public, and for parents with students in school. It is one way people measure public school performance, and it may be as significant to them as test scores or grades on report cards or reports from national commissions.

Heterogeneous Grouping

Only 34% of Americans think that mixing students of different achievement levels together in classes—“heterogeneous grouping”—will help increase student learning. People remain skeptical about this strategy even when presented with arguments in favor of it. Eighty-seven percent of those opposing heterogeneous grouping remain doubtful even when told that one benefit of heterogeneous grouping is that more accomplished students serve as good role models for underachievers. Focus groups on heterogeneous grouping conducted for another Public Agenda research project suggest that other arguments in favor of the idea—such as academic research indicating its benefits or the need to avoid stigmatizing students—are equally unconvincing to most people.
Some proponents of heterogeneous grouping, professional educators and others, have suggested that parental opposition to it is a camouflage for racial prejudice—the fear of white parents that their children will be put in classes with "underachieving" African-American students, but opposition to heterogeneous grouping is as strong among African-American parents as among white parents, and support for it is equally weak.

Another recurrent theme among proponents of heterogeneous grouping is that "tracking" of students stigmatizes low achievers, whom they fear are routinely under-served in public schools. Significantly, the public's concern may be somewhat different from that of the experts. This survey asked people which students receive the most attention in school—fast learners, slow learners, or average learners. The overwhelming majority of people (72%) are convinced that average learners get less attention than either fast learners or slow learners. The public's concern, in other words, seems to be that average students don't get the attention they need because the teacher is distracted trying to deal with the youngsters at the extremes. This may be one reason heterogeneous grouping has so little appeal. For many Americans, separating students by ability may be the way for average learners to get just as much attention as fast and slow learners.

When Public Agenda focused exclusively on this issue in its earlier research, comments by respondents in focus groups suggested that people's doubts about heterogeneous grouping also stem from their own experiences in school or at the workplace. People recalled incidents when they suffered from being in a class that was too advanced for them, or when they watched someone else fall further and further behind because his skills were just not equal to those of the rest of the class. People often cited differences in the needs of their own children as arguments in favor of grouping students by skill level and tailoring teaching to their level of advancement. In short, heterogeneous grouping makes no intuitive sense to people and seems to fly in the face of their real-world experiences.

Replacing Multiple-Choice Tests With More "Authentic" Assessments

Previous research by Public Agenda has suggested that large numbers of Americans, like leaders, question the usefulness of multiple-choice exams and favor alternatives such as essay tests, portfolios, and demonstration projects when they are used in conjunction with grades. In this study, 54% of respondents say replacing multiple-choice tests with essay tests would improve academic performance—an endorsement, but one that falls significantly short of people's support for removing disruptive students (73%) or making correct English a requirement for graduation (88%).

The problem that education reformers face in their drive to replace multiple-choice tests with more "authentic" forms of assessment is not that people object to the idea. The problem is that this particular recommendation seems somewhat tangential to people's chief concerns about the schools. It is as if people are saying, "Well, that's all well and good, but what about the guns, the drugs, the truancy, and the students who can't add, spell, or find France on a map?"

Outcomes-Based Education

Both the general public and parents with children currently in public schools express very strong support for the core concept of "outcomes-based education" or OBE. More than eight in ten (82%) say that "setting up very clear guidelines on what kids should
learn and teachers should teach in every major subject would significantly improve academic achievement. Despite the very strong endorsement for the concept, focus group interviews suggest that local initiatives risk becoming far less popular if they are accompanied by too many unfamiliar, poorly understood, "newfangled" teaching innovations.

Comments in focus groups suggest that the concept of setting clear goals for learning can be undermined by the shock of the new—new jargon, new kinds of report cards, new kinds of assignments—unless they are very well explained and crystal clear in their responsiveness to the public's concern about basics. Focus groups conducted in Minneapolis and Des Moines for this project uncovered a surprising degree of frustration and even ridicule for outcomes-based education:

"They have this outcomes-based education. I never did fully understand it, but when I got my son's report card, I was fully confused. It just had columns and check marks of 'has not fully accomplished' or 'needs work accomplishing'. I had no idea where he was at, what level he was at. What was he accomplishing? It was a real arbitrary thing—the opinion of the teacher. She couldn't even tell us where he was at. It was real vague, without those boundaries and concrete measures that say, 'Yes, he can do fractions, or he knows his multiplication tables.' All of that was totally lost."

—Minneapolis father

"Outcomes-based education? That's sort of on the idea where the students are all in the classroom, and they decide the way it's going to be and [assign] their own grades."

—Des Moines father

"Outcomes-based education is supposed to be the hot topic, but it doesn't look like anything that I ever saw. They have these real vague, self-esteem-oriented goals, and even the teacher can't tell you what the heck it is that they're supposed to be evaluating. It's fluid. You try to grab on to it and there's nothing there. It just kind of runs through your fingers and leaves a mess on the table. It's like they're trying out someone's pet theory. It's like they all go to this conference over the summer, the teachers—the educational professionals I guess they have to call them now—and someone comes out and says, 'Hey, why don't we try this outcomes-based education thing,' and everyone says, 'Yeah!'"

—Minneapolis father

The public's reactions to many of the newer educational approaches and trends that often accompany the drive for higher academic standards share a common thread: People don't understand why the reforms are considered better, and people haven't really been all that impressed with the teaching reforms they have seen in the past. Respondents in focus groups were often unnerved by what they regarded as a "fuzziness" and lack of precision in the way some teachers approach basics such as arithmetic and writing, and people seemed to fear that teaching "fads" were replacing time-honored ways of doing things.

Americans read newspaper stories about the impressive achievements of students in other countries, and they are repeatedly confronted with young people behind the cash register who can't make change. The reaction of many people seems to be something like this: "Maybe the old-fashioned methods weren't perfect, but schools are getting even worse results now! I learned the old-fashioned way, and at least I can spell and add."
FINDING 4:

The Ideal Classroom

People’s traditionalism about education does not mean that they yearn for “the good old days” in every respect. They seem to want a new and improved version of the little red schoolhouse.

Despite their strong support for more order and discipline in the schools, and their commitment to more traditional teaching methods, the public overwhelmingly rejects the notion that schools should be domains of boredom or fear. People believe that learning can be fun and interesting, and they say that teachers and schools should find ways to help children enjoy their education and become more confident and self-assured. They seem to reject both extremes in education—either intimidating students or pandering to them.

More than nine in ten (92%) Americans say it is a “good” or “excellent” idea to make learning enjoyable and interesting for elementary students, with results almost as high (86%) for high school students. And more than eight in ten (84%) think elementary schools should emphasize self-esteem and help students feel good about themselves, again with similar results for high school (81%). In contrast, only 28% think that bringing back spanking would make much improvement in how much students learn in school. The study, by the way, was conducted after the Michael Fay controversy (concerning the Ohio teenager who was caned in Singapore for petty vandalism) and in the midst of renewed discussion about the usefulness of corporal punishment in the schools.

People also reject the notion that schoolwork should be tailored to suit the interests and preferences of young people. Only 20% think the idea of adapting teaching techniques to students’ backgrounds (such as using street language to teach inner-city students) would be effective in boosting academic performance. This approach does not enjoy much support from African-American parents, either: only 24% think this idea would improve learning.

