The Basics: Parents Talk About Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and the Schools

A Focus Group Report from Public Agenda for The Business Roundtable

By Will Friedman
Founded in 1975 by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's research on how 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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In dozens of focus groups and numerous telephone surveys conducted by Public Agenda in recent years, the public's emphasis on teaching "the basics" has been a continuous theme. This report, based on ten focus groups in six sites around the country, explores the public's concern with the basics. Is it as deeply felt as it appears? Do those with a college degree mean the same thing by the basics as those with only a high school education? How do the basics fit into the overall scheme of a child's education for today's parents?

These and other questions were addressed in focus groups with parents of public school children in New York State (Middletown), Birmingham, Cincinnati, Denver, Albuquerque and Sacramento during June and July of 1995. The groups were recruited by local market research organizations. They were organized to test the effect of level of education on attitudes: half of the groups were with parents with a high school degree or less (referred to throughout the report as the "non-college groups"), and half had a four-year college degree or more (the "college groups"). The demographic variables of race, sex, income, and age reflected national demographic patterns, with some adjustment for local variations. Teachers and school administrators were excluded from the groups.

As with all focus group reports, results should be taken as suggestive, not definitive. Public Agenda is about to release a national survey under the title "Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform" that adds detail to many of the points contained within.
HIGHLIGHTS

The basics are a strong, spontaneous theme for the public
In every part of the country we visited, with parents of various backgrounds, the basics were a major issue. People felt they were seeing too many examples of kids graduating without basic academic skills.

What are the basics and why are they important?
To the public, the basics remain the traditional three R's of reading, writing and arithmetic, with reading sometimes seen as most important. In both the college and non-college groups, many added computers to the list. Some (especially in the college groups) also included an introduction to a variety of academic subjects, from history to science.

The basics are seen as crucial not because they represented an adequate education in themselves (although a few members of the non-college group seemed to hold this view), but because they provide the essential foundation for later success in school and life.

What about beyond-the-basics schooling?
The non-college groups tended to view post-basics schooling in highly pragmatic terms. They felt that higher academic course-work was fine for some kids, but generally favored a vocational track as an option. This trade track was sometimes spoken of as traditional shop and home economics, and at other times in more cutting-edge, high-tech terms.

The college groups were more likely to think of higher education as a good thing in itself. They were often wary of tracking kids, feeling they could blossom academically in the later grades. They were therefore more likely than the non-college groups to favor requiring higher academic course-work for all kids.

Tough standards and no gimmicks for teaching the basics
Most of our focus group participants favored tough standards for teaching the basics, arguing against social promotion. While they did show a limited tolerance for some teaching innovations, they were clearly most comfortable with traditional approaches.

The sources of people's attitudes toward the basics
People's thinking tended to start with their own experiences in school and the role their education has played in their lives. In general, this meant that the non-college groups were less impressed with the necessity of high academic achievement for a successful career or a happy life.

The college groups saw academics as a pre-requisite for later success. They often factored into their thinking the changing job picture and international economic competition. Finally, unlike many non-college participants, they felt that students should not decide for themselves whether to take academic course-work.
I. THE BASICS ARE A STRONG, SPONTANEOUS THEME FOR THE PUBLIC

The importance of the basics was a spontaneous and sustained priority in all of the focus groups. Before "the basics" were even mentioned by the moderator, the term emerged strongly in response to the opening question, "What's most important for kids to be learning in school these days?" Irrespective of educational background, similar sentiments were expressed in every site we visited. For example:

The school's responsibility first is basic skills... -- Sacramento woman, college group

I think the basics is always a key thing in education. A lot of times you don't have the basics. -- Birmingham man, non-college group

I tend to like more emphasis on the three R's... It seems to me like they're placing more emphasis on things that are not the basics of education. -- Birmingham man, college group

They should learn the three R's, the basics. [It's important] that they learn how to fill out a job application... learn how to do [math] in their head without a calculator. -- Cincinnati woman, non-college group

"They Can't Fill Out a Job Application"
People often tied their emphasis on the basics to personal observations of recent graduates unqualified for the job market due to their lack of basic skills.