Interestingly, four in ten respondents in this study (41%) express concern that too many teachers veer toward too much camaraderie with students, and that too many teachers are more interested in being popular with students than in commanding respect and instilling discipline. More than half (56%) of Americans—and 71% of African-American parents—think teachers should conform to a dress code to set an example for the students.

In talking about the schools, people often characterize good teachers as those who can make learning interesting and enjoyable, while still enforcing standards and helping students gain skills. When people picture the classroom teacher, their ideal is not a dictatorial and severe teacher terrorizing young children into compliance, nor is it someone who acts like the students’ “best pal.” The ideal teacher, for most people, seems to be someone who likes children, likes the material and is enthusiastic about it, makes school work interesting, but at the same time enforces the rules and demands that students give their best effort.

This study found, as other surveys have shown, substantial concern about large classes. About half of Americans, and 63% of African-American parents, say classes are too crowded in their local schools. Respondents in focus groups often propose smaller classes.
as an effective way to make the schools more orderly and thus improve learning. This study, and other Public Agenda education projects, suggest that people place a very high premium on the teacher's role in a small-scale structured environment. People believe children succeed best when a teacher knows them individually, knows how to encourage and challenge them, checks carefully on both their academic work and their behavior, and responds quickly and decisively if they fall behind. People believe that, at its heart, education is a human endeavor dependent on the individual efforts made by dedicated teachers and motivated students.
FINDING 5:

The Public and the School Wars

Most Americans are not preoccupied by concerns about sex education and multiculturalism that have caused such acrimonious debate in many communities.

Despite the attention they have attracted in the press and the genuine turmoil they have created in some school districts, "values" disputes about how history and science should be taught, about how minorities are portrayed, about what textbooks should be used, and about what moral traditions should be conveyed in sex education and AIDS prevention programs are not at the top of the public's list of concerns about the schools. While Americans certainly have opinions about these issues and care about how they are resolved, they simply are not a chief concern when most people consider how well public schools are serving the nation's children.

Although very strong majorities of Americans in all parts of the country and in all demographic categories express concern about safety, discipline, the basics, and academic standards, only 24% say they are concerned that sex education in public schools has become "too graphic," and only 14% think that schools devote too much time to it. Even among traditional Christian parents whose children attend public schools—those who attend church regularly and say they accept the Bible as the literal word of God or characterize themselves as "born-again"—only 30% express concern about excessively graphic sex education. Less than a third of Americans (30%) are worried that textbooks stereotype women and minorities, although more than half (53%) of African-American parents express this concern. (See Findings 8 and 9 for fuller discussion of the views of traditional Christian and African-American parents.)

When parents are asked whether they have ever seen anything in their children's textbooks that "struck them as very inappropriate," only 15% say they have. Only 23% of traditional Christian parents and only 14% of African-American parents say they have been upset by material in one of their children's textbooks or lessons.

Moreover, people seem comfortable that the values of educational professionals are similar to their own. More than three-quarters (76%) say the values of teachers are close to their own values. Almost two-thirds say the values of school board members (64%) and people who write school textbooks (65%) are similar to their own. In stunningly sharp contrast, only 16% say that the values of those who produce Hollywood action films are similar to their own, and only 10% say the values of those who make TV soap operas are close to their own.

These results, however, should not be interpreted to mean that people are blasé about the role of the schools in transmitting values to the nation's children. More than two-thirds of Americans (71%) say that it is even more important for the schools to teach values than to teach academic subjects, and this study sheds some light on specifically what people have in mind.
FINDING 6:

The Most-Valued Values: Tolerance and Equality

People want schools to teach values, but they especially want schools to emphasize those values that allow a diverse society to live together peacefully.

The public's lack of concern about "values issues" as defined by the press and leadership does not mean that Americans endorse a public school education that is value-neutral or makes no judgments about moral behavior. There is a circle of broadly agreed upon values people expect the schools both to teach directly and to reinforce by example. And there are some "lessons" that most Americans believe are not the business of the public schools—those that seem strident to people and aimed at dividing them, rather than helping them live together in harmony.

As part of the study, respondents were given a list of 22 items and asked whether they were appropriate for public schools to teach. They rated each item from one to five, with one being "not at all appropriate" and five being "highly appropriate." Results indicate that overwhelming majorities of Americans—across geographic and demographic lines—believe it is "highly appropriate" for public schools to teach an inner circle of consensus values.

Top Priorities

Ninety-five percent of Americans say schools should teach "honesty and the importance of telling the truth," with 89% giving this a "number five" rating. Ninety-five percent say schools should teach "respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background," with 88% giving this the top rating. Ninety-three percent say schools should teach "students to solve problems without violence," with 85% giving it the top rating.

Other items near the top of the public's "values-to-teach" list reiterate a concern for equality, fairness, and "getting along." Eighty-four percent of Americans say schools should teach "students that having friends from different racial backgrounds and living in integrated neighborhoods is good," with 67% giving this a "number five" rating. Eighty percent say schools should teach "that girls can succeed at anything boys can," with 63% giving this a top "number five" rating. Seventy-six percent say schools should teach about "the struggle for black civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s," with 54% giving this the highest rating. And even though homosexuality is a more controversial area, as we explain later in this report, 61% of Americans say schools should teach "respect for people who are homosexual," with 47% giving it a "number five" rating.

The public's concerns about tolerance and equality extend beyond selection of textbooks and development of curricula and lesson plans. People expect the schools to enforce certain minimum standards of fair treatment for all children.

Study participants were presented with this scenario: "If a teacher passes a group of students in a public school playground who are teasing another child about his race, should the teacher: A) let the students work it out themselves; B) break up the situation; or C) break up the situation and emphasize that teasing about race is wrong?"

Ninety percent of Americans—across all geographic and demographic lines—want the teacher not only to break up the situation, but to explain that the behavior is wrong (Option C). Eighty-six percent would expect the same reaction if the child were being teased about religion. More than seven in ten (72%) would expect the same reaction if the child were being teased because a parent is homosexual; in this case, however, another 18% would have the teacher break up the situation, but not discuss the reason at length.
Low Comfort Level

Several items are considered “not at all appropriate” by most Americans and fell to the bottom of the public’s list. What most of these items have in common is that people seem to find them strident and divisive. Eighty-one percent of Americans say that schools should not “bring in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened,” with 70% giving this idea the lowest possible rating. Seventy-one percent say schools should not “bring in a guest speaker who advocates black separatism,” with 61% giving this the lowest possible ranking. Contrary to what might be the conventional wisdom, there are no significant differences between the views of African-American parents and white parents on this issue—both oppose it. Sixty-six percent of Americans also reject the idea that schools should teach that “Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans,” with 53% giving this the lowest rating possible.

Among leadership, there is an ongoing discussion about issues of Eurocentrism and patriarchy in the public school curriculum. Some have called for a more multicultural curriculum, while others fear that too great an emphasis on multiculturalism could undermine traditional American values. This dispute has a relatively low priority for the public, but Americans do bring a distinctive point of view to it—one that helps explain why they deem some kinds of lessons highly appropriate while rejecting others as highly inappropriate.

Avoid Discord

First, most people do not believe that women and racial minority groups are treated unfairly in existing textbooks, although African-American parents view this issue quite differently (See Finding 9). Less than a third of the public thinks that African-Americans (32%), Hispanics (28%) or women (20%) are treated unfairly.10 Nonetheless, people support what they see as positive values emerging from the women’s movement and the advocacy of minority groups.

What they reject, at least as lessons in the public schools, are sharply negative critiques of American society. For example, 80% of Americans say schools should teach that “girls can succeed at anything boys can.” But public support drops off dramatically when people are asked whether schools should teach that “women need to have careers outside the home to be fulfilled.” Only 35% support this as a value which should be taught in the school. What people seem to be saying is, “Yes, encourage girls to succeed at anything they want, but don’t criticize those who choose a more traditional lifestyle”—a variation of the “live and let live” theme.

A similar pattern emerges on race. People strongly endorse teaching respect for all people regardless of their racial background, and they want schools to teach children that it is good to have friends of different races and to live in integrated neighborhoods. People think it is utterly unacceptable for a student to be teased because of his race, and there is broad support for including lessons about the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (76%). But support drops off dramatically when issues are presented as a critique of mainstream society. Only 29% think schools should teach that “racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today,” and only 10% believe public schools should invite a black separatist to speak.
A Goal for the Next Generation

The findings—strongly endorsing the teaching of "respect" for others and rejecting more contentious messages—suggest among the general public a longing for harmony and civility and some desire to put discord in the past. The public school system has played a historic role in enabling diverse Americans to learn about each other, and live together without bloodshed—a goal that many other nations have not been able to achieve. During the 1950s and 1960s, the public schools became the symbol of the nation's moral judgment that African-Americans and white Americans should live together in equality.

Few would argue that the United States has lived up to all of its goals, and it is indisputable that prejudice, anger, misunderstanding, and distrust continue to divide the country along racial and ethnic lines. Regardless of these failures, the vast majority of Americans accept the goal, and they want the public schools to play a central role in passing that goal along to their children.
FINDING 7:

Sex Education, Yes, But...

There is strong support for public schools playing a central role in sex education—an overwhelming consensus that parents need help. However, on questions of premarital sex and homosexuality, there are sharp divisions among the public over how graphic and how morally judgmental sex education should be.

Americans accept sex education as part of the public school agenda and express broad support for giving students information about the biological aspects of sex and birth, the dangers of sexually transmitted disease, and for older students, information about birth control. There are, however, some important differences among Americans about how graphic and explicit that information should be.

Although very few Americans want the schools to relinquish their role in educating young Americans about the danger of AIDS or the desirability of postponing childbirth until marriage, sex education is a far more divisive issue when it turns to topics such as abortion, sex outside marriage, and homosexuality. Americans have different viewpoints about these topics, and, because they are so emotionally charged, people hold their views intensely.

This study, along with many others conducted on this issue, found strong support for sex education in the schools. Only 14% of Americans feel that schools spend too much time on sex education, and a majority of Americans want sex education to begin by sixth grade.

Strong Support for Some Sex Education

This study presented respondents with a list of sex education measures and asked them which are appropriate in the public schools beginning in elementary school, which are appropriate beginning in junior high or middle school, which are appropriate beginning in high school, and which are “never appropriate” in the public schools. Overwhelming majorities support the schools’ role in teaching the biology of sex and pregnancy. Ninety-five percent say this is an appropriate area for public schools, and 78% would start this before high school. An even higher number (97%) say the schools should teach students about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, with 86% wanting this to begin before high school: (35% would begin in elementary school and half (51%) say this should begin in junior high.)

But Sharp Disagreements

Despite the consensus that schools should play an important role in sex education, it is the most divisive issue examined in this study. Americans have important disagreements about exactly what should be taught, when it should be taught, how it should be taught, and the degree to which moral judgments should play a part. Large numbers of Americans place themselves squarely in “for” or “against” categories, not in the middle, whenever they are asked about some especially candid sex and AIDS education practices—or those that suggest moral neutrality about premarital or homosexual sex.

For example, 31% of Americans want the schools to teach that sex before marriage is always wrong, a message that receives their highest possible rating for appropriateness. But 22% say this is “not at all appropriate.” In other words, more than half of Americans place themselves squarely at the extreme ends of the scale.
Similarly, 32% of Americans are comfortable with sex education textbooks that feature "nude photos of men and women showing their sexual organs," even before high school, but 34% think this is "never appropriate." Twenty-eight percent think it is appropriate for schools to discuss homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle, even before high school, but 37% think this is "never appropriate." There is even strong disagreement about appropriate behavior at school: 36% "strongly favor" the idea of "banning hugging and kissing between students on school grounds," but 19% "strongly oppose" such a ban.

Comments from focus groups capture some of the depth of the feeling behind the different views:

“I’m sorry, but if you think that abstinence is the only thing that you can do before marriage, you’re burying your head in the sand.”
—Birmingham mother

“I think that some types of birth control should be taught in school, but there is a line that has to be drawn. I don’t think that [hands-on demonstration of condom use] has anything to do with teaching in school.”
—Philadelphia father

“As far as the gay issue [teaching respect for homosexuals in the schools] being overemphasized, yes, I think it is, because of my second grader. She comes home and talks about the word ‘gay,’ and she doesn’t even know what it means. It’s giving [homosexuals] what they want—publicity.”
—Birmingham mother

**What to Teach—and When**

One issue that clearly divides Americans is whether it is best to assume that teenagers are sexually active—a “Be careful out there” approach—or whether making that assumption in essence sanctions the behavior, encouraging more youngsters to experiment. Americans seem to be about equally divided on measures that assume that some teenagers are already sexually active. Fifty-six percent of Americans feel “using models of nude men and women to demonstrate the correct use of condoms and diaphragms” is appropriate, while 41% say this is “never appropriate.” Fifty-five percent believe it is appropriate to allow schools to distribute condoms to students, while 43% oppose it; and 51% support allowing schools to supply students with telephone numbers of gay support groups, while 46% oppose it.

A related area of disagreement concerns the age at which sex education is appropriate. Overall and not surprisingly, people feel more comfortable about sex education for older students. Only 21% support making condoms available to middle school students, as opposed to 55% who would allow high schools to distribute condoms. And while only 19% support the idea of allowing schools to give out the telephone numbers of homosexual support groups to elementary or middle school students, about half (51%) supports this idea for high schoolers. These distinctions came up repeatedly in focus groups:

“In high school, they need to teach this because these students are going to be sexually active... They need to learn how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.”
—Minneapolis mother
“No sex should be taught in elementary schools.”

—Des Moines father

“It depends on what age it’s being taught. If they’re a junior or senior, OK, but not if they’re in elementary school.”

—Philadelphia mother

Parents with children currently in public school are more supportive than the population in general of sex/AIDS education that is frank. With the incidence of teenage AIDS and pregnancy higher among African-Americans, it is not surprising that African-Americans want the schools to play a larger role at an earlier age. Almost half (47%) of African-American parents want the schools to begin teaching about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, in elementary school, compared to only 33% of white parents. Forty-one percent of African-American parents would allow schools to distribute condoms in junior high, compared to only 23% of white parents.

**Required Subject?**

Another area of sharp disagreement is whether parents should be able to remove their children from sex education courses that they believe undercut their own moral teachings. About four in ten Americans think sex education should be required for all students, regardless of their parents’ wishes, with almost half (48%) of African-American parents holding this view. Larger numbers of the general sample (56%) think AIDS education should be required with more than seven in ten (71%) African-American parents backing this approach. (The question explored only AIDS education in general, not condom distribution programs or inclusion of explicit information about condom use or sexual practices more likely to cause AIDS.) Parents expressed a range of views in focus groups.