You come across people who have graduated from high school and don't know how to read at all. They can't read a newspaper and make sense of it. They couldn't look at a legal document and understand what it was trying to say. I get letters from people and.. there are obvious misspellings of simple words. -- Denver man, college group

[The basics are important] when you have to go and fill out a job application and a lot of these children don't even know how to read. -- N.Y. State woman, non-college group

I see an awful lot of kids graduating from high school now, coming in and putting in applications at my place of work and they can't even fill it out. But they've graduated. It's very disturbing. -- Albuquerque woman, college group

I see lots of adults in the work world who can't write simple, clear sentences. -- Sacramento woman, college group

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II. WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

The core of what people mean by the basics remains the traditional three R's: reading, writing and arithmetic. Most people added computers, and the college groups especially tended to include introductions to various academic subjects. People view these content areas as the essential foundation that the school must provide all kids.

The Content of the Basics: The Three R's, Plus

In defining the basics, most started with the three R's -- reading, writing, and arithmetic -- and some spoke of reading as a kind of master basic.

[Kids need] the basics. They need to be able to read, they need to be able to write, they need to be able to do math. -- Denver woman, college group

I go along with the three R's, but I think reading is probably the most important because I think if you can read well you're going to do well. -- Denver man, college group

If you can't read, you can't fill out a job application, you can't do anything. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

While the core of the basics remains the traditional three R's, many also see them changing with the times. As one participant put it, "Things change so quickly, what was basic for me may not be basic for a kid today." In particular, technology -- especially computer technology -- has become a new basic.

Technology, of course [is part of the basics], because whether we like it or not, it's here and it's coming quick.... Nowadays, technology is part of survival. -- Sacramento woman, college group

[The basics are] math, English, writing, and probably computers. -- NY State man, non-college group

I believe [the computer] is now [part of the basics]. They're just trying to get all the kids interested in computers so maybe we can help them with the future. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

Kids need a fairly rigorous fundamental education and what we traditionally referred to as the basics. Computer education may be a basic, core element of the curriculum right now. -- Denver man, college group
The addition of computers and other technology to the basics is not without ambivalence. For some, technology has eroded rather than added to the quality of kids' education. These respondents fear technology like computers and calculators encourages short-cuts that dissuade true learning, and this attitude was as likely to come up among the college as the non-college groups.

They've got all this technology, they're not using their brain. They're using a key to input data and it's not really using what God gave us... They've got Nintendo and Sega and they have no morals about trying to reach out there and struggle and make it. -- Birmingham woman, college group

Computers are a resource. Computers are not the answers to everything. Somebody has to teach you to do all this. -- Denver woman, college group

Finally, in addition to reading, writing, arithmetic and computers, for some the basics include an introduction to a more varied menu of academic subjects. This was especially true for members of the college groups.

I would add some science [to the basics], because this is a very scientific world. -- Sacramento woman, college group

The basics are reading, writing, grammar, science, history, music... [Students] need to be exposed [to these things]. -- Birmingham man, college group

The Concept of the Basics: A Foundation on Which to Build
People see the basics as the essential foundation that the schools must provide in order for children to be successful. Similar imagery and logic permeated discussions around the country:

If you don't have a foundation, no matter how strong the building is, it will not stand. -- NY State male, non-college group

If you do not have the basics, then you're not going to learn anything else. It's like climbing a set of stairs... one step at a time. If you can't add then how can you multiply? -- Birmingham woman, non-college

I am a believer in having the basic building blocks, that foundation. There's got to be the basics, then you can get into...other areas. But if you don't have that foundation you're going to have a shaky house. -- Denver man, college group
III. THE BASICS ARE A FOUNDATION ON WHICH TO BUILD...WHAT?