“My wife and I have talked a lot about this [sex education], and we’ve decided we’re going to handle this at home. We don’t feel it’s the schools’ job to teach our [children] birth control. I think there should be a provision [to opt out]. I feel awkward about this being in the public schools.”

—Minneapolis father

“I think they’re going to find out about it whether they find out about it at school or not... They might as well go over it in school—in an environment where it’s presented in a more matter-of-fact way than finding out on the street corner... I mean parents aren’t always going to tell them everything they need to know either.”

—Birmingham mother
Disputes about sex education policies present particularly volatile situations for school boards and administrators nationwide, particularly since the issue tends to attract press attention and the interest of people who do not normally pay that much attention to the public schools. Although there are significant regional differences in attitudes, geography does not entirely explain the differences that clearly divide Americans, nor does it give policymakers clear signals on where consensus might lie. And while religion is clearly a factor in shaping people’s views, it is not the determining factor either. Focus group discussions suggest that, for some Americans, discomfort with more explicit sex education does not stem primarily from moral or religious convictions, but rather from the sense that sexuality should be a private matter, not one for routine public discussion.

Perhaps the only solace this study offers educational leaders is the remarkable ability of individuals in focus groups—typical parents from all walks of life—to express conflicting viewpoints without rancor. People also seemed to desire, among themselves at least, to find some areas of agreement, or at least, to agree on reasonable mechanisms for making a decision.
FINDING 8:

Special Focus: Traditional Christian Parents

Traditional Christian parents share most of the same concerns about the public schools—and support most of the same solutions—as other Americans. They do, however, have a special perspective on issues related to sex and religion.

Public school parents who identify themselves as Christians, attend church regularly and say that they accept the Bible as the literal word of God or consider themselves “born-again” are just as likely to support solutions directed at improving safety, order, and command of the basics as other parents. They are, however, especially concerned about sex education that accepts premarital or homosexual sex. They are more concerned about profanity in assigned reading, and more eager to include Christian religious materials in public schools.

This study looked at the views of traditional Christians whose children currently attend public schools, and, apart from some very specific issues, their views are quite similar to those of other parents and the general public. There are no significant differences in views of these traditional Christian parents versus Americans in general about the need to rid the schools of drugs and violence, the need for more order, or the need to set higher standards and enforce them. For traditional Christians, like other Americans, these issues are their most serious concerns and their top priorities. Like other Americans, they are highly skeptical about new techniques for teaching math and composition, and about heterogenous grouping.

Teaching Self-Esteem

Some traditional Christian groups have expressed concerns about including “building self-esteem” as a stated educational goal, fearing that this practice can lead children to reject their family’s values by endorsing a broad range of behaviors and lifestyles. They also say it diverts precious classroom time from academic matters to meaningless “feel-good” exercises.

Based on results from this study, traditional Christian parents are actually somewhat more likely than other Americans to say that teaching self-esteem—at least conceptually—is a productive role for the public schools. Ninety percent of traditional Christians (compared to 84% of Americans in general) say that schools should “put more emphasis on building self-esteem in students and helping them feel good about themselves” for elementary students. Eighty-eight percent (compared to 81% of the general population) say this is a good idea for high school students. These parents, like virtually any other parents, would probably object strenuously to efforts by any school to “turn parent against child.” What these findings suggest is that religious parents do not automatically reject either the terminology or the overall purpose of “building self-esteem.”

Not surprisingly, traditional Christian parents are more disturbed than most Americans about some features of some sex education programs. For example, 34% of Americans think that it is “never appropriate” to include detailed photographs of nude men and women, including their sexual organs in sex education materials, but that number rises to 46% among traditional Christian parents. Traditional Christian parents are also significantly more likely to object to schools providing the telephone numbers of homo-
sexual support groups or abortion counseling services. Sixty-five percent think it is never appropriate to give students the phone numbers of homosexual organizations, compared to only 46% of the general public. Seventy-three percent of traditional Christian parents say it is never appropriate to give students the telephone numbers of abortion counseling services, compared to 52% of the general public.

Traditional Christian parents are also more likely to object to assigning Catcher in the Rye—described in the study as a “classic, but contains profanity and, in the view of some, glamorizes rebellious youth”—in high schools. While only 33% of the general population objects, more than half (58%) of traditional Christian parents do. They are also more disturbed by the use of the word “nigger” in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Thirty-eight percent of traditional Christian parents consider it inappropriate, compared to only 24% of the general population.

Teaching About Religion

The most significant difference, however, is that this group of parents, far more than the population at large, wants public schools to teach some specifically religious beliefs. Although only 27% of the general population thinks it would be beneficial for the schools to reintroduce prayer (as opposed to moments of silence), 62% of traditional Christian parents think this would be useful. A little less than half (47%) of Americans think the schools should teach the Ten Commandments, but three-quarters (75%) of traditional Christian parents do. And although only 39% of the general population objects to teaching students about non-Christian religions, more than half (53%) of traditional Christian parents believe this kind of instruction is not appropriate.

It is in this area—whether specifically religious materials and messages should be taught in public schools—that views of traditional Christian parents depart most sharply from those of the general population. In focus groups, some traditional Christians voiced bitter dismay that traditions and values that have played such a positive role in their own lives are now subject to criticism. One Des Moines mother described an incident that both surprised and rankled her: “I do a school newsletter and I put ‘Happy Easter’ [on the cover] last year. One person complained and said why don’t I put ‘Happy Spring.’ I was really upset because I thought the newsletter was being ruled by the minority instead of the majority.”

But in other ways, the views of traditional Christian parents are not what might be expected. Six in ten (61%) of these traditional Christian parents (about the same as the general population) want schools to teach students to have “respect” for homosexuals. A roughly equal number (58%) would not want “to make an issue of it” if a teacher was discovered to be a homosexual. Only 13 percent say the teacher should be fired or reassigned to a different school. This issue came up several times in focus groups. Many traditional Christian parents seem willing to tolerate—or at least overlook—the private practice of homosexuality, but object far more strongly to the public acknowledgment or recognition of homosexuality. As one Birmingham mother put it: “Gay people don’t bother me, but I don’t go around talking about the sex [in my life]. I mean, I don’t understand why sex has to be such a issue.”

And finally, traditional Christian parents are neither more nor less likely than other Americans to support the idea that public school science classes should teach the Biblical version of creation presenting it as “equally valid to Darwin’s.” Roughly four in ten Americans (38%)—including traditional Christians (38%)—think this is the preferred course of action.
FINDING 9:

Special Focus: African-American Parents

African-American parents have the same concerns about the schools—and the same ideas about what needs to change—as other Americans. They strongly support setting and enforcing high standards for their children for both academics and behavior.

Like other Americans, African-American parents with children currently in public school are concerned about safety, order, and the basics. Like other Americans, they endorse higher standards and want more effective measures to enforce order. However, they are significantly more likely to see problems in their local schools and significantly more dissatisfied about their local schools' performance.

There are also two areas where African-American parents have a distinctive viewpoint. They want more candid sex education and AIDS prevention programs for their children at an earlier age. And perhaps not surprisingly, African-American parents are concerned about negative stereotypes in textbooks and curricula—an issue that troubles only a small percentage of white parents.