The non-college groups tended to see the basics as *essential life skills*. For many in these groups, higher academic course-work is not for everyone, but all students must be prepared for their futures. Typically, non-college respondents held that once students have the basics under their belts and have undergone some limited exposure to higher academics, they are in a position in the upper grades to decide whether to go in a more academic or a more vocational direction. This vocational option is sometimes thought of in terms of traditional shop and home economics, and sometimes in more rigorous, high-tech terms.

The college groups tended to view the basics as *pre-requisites for higher learning*. To many of them, the natural next step beyond the basics is further academic course work, and they were more likely than the non-college groups to see this as something that almost all kids could greatly benefit from. In this view, beyond-the-basics academics is important for a well-rounded life and a successful career. Some members of the college groups also saw a place for a rigorous vocational track as an option for some kids.

**Beyond the Basics: The Non-College Groups**

1. *The academic potential of students*

The non-college parents sometimes showed an almost fatalistic attitude toward the academic potential of students. As one put it, "If they have it in them and want to learn, they'll go on...themselves. You don't have to force them." There was at times a sense that many kids are incapable of absorbing certain subjects, higher math being a common example.

   There are kids who struggle with basic math. Then when you give them something [higher] that they have no desire to do and have a lot of trouble learning, they just seem to fail it anyway. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

   I don't think you need to push them into something that is just going to frustrate them. Especially in high school. If they can't get the math and they are not going to be heading in that kind of career to use that math, they should be shown into another direction that they could better use. -- Sacramento woman, non-college group

Some members of the non-college groups felt that it is fairly obvious whether or not kids are cut out for a strong academic education. These respondents did not feel that students were likely to surprise you by revealing a previously undiscovered academic aptitude in the upper grades.

   If you take a child and you sit him in class and introduce him to [Shakespeare] and you get
three weeks into it and you look over at this child and this child is daydreaming, looking up, saying, "I'm not interested in this," why make the child continue to sit in that class and take in something that they're not going to take in -- that they're either going to fail or someone's going to pass them through? -- Birmingham woman, non-college group

Interacting with the attitude that not all kids have the aptitude for higher academics was a sense that kids are highly individualistic and should not be treated as if they were all poured from the same mold.

People are different, they're all made up differently. I don't think everybody's qualified or everybody should go to college. If they don't want to, they shouldn't have to.
-- Birmingham woman, non-college group

At times the moderator challenged these views by asking for reactions to the argument that "if you expect more, you get more." While this clearly resonated with many of the non-college participants, it only partially offset the overall attitude that higher academics are not for everyone.

2. Should higher academic course work be required?
The very idea of requiring higher academic course work from all kids struck many of the non-college respondents as wrong-headed and pointless.

They should get the basics. They should be forced to learn the basics. Whether they can go further is really up to them -- N.Y. State man, non-college

If they've got it set in their mind that they're not going to college, then why make them take trig or geometry? -- Birmingham woman, non-college group

When the discussion centered on liberal arts course work, non-college parents sometimes emphasized their irrelevance. This attitude was summed up by a farmer from the Sacramento area in a statement he remembered making to one of his own teachers:"What does Shakespeare have to do with cows?"

There were, of course, exceptions to the general pattern. For instance, an Albuquerque non-college respondent felt that, "It's really important to get a well-rounded education -- to introduce 4th and 5th graders to Shakespeare." And,

Most kids want a challenge... Sometimes the more difficult it is, the higher they want to go. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group
Perhaps most typical among the non-college groups was the view that all kids should be exposed to higher academic subjects rather than required to go into them in-depth. They should have a "dusting," as the Sacramento farmer put it, so that those with an academic aptitude will have an opportunity to discover it.

3. Tracking
Non-college group members often thought of education beyond the basics in terms of a two-track model, in which higher academics are appropriate for those kids somehow especially cut out for them, while other students should be offered vocational educational opportunities.