What this study captures most among African-American parents is a magnified call for schools that are safe, for teaching that produces solid academic skills, and for programs that will help them protect their children from AIDS and early pregnancy.

Shared Concerns, But Magnified

Compared to white parents, African-Americans are far more troubled by the state of their local public schools in virtually every area of performance. Eighty percent of African-American parents say that drugs and violence are serious problems in their local schools, compared to 58% of white parents. Seventy percent of African-American parents polled say that academic standards are too low, compared to 49% of white parents. Sixty-six percent of African-American parents say there is not enough emphasis on math and science, compared to 46% of white parents.

As asked about 13 problems that might be present in local schools—including drugs and violence, overcrowded classrooms, lack of clarity about teaching goals, the too many teachers more concerned with popularity than with what students learn—African-American parents are more satisfied than white parents in every category.

When asked, most Americans, including African-Americans, voice strong support for teachers and principals, seeing them as hard-working professionals trying to do a tough job, but there are substantial levels of dissatisfaction among African-American parents. Four in ten say teachers (40%) and principals (41%) have gotten worse since they were in school. More than seven in ten African-American parents (71%) want teachers to dress more professionally, compared to only 47% of white parents.

Like white parents and Americans in general, African-American parents want schools to be more orderly; they want schools to emphasize basic academics; they strongly support higher academic standards; they reject teaching methods that in their minds are unproven. By very large numbers, both African-American and white public school parents want students caught with drugs or guns permanently removed from school grounds, and they want persistent troublemakers taken out of class.
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What this study captures most among African-American parents is a magnified call for schools that are safe, for teaching that produces solid academic skills, and for programs that will help them protect their children from AIDS and early pregnancy.

Shared Concerns, But Magnified

Compared to white parents, African-Americans are far more troubled by the state of their local public schools in virtually every area of performance. Eighty percent of African-American parents say that drugs and violence are serious problems in their local schools, compared to 58% of white parents. Seventy percent of African-American parents polled say that academic standards are too low, compared to 49% of white parents. Sixty-six percent of African-American parents say there is not enough emphasis on math and science, compared to 46% of white parents.

Asked about 13 problems that might be present in local schools—including drugs and violence, overcrowded classrooms, lack of clarity about teaching goals, too many teachers more concerned with popularity than what students learn—African-American parents are more dissatisfied than white parents in every category.

When asked, most Americans, including African-Americans, voice strong support for teachers and principals, seeing them as hard-working professionals trying to do a tough job, but there are substantial levels of dissatisfaction among African-American parents. Four in ten say teachers (40%) and principals (41%) have gotten worse since they were in school. More than seven in ten African-American parents (71%) want teachers to dress more professionally, compared to only 47% of white parents.

Like white parents and Americans in general, African-American parents want schools to be more orderly; they want schools to emphasize basic academics; they strongly support higher academic standards; they reject teaching methods that in their minds are unproven. By very large numbers, both African-American and white public school parents want students caught with drugs or guns permanently removed from school grounds, and they want persistent troublemakers taken out of class.
Higher Standards

Equally significant, this study strongly counters the theory advanced by some observers that African-American parents are troubled by efforts to set and enforce very high expectations for their children. High standards are what they want, and they overwhelmingly reject the concept of “social promotion.” Only 20% think schools should “pass students to the next grade if they make an effort by attending classes regularly and working hard.” Roughly three-quarters (77%) say students should be promoted “only when they have learned the knowledge and skills they were expected to learn.”

African-American parents want to raise and enforce standards for promotion from grade school to junior high (72%) and to guarantee that a high school diploma means that youngsters “write and speak English well” (80%). And they overwhelmingly reject the proposition that teaching should be adapted to the backgrounds of the student, such as using street language to teach inner-city students. As one Philadelphia father put it: “They hear enough of that in the street. They don’t need to teach it in school.”

Special Concerns

African-American parents do have some special concerns, and sex education is one area where their perspective is somewhat different from that of many white parents. Almost half (46%) of African-American parents say schools do not spend enough time on sex education, compared to only 28% of white parents, and there is more support among African-American parents for more explicit sexual information at an earlier age. Almost half (47%) of African-American parents want AIDS education to begin in elementary school, compared to roughly a third of white parents. Forty-two percent of African-American parents say it is appropriate to demonstrate use of condoms and diaphragms using models of nude men and women in elementary or middle school, compared to only 24% of white parents (43% of white parents say this type of explicit demonstration is “never appropriate”).

Although African-American parents endorse earlier, more candid sex education, they seem to be less willing to sanction premarital sex or early sexual behavior than white parents. While fewer than half (48%) of white parents want schools to teach that sex outside marriage is always wrong, 59% of African-American parents endorse this idea. And, while only 39% of white parents strongly favor banning hugging and kissing on school grounds, more than half (54%) of African-American parents do.

Racial stereotyping and prejudice are also areas where African-American parents and white parents start from distinctly different perspectives. More than half (56%) of African-American parents, compared to only 25% of white parents, say that African-Americans receive unfair treatment in textbooks, and 50% say it is appropriate for schools to teach that “racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today.” Only 29% of white parents consider this appropriate.

Fewer than a third of African-American parents (31%) think schools should assign Mark Twain’s novel, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, described in the survey in these words: “considered a classic, but contains words like ‘nigger.’” Forty-three percent of white parents and almost half (47%) of the general public consider this novel appropriate. However, given the stature this novel has, as both a literary classic and a mainstay of high school reading lists for decades, it is noteworthy that less than half of white and traditional Christian parents find it appropriate.
Clearly, African-Americans fear the impact of racial prejudice on their own children and on others, and their own experience and sensibilities make them more sensitive to stereotyping of other minority groups. They are far more likely than white parents, for example, to believe that women, Hispanics, homosexuals and Native Americans also receive unfair treatment in textbooks.

Despite very clear evidence that the sting of racial prejudice—both past and present—is intensely felt and still at the forefront of their concerns, African-American parents reject some more contentious voices. For example, only 15% think it is appropriate for schools to bring in a speaker advocating black separatism. Only 8% say it is appropriate for schools to bring in a speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened.
FINDING 10:

The Public and the Educators: The Fault Line Beneath the Trust

Americans still trust teachers, principals, and school boards to make decisions about how to manage the schools—but the public’s trust is wavering.

Americans believe that, compared to other decision makers such as elected officials, business people and religious leaders, educators can be trusted with decisions about running the schools. But the endorsement is not overwhelming. Specific findings about teachers and principals suggest that substantial numbers of Americans are not completely confident about their performance or judgment.

Many observers believe the country is experiencing a wave of skepticism about leaders, experts, professionals, and institutions, and there is no reason to expect that educators should be immune to criticism. Results from this study suggest that educators need to rebuild public trust in a few important areas.

When it comes to making decisions about how the schools should be run, more than half of Americans (58%) are distrustful of “elected officials in Washington,” and four in ten are distrustful (41%) of their state’s governor. Contrary to what many observers might expect, white parents with children in public school are more distrustful of these national and state officials than African-American parents, traditional Christian parents, or the public in general.

In contrast, local teachers and principals do well. Fewer than 15% of Americans express serious doubts about their judgment. More than six in ten Americans (64%) give local public school teachers a rating of “four” or “five” on a five-point “trustworthiness” scale. About half (54%) give principals and school board members a similar vote of confidence.

But responses to specific questions about teachers and principals—groups that have historically enjoyed high public confidence—reveal a “fault line” in the public’s views about them that warrants attention. Roughly half (54%) of Americans question teachers’ judgment in matters of discipline, a priority area of concern for Americans. More than four in ten (41%) say too many teachers are more concerned with being popular than with earning respect and enforcing discipline.

More than a third (37%) say too many teachers are more concerned with making students feel good than with what they learn. More than half of Americans say teachers should have a dress code, and roughly a third (33%) say teachers are “worse” now than when they were in school. Thirty percent of Americans say principals are doing a worse job now. Concerns about teachers came up repeatedly in focus groups:

“When I went to school, there was a certain way the teacher had to look vs. the certain way the student had to look. Today, it’s competition between a lot of students and the teachers.”

—Philadelphia father

“School administrators are held hostage because they can’t get rid of teachers... Show me where they have gotten rid of teacher... You are telling me with all these teachers, there is not one who is no good. They are down-sizing industry. Maybe they should down-size the teachers.”

—Hartford senior citizen
“Teachers are using just as much bad language as the students are using.”

—Philadelphia father

The level of dissatisfaction with teachers is not enormous, and it is important not to overstate the findings. However, large numbers of Americans wonder whether too many teachers are too lax, too easy-going, and too quick to let the youngsters run the show.

Americans still respect the teaching profession and value its significance. In fact, Americans think that “good teachers” are the single most important ingredient in sound education and good schools**, and many express empathy for the difficult challenges they face in today’s classrooms. But there are some doubts—submerged, perhaps, and just beginning to surface—about whether enough teachers are really up to the job that’s required of them these days. As one Des Moines mother put it: “I think some of the teachers are wonderful. And some of them, I think, ‘Why are they teachers?! ...I just want teachers who are really committed to teaching. Some of them are, but some [of them]—I wonder why they’re there.”

"I think some of the teachers are wonderful. And some of them, I think, 'Why are they teachers?""

—Des Moines mother
AFTERWORD

Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director, Public Agenda

Not all of the findings in this report are new. Americans have voiced concern about too little attention to discipline and the basics in public schools for well over a decade. Indeed, it is the persistence of these concerns that should make them a priority for leadership attention.

Leadership-led reform is underway in communities across the country. Americans are beginning to learn about the changes being launched in schools their children and grandchildren attend. But their concerns about schools, rather than being alleviated, have become even more urgent. Public dissatisfaction about discipline and the basics has been joined by a potent new concern—fear about safety and security. Even though public fears may be exaggerated, this issue represents, for most Americans, the most fundamental breakdown in their compact with the schools. Warranted or not, fear is, as Franklin Roosevelt observed, the most corrosive and debilitating of emotions.

The purpose of this report is not to provide a “follow-the-instructions” recipe for educational policy. It is to ask leaders to stop, to listen, and to give the public’s point of view the same attention and respect, the same consideration, they naturally give to the “experts.”

Leaders, if they choose to listen empathetically to the public’s point of view, face three choices. One, they may decide that the public’s concerns require genuine changes in leadership’s agenda. In that case, leaders must either expand their agenda, for example, to take account of the public’s concerns about safety and order, or amend it to accommodate some of the public’s conclusions about what is most likely to work.

Second, leaders may determine—after an honest and candid self-appraisal—that the public’s views stem from misunderstanding, and to respond with better, more effective communications. This does not mean a new slogan or public service announcement—or a slight repackaging of the old communications plan with the latest public “buzzwords” thrown in. It means an authentic, well-thought-out, and continuing communications effort to help people understand what is happening in the schools and what reform is all about—a communications effort that starts from the public’s concerns and priorities.

An anecdote told by the principal of a highly acclaimed magnet school in New York City suggests one approach. Every year parents of prospective students are invited to an “open house” where the curriculum is explained, teachers are introduced, and parents ask a myriad of questions about test scores, college admissions, elective courses, and so on. Toward the end of the day, the principal himself introduces a new topic: “There is one question I haven’t heard,” the principal will say, “Is this school safe?” And every year, he reports that he can see an almost visible sigh of relief among the parents, relief that the “unaskable” has been asked, that the topic on their minds is going to be addressed. The principal then invites parents to visit the school, go anywhere on the premises they like, talk with the students, talk with the teachers. His approach is effective because, although he himself is confident about his school’s safety, he understands and respects parents’ fears for their children and takes it upon himself to ensure that those fears are addressed effectively.
In a third course of action, leaders may decide that the public’s point of view (in whole or in part) is mistaken. This decision demands the exercise of real leadership—the slow, exacting process of building a constituency for ideas that are not popular, but that are worthwhile. It has taken public health officials more than a decade, for example, to change Americans’ views on smoking and driving after drinking alcohol. Environmentalists have built public support for recycling and other measures, but only after long, multi-faceted, persistent education efforts. This is the most difficult path of all, but it is the one that is warranted if, after honest self-scrutiny, leaders are convinced their approach—not the public’s—will truly help children and their families.

What will not advance the cause of public education is to dismiss the public’s views out-of-hand or attempt to manipulate people by paying lip service to their ideas. The public’s concerns are fundamental. Many of the public’s views—the focus on order and basics, the discomfort with teaching innovations—have been around for a while. And at their very core, these are people’s very real concerns about the future of children they love. People are not likely to be persuaded just because leaders put a better spin on the same old messages.

Public education in America is, in the most fundamental sense, a public issue. Schools will not change because leaders want them to. They will change when parents, students and teachers go about their daily activities in different ways. That will only happen when the public is considered an equal and respected partner in reform—one whose views are worth listening to.

What will not advance the cause of public education is to dismiss the public’s views out-of-hand or attempt to manipulate people by paying lip service to their ideas.


2. September 1994, Phi Delta Kappa/ Gallup Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools, National phone survey of 1,326 adults.

3. Ibid.

4. May 1994, Gallup Organization national survey of 1,326 adults for Phi Delta Kappa. Exact wording: "As I read off each high school subject, would you tell me if you think that subject should be given more emphasis, less emphasis, or the same emphasis it now receives in high school, regardless of whether or not you think it should be required?" Science: (More emphasis 75%, Less emphasis 3%, Same emphasis 22%) English: (More emphasis 79%, Less emphasis 2%, Same emphasis 18%) Mathematics: (More emphasis 82%, Less emphasis 1%, Same emphasis 17%).

5. August 1992, Louis Harris and Associates Survey for Business Week, national phone survey of 1,250 adults. Question: "Do you favor or oppose each of the following proposed changes to public school curriculum? Putting more emphasis on teaching tougher, more challenging basic courses such as reading, writing, math and science." Responses: Favor (96%), Oppose (3%), Not Sure (1%).

6. 1984, 1988, 1994 Gallup Organization national surveys of over 1,300 adults sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa consistently show 65% approval for requiring students to pass a standard nationwide examination in order to get a high school diploma.

7. Farkas, *Effective Public Engagement*.

8. Ibid.

9. Full question wording and responses of the general public: "Which of these kids do you think get the most attention in public schools today? Is it the fastest learners (61%), the average kids (19%), or the slowest learners (22%).

10. Significant percentages of the public say that they don’t know whether textbooks and lesson plans treat these groups fairly or unfairly. Around ten percent of the public didn’t know whether textbooks treated African-Americans (11%), women (9%), or Hispanics (15%) fairly or unfairly.