Every person has a different level. Everybody is not going to be a doctor. If a child doesn't want to go to college by the time they learn the basics and they decide they want to learn a trade, that should be their choice. -- Sacramento woman, non-college

If it is a skill they want to learn, let them learn a skill. They don't have to go to college. As long as they're getting something that will help them support themselves in life, that is education. -- Birmingham woman, non-college group

It is important to note that for some in the non-college groups a vocational track meant traditional shop and home economics.

The basics are nice but they also need to learn other things... they need cooking. -- Sacramento woman, non-college group

For others it was a rigorous, high-tech parallel to the academic track.

My son is an auto mechanic. Well the things he needs to learn that are more advanced, they're going to teach him in that [vocational] class. They're going to teach him the most up-to-date [technology]. -- Birmingham woman, non-college group

Beyond the Basics: The College Groups

1. The academic potential of students
The college group participants generally viewed kids as having greater potential for academic achievement than did the non-college groups. And many considered this potential to be difficult to predict, feeling that kids could surprise you in the later grades.

I would require [students] to take...higher level courses when they get through with the basics. Because...it challenges them, and they may exceed everybody's expectations and excel where nobody thought they would. -- Denver man, college group
The argument that "if you expect more, you get more," came up spontaneously among some college groups and struck a strong chord when it did. In the Sacramento college group, for instance, a woman said, "In school you should be challenged." A man responded, "You rise to your expectations," and the group nodded in agreement.

2. Should higher academic course work be required?
The college groups generally favored requiring students to take higher academic courses. While they favored providing some measure of choice within academic areas, most did not think the decision whether to take academic courses should be left to students.

I certainly don't think it should be up to [students] to decide in 9-12 whether "I'm just going to take all keyboarding from now on." -- Birmingham woman, college group

Life is not a bowl of cherries. It's not easy all the time and I don't think it hurts, even if you might flunk it or something, exposing kids to [higher academic course work] -- Denver man, college group

I think it would [be] much better to [be] exposed to several different writers and given a choice... -- Denver woman, college group

Members of the college groups were likely to see the basics as the necessary prelude to higher academic achievement, but as inadequate in and of themselves.

We've need to take the foundation they've got [with the basics] and expand now from English into literature..., then go from [basic] math into problem solving... -- Birmingham woman, college group

[With just the basics] people would not be prepared because [the basics] are not for life, for thinking, for taking a problem on and being able to apply some of their knowledge. When you are faced with a situation that is not in the book, you need to improvise and if you are not taught to improvise, you won't know how to improvise. -- Sacramento woman, college group

Some emphasized preparation for today's high-tech work-force.

[Kids should be taught] job related learning that they need to exist in today's world, including the basics, and electronics, computers, and all the current information-age stuff. -- Sacramento woman, college group
Many also saw higher academics as a key to a well-rounded and satisfying life and a general social good.

There is something to be said for education just for the sake of education, and that your life is better spent because you know these things. Not that you necessarily apply them all in your job. -- Denver woman, college group

Absolutely [kids should be required to learn literature]. Not because that's a basic but because it's a way for kids to learn to think. It's a way for them to experience things outside their own immediate lives... Our kids need to know more than the technical, electronic world. -- Albuquerque woman, college group

If we don't teach our kids to think, then we would stop being a democracy. We would stop being a free society. If everybody was satisfied with their itty-bitty, very limited niche, then it would be the end of our way of life -- what we've all grown accustomed to in this society -- which means that those who can grow will grow, will invent, will write, will do whatever they can do because they've been taught not just the basics but also to think. -- Albuquerque woman, college group

3. Tracking
College group participants were often uneasy with a two-track approach that distinguished between an academic and a vocational orientation for students.