11. Exact question wording: "Which of the following comes closer to your own view: Kids would benefit enormously by having prayer and religion introduced in the public schools OR Kids would benefit from having occasions for moments of silence and reflection, but without mention or prayer or reflection OR Religious and spiritual matters like this really don’t belong in the public school but should be left to the family." Responses: Prayer should be in schools (General Public (27%), Traditional Christian Parents (62%)); Moments of silence yes, but not prayer (General Public (43%), Traditional Christian Parents (24%)); Religious matters don’t belong in school (General Public (29%), Traditional Christian Parents (13%)).

12. Exact question wording: "What is the most important thing public schools need in order to help kids learn?" Top five open-ended responses: Good teachers (42%), Discipline/Respect (25%), Teach Values (15%), Involved Parents (11%), Enough Money (8%).
### Problems Facing Local Public Schools

**QUESTION:** "Please tell me how serious a problem each is in your own community's public schools." Responses: very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not a problem at all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There’s too much drugs and violence in schools</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic standards are too low and kids are not expected to learn enough</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is not enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing, and math</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools are not getting enough money to do a good job</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids are not taught enough math, science and computers</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools don’t teach kids good work habits such as being on time to class and completing assignments</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes are too crowded</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools fail to teach religious values</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools are not clear and specific enough about what they want kids to learn</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many teachers are more interested in being popular than in requiring respect and discipline</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many teachers are more concerned with making kids feel good about themselves than with how much they learn</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes and textbooks stereotype minorities and women</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools are too graphic and explicit when teaching sex education</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Changes to Improve Academic Performance

QUESTION: "For each idea 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages rating item 4 or 5</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not allowing kids to graduate from high school unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable and disciplined</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>90%</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>82%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanently removing from school grounds kids who are caught with drugs or with weapons</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</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>70%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacing multiple choice tests with essay tests to measure what kids learn</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixing fast learners and slow learners in the same class so that slower kids learn from faster kids</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing educators to paddle or spank students</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>41%</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>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ideas for Improving Public School Education

QUESTION: “Now I’m going to read you some ideas about improving public school education, and for each I’d like you to tell me if you think the idea is excellent, good, fair, or poor.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages responding excellent or good</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools should place much greater emphasis on making learning enjoyable and interesting to elementary school students</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools should place much greater emphasis on making learning enjoyable and interesting to high school students</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools should put more emphasis on building self-esteem in elementary school students and helping them feel good about themselves</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools should put more emphasis on building self-esteem in high school students and helping them feel good about themselves</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should toughen their grading and be more willing to fail elementary school students who don’t learn</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should toughen their grading and be more willing to fail high school students who don’t learn</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### School Policies

**QUESTION:** “Here are some policies your community’s public schools might consider adopting. Would you favor or oppose?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages responding strongly favor or somewhat favor</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banning smoking anywhere on school grounds by students</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring kids to stay on school grounds throughout the day, with no choice of going off-campus for lunch</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>80%</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>56%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banning hugging and kissing between students on school grounds</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring kids to dress in standard clothing, such as a button-down shirt and slacks for boys</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stereotyping in Textbooks

QUESTION: "I'm going to name some groups that may be discussed in the textbooks and lesson plans of your community's public schools. For each I'd like to know if you think the group is treated fairly or unfairly."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages responding &quot;unfairly&quot;</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuals</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Americans</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Christians</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Personnel</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Lessons Rated as Very Appropriate

**QUESTION:** “I’m going to read you some descriptions of class textbooks 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.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages rating item 4 or 5</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching honesty and the importance of telling the truth</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids to solve problems without violence</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching students that having friends from different racial backgrounds and living in integrated neighborhoods is good</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing that girls can succeed at anything boys can</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying the struggle for black civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing that democracy is the best form of government</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching respect for people who are homosexual</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that two-parent families are the best way to raise children</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigning students the book <em>Huckleberry Finn</em> which is considered a classic but contains words like nigger</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids to memorize the Ten Commandments</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that sex before marriage is always wrong</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>72%</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>38%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Lessons Rated as Very Appropriate

(continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages rating item 4 or 5</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that women need to have careers outside the home to be fulfilled</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigning students the book <em>Catcher In the Rye</em> which is considered a classic but contains profanity and, in the views of some, glamorizes rebellious youth</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching about the beliefs and practices of non-Christian religions</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguing that racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding any materials or discussions that mention homosexuality</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying the history of witches and witchcraft</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in a guest speaker who advocates black separatism</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Lessons Rated as Very Inappropriate

**QUESTION:** "I'm going to read you some descriptions of class textbooks 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."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages rating item 1 or 2</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying the history of witches and witchcraft*</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in a guest speaker who advocates black separatism</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding any materials or discussions that mention homosexuality</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguing that racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching about the beliefs and practices of non-Christian religions</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that women need to have careers outside the home to be fulfilled</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>43%</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%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigning students the book <em>Catcher In the Rye</em> which is considered a classic but contains profanity and, in the views of some, glamorizes rebellious youth</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that sex before marriage is always wrong</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids to memorize the Ten Commandments</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Lessons Rated as Very Inappropriate

(continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages rating item 1 or 2</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that two-parent families are the best way to raise children</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigning students the book <em>Huckleberry Finn</em> which is considered a classic but contains words like nigger</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching respect for people who are homosexual</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing that democracy is the best form of government</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing that girls can succeed at anything boys can</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying the struggle for black civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching students that having friends from different racial backgrounds and living in integrated neighborhoods is good</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids to solve problems without violence</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching honesty and the importance of telling the truth</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This study did not explore the reasoning behind public concern about this item. In focus groups, the concern did not seem to be primarily a moral one. Instead, some parents referred to widely publicized murders by adolescents involved with cults and satanism. They worried that studying witchcraft might lead children to experiment with “satanic rituals” outside school. Others seem to think studying witchcraft was silly and a waste of time.
**Sex Education Proposals**

**QUESTION:** "I'm going to read you a list of proposals having to do with sex education. For each, I'd like you to tell me when you think it is appropriate for the public schools to begin each of them. Is it appropriate to begin in elementary school, middle school, high school, or is it never appropriate?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal</th>
<th>Beginning in Elementary School</th>
<th>Beginning in Middle School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributing condoms at school to kids who want them</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a sex education text with detailed photographs of nude men and</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women showing their sexual organs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing the morality of abortion, giving arguments from all sides</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing whether homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, giving</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arguments from all sides of the question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids the biology of reproduction, including how pregnancy</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occurs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids about dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, including</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using models of nude men and women to demonstrate the correct use of</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>condoms and diaphragms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making available to all students the phone numbers of homosexual</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizations that offer information and support to gay students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making available to all students the phone numbers of clinics that offer</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abortion services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:**
- GP = General Public
- W = White Parents
- A-A = African-American Parents
- TC = Traditional Christian Parents
Sex Education Proposals

(continued)