My concern is with kids making life choices or people making life choices for them at a premature age, and I just don't think that the kids, the parents, or the educators can at any time in public school be making those sorts of decisions for them at all. -- Denver man, college group

Nevertheless, there were those in the college groups who felt that a vocational track is a good idea for many students. Almost inevitably they had in mind the more rigorous, high-tech version of what it can mean, which one respondent referred to as "the German model." Another commented:

I am a general contractor. It's getting pretty bad out there trying to find anybody that knows any trade and is skilled at it. -- Albuquerque man, college group
IV. HOW SHOULD THE BASICS BE TAUGHT?

Strong Support for Tough Standards for the Basics
College and non-college respondents alike favored tough standards for teaching the basics. Most thought the basics should be mastered by middle school, with the college groups leaning toward early middle school and the non-college groups toward late. The groups were asked if kids should be allowed to move on if they have not mastered the basics by then, a proposition that most respondents firmly rejected.

If you can't do the work, you don't get pushed on to the next grade. They pass you on now whether you can do the work or not, which is wrong. They should learn the three R's.
-- Cincinnati woman, non-college group

At some point they do not progress any further unless they have mastered [the basics].
-- Denver man, college group

You'd better start [leaving kids back] in kindergarten and first grade. The kid who doesn't learn the alphabet should not be moving on to the next grade.
-- Albuquerque woman, college group

I think parents worry too much about [leaving a child back a grade] being a social stigma. It's a lot worse to have an educational deficit.
-- Albuquerque woman, non-college group

Thus there appears to be a strong consensus on toughening up standards for learning the basics.

Teaching Methods and the Basics
The college and non-college groups were both traditionalist when it came to teaching the basics, although both also showed a limited openness to innovation. People were especially suspicious of teaching innovations if they associated them with poor performance on the basics.

An example of the traditional thinking that often came to the fore was the response of a college-educated woman from the Birmingham area:

I tend to just go back to my own past and the people I grew up with. Most of us turned out pretty good and I think the way we did it back then must have been alright. To me, some of the modern thinking is not the way I'd like to see it go.

In some cases, parents felt at odds with teachers who did not seem to share their concern with the basics.
I think there is a real rift between parents who want to see their kids get basic education and some teachers and administrators who don't have that same value. I think what's on their mind is... that it's more important to know how to find the information than to know the information... You absolutely have to have a fundamental core of knowledge and upon that you build research skills. -- Denver man, college group

In other instances, parents felt that educators shared their concern with the basics, but were still on the wrong track in getting too involved in innovative approaches.

I think [recent teaching reforms were] mostly motivated by an effort, probably a pure effort, to teach the basics still, but to try from a different teaching approach. As opposed to content, [the reform] was really more the method. The result of the new method...resulted in failing to get basic education across. -- Denver man, college group

Participants were not inevitably against any teaching innovation. They were, however, wary of any new methods that could be counter-productive to a solid learning of the basics. For example, one participant warned of the danger of using technology at an early age: "Don't just jump into the computer and get away from the basics." But he continued with a willingness to see some technological innovation if it did not interfere with learning the basics. "Maybe interrelate the computer into the basics, to make math more fun with a computer or something like that."

People's views were similarly nuanced when asked about the importance of memorizing facts versus learning to use tools for organizing information.

Memory is important, but they also have to keep moving on with calculators and computers. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

I think memorization in math is important...But as far as memorizing historical facts and things like that I would much prefer my children to be resourceful and to know where to find information than to spend all of their time memorizing to take a test. -- Denver woman, college group

Finally, when it was suggested that some educators recommend more team learning to help kids get ready for the modern workplace, most participants responded positively while remaining guarded. As one put it, "I think it's good for socialization and to learn conflict resolution. But they also need to be allowed that individual study time to do what they do best."
V. SOURCES OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE BASICS

The Power of Personal Experience
The views of both the college and non-college groups powerfully reflected their personal experiences of school. Many non-college respondents seemed to have experienced higher academics as being forced on them at the time and yet producing only modest payoffs in the course of their lives. College group members seemed more likely to have experienced the same subjects as keys to opening important cultural and professional doors, and as therefore inherently relevant and worthwhile.