**QUESTION:** "I'm going to read you a list of proposals having to do with sex education. For each, I'd like you to tell me when you think it is appropriate for the public schools to begin each of them. Is it appropriate to begin in elementary school, middle school, high school, or is it never appropriate?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal</th>
<th>Beginning in High School</th>
<th>Never Appropriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributing condoms at school to kids who want them</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a sex education text with detailed photographs of nude men and women showing their sexual organs</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing the morality of abortion, giving arguments from all sides of the question</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing whether homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, giving arguments from all sides of the question</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids the biology of reproduction, including how pregnancy occurs</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching kids about dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using models of nude men and women to demonstrate the correct use of condoms and diaphragms</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making available to all students the phone numbers of homosexual organizations that offer information and support to gay students</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making available to all students the phone numbers of clinics that offer abortion services</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:**
- GP = General Public
- W = White Parents
- A-A = African-American Parents
- TC = Traditional Christian Parents
Trust in Leaders and Educators/High Trust

QUESTION: “I’m going to name some people, and I’d like you to tell me how much you would trust each of them to make decisions about how the public schools in your community should be run. Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 means that you would trust them a great deal and 1 means you would not trust them at all.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages responding 4 or 5</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents in your community</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers in your local public schools</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local public school principals and school board members</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxpayers in your community</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education experts from throughout the country</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local religious leaders</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local leaders of minority groups</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business leaders</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected officials in your community</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your state’s governor</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers union representatives</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected officials in Washington, DC</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Lack of Trust in Leaders and Educators/Lack of Trust

**QUESTION:** "I'm going to name some people, and I'd like you to tell me how much you would trust each of them to make decisions about how the public schools in your community should be run. Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 means that you would trust them a great deal and 1 means you would not trust them at all."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages responding 1 or 2</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>White Parents</th>
<th>African-American Parents</th>
<th>Traditional Christian Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elected officials in Washington, DC</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your state's governor</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected officials in your community</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers union representatives</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business leaders</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local religious leaders</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local leaders of minority groups</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education experts from throughout the country</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxpayers in your community</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local public school principals and school board members</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers in your local public schools</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents in your community</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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METHODOLOGY:

To assess the public’s priorities for the public schools, Public Agenda conducted a national telephone survey with 1,198 randomly selected adults that included "oversamples" of white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents with children in public school. The survey was preceded by a series of four focus groups with public school parents.

The Survey

Public Agenda designed the survey questionnaire, and contracted CRC Information Systems, Inc. of New York City to provide the sample, execute the interviews, and tabulate the results. Telephone interviews, averaging about 34 minutes in length, were conducted with 1,198 Americans over the age of 18. The general public portion of the survey was conducted between August 8th and 14th, 1994, and the three parent oversamples were carried out between August 18th and 24th. Respondents were selected through random digit-dialing techniques whereby every household in the continental United States, including those with unlisted numbers, had an equal chance of being contacted. The sampling error for the study is plus or minus 3% for the 869 members of the general adult public; it will, of course, be higher when discussing the results of subgroups. As in all surveys, question-order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results.

The research design called for the ability to compare four groups: the general adult population and three groups of parents with children in the public schools, non-Hispanic whites, African-Americans, and traditional Christians. These groups were generated by first interviewing 869 randomly selected members of the general public. The three groups of parents were obtained by augmenting the random sample, resulting in:

- 320 White parents
- 200 African-American parents
- 204 traditional Christian parents

The traditional Christian parents were defined according to these criteria: All reported being Protestant, Catholic or “of a Christian faith.” They also reported attending religious services “nearly every week” at the minimum. Finally, they agreed that “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word” and/or described themselves as “born-again Christians.” Because we restricted the study to parents with children in public school, the responses reported here may or may not represent the views of those who would otherwise fit the traditional Christian category but who enroll their children in private school.

The Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted between March and June of 1994 in Philadelphia, Birmingham, Minneapolis, and Des Moines. All participants were parents with children in public school and reflected the general demographic characteristics of the community in which the focus groups took place. In the Birmingham group, four participants were screened to fit the criteria of what the study defined as “traditional Christians.” These participants reported attending religious services regularly and considered themselves "born-again Christians who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible." In all cases, recruitment for the groups was handled by independent research organizations based in the locale in which they took place.

The groups were moderated by John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson, and Steve Farkas of Public Agenda. All of the moderators worked from a common moderator’s guide, probing the same themes and questions on the public’s reactions to the schools. Each session was recorded for later analysis. This qualitative research stage served the dual purpose of generating hypotheses to be tested through the phone survey and of supplementing the survey results with the words of Americans talking about the schools.
Related Publications

Contested Values: Tug-Of-War In the School Yard. 1994

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 arguments for and against 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 may be ordered from McGraw-Hill, Inc. by calling 1-800-338-3987. ISBN 0-07-051825-4

* Crosstalk: The Public, the Experts, and Competitiveness. 1991

A research report from Public Agenda and the Business-Higher Education Forum. The report describes a gap in the way leaders and the public view the issue of U.S. economic competitiveness and the associated crisis in education and work force training. The report is $17.50 and may be ordered from Public Agenda.

* Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts. 1993

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. The result of two years of education reform research and more than 200 face-to-face interviews with teachers, principals, administrators, school board members, parents, and business executives in four typical school systems, this report reveals a significant barrier to educational reform—political gridlock among education stakeholders. It describes the substantial in-fighting and communication gaps among these groups and concludes with several recommendations for improving dialogue. The report may be ordered from Public Agenda for $10.00.

* Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics. 1992

Based on mail surveys conducted by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation between January and March 1992, this report surveyed diverse groups with a stake in education: teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, and in the private sector, business executives from major corporations. The study reports consensus among the groups on the goals of K-12 education but strong differences in their evaluations of the performance of the schools, as well as fundamental disagreement over the scope and root of the problem and how to approach a solution. The report is $8.50 and may be ordered from Public Agenda.

Effective Public Engagement. 1993

The New Standards Project, a national standards and a new assessment system that gauges student progress toward those goals, commissioned Public Agenda to explore public reactions to its programs. Although the study, based on 24 focus groups conducted with teachers, parents, high school students and members of the general public, was designed to find out how people respond to the New Standards Project, the handbook is useful to anyone interested in education reform, particularly in the areas of standards and assessment. 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.

* Math Leads the Way: Perspectives on Math Reform. 1993

Public Agenda, in a study prepared for The Math Connection, surveyed participants in a national videoconference on math reform co-sponsored by WQED in Pittsburgh and the Math/Science Education Board in Washington, DC. The survey of more than 1,000 educators identified a broad consensus among math educators about the kinds of changes needed to improve student achievement. Single copies of the study are available from Public Agenda for $7.50.
The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System.
1993

This report was prepared by Public Agenda for the California Higher Education Policy Center. Based on the views expressed in eight California focus groups and phone surveys in California and across the nation, the study documents Californians' perceptions of the cost, accessibility, value, and opportunity in their public higher education system and compares these attitudes with broader national attitudes citizens hold about their own state's public higher education systems. To order, please call or write the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, Suite 704, San Jose, CA 95113. When ordering, ask for report #93-6.

* Reports marked with an asterisk can be ordered by calling or writing Public Agenda at 6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016; Tel: (212) 686-6610, Fax: (212) 889-3461.

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About the Authors

Jean Johnson is a Vice President and Director of Programs at Public Agenda. She is the co-author, with John Immerwahr, of Fault Diagnosis: Public Misconceptions About Health Care Reform (1992). She has also worked with Dr. Immerwahr on major studies of public attitudes about freedom of expression and the media, economic competitiveness and education reform.

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Founded over a decade ago by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how average citizens think about policy forms the basis for its 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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