The non-college groups
In some of the non-college groups it was not unusual to hear comments like, "I think [students] should be introduced to [literature], but I don't think it should be a big deal -- I never liked to read myself." Or,

I think [science] should be an elective. I remember my parents doing most of my science projects throughout school. Now that my son is in school, he was required to do a science project. Who did it? Me, not my son. So what is he learning? -- Albuquerque woman, non-college group

At times this self-referencing approach to the issues was accompanied by a note of defensiveness.

People [like me] have just gotten a basic education and become something. -- Cincinnati woman, non-college group.

I don't think I took trigonometry, and I don't feel like I'm less successful [because of it]. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

This man was asked if the world was still similar enough to when he was young that his own kids could be successful if they did without higher math. He bent without breaking: "No [the world is not the same], but I think they can do without that [higher math]. There are still other ways they can teach the kids to think without this complex math."

The college groups
College participants seemed to think back more positively on their academic course work. And even when they did not enjoy a subject, they often viewed the requirement as an important, not a pointless, experience in the course of their lives.
I know that I had to be forced to read things like Tom Sawyer and Little Women and I want my kids to at least be pushed a little bit to read things like that and if they choose to continue it, great, and if they don't at least they have learned to read in the process. -- Denver woman, college group

For some, the very struggle with a difficult subject was a point of pride. As a college-educated Denver man put it, "I got turned off of algebra but I came back to it later. I got turned off of geometry but I didn't quit on it."

The Presence or Absence of a Wider Economic Perspective
An important difference between the groups was the degree to which a wider economic perspective, beyond their personal experience, informed their judgments about the education of today's kids. Members of the college groups were more likely to factor into their thinking the changing job picture and international economic competition.

I think they need a lot more [than the basics] now to compete in the global economy. -- Albuquerque woman, college group

This society is pumping out millions and millions of kids who cannot read and cannot write and we are lagging far behind the rest of the industrialized world in virtually every measurable category... -- Denver man, college group

The point should not be overstated. When asked, many non-college participants thought the country would be in trouble if very few kids were going beyond the basics in their education, and some referred to international economic competition in the course of the conversation. Furthermore, most non-college respondents agreed that it would be a good thing if all students went beyond the basics in their schooling. However, there was also in the non-college groups an emphasis on the potential downside of a more highly educated population.

You will have a power struggle. There are [only] so many jobs and so many people that are qualified for that one job. -- NY State woman, non-college group

If you had everyone who was so brilliant they only wanted to do white collar work and you did not have a labor force to do blue collar work, it could be a problem. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

The college group participants, on the other hand, were rarely impressed by arguments pointing to the problems that a more educated population might create, such as a high-skill employee glut.
It's hard for me to say that we need to keep a certain segment of the population under-educated. [Having too few high-skill jobs is] a dilemma, [but] I would hate to see people held back just to hold the menial jobs. -- Birmingham man, college group

If you have more people that are educated, you're going to have more people researching, more people discovering things. You're always going to be moving forward with that technology and then it won't matter because people will find their niche. -- Denver woman, college group

You hear about foreign countries where the majority of students do take the higher-level classes and there you don't have all rocket scientists and all brain surgeons. Their economy must have a dispersed work-force where even though a person knows trigonometry, he might be in a job where he doesn't apply it. I guess it boils down to the problem-solving and the creativity so that you can use skills in any particular job. -- Albuquerque man, college group

**What Are You Going To Do With Teens?**
The attitudes of the groups toward both the basics and what should follow them seemed linked to underlying perceptions of adolescence. Many respondents from the non-college groups felt that with the onset of the teen years kids are so independent and unruly that there is not much that can be done with them: Those that want to learn will, the rest will do what they want.

When they are teenagers they are hard to discipline no matter what. -- Cincinnati man, non-college group

After they reach a certain age it doesn't matter how many basics you throw at them, if they don't want it or they don't like it. -- Birmingham woman, non-college group

You wait to try and push kids in high school and it's too late because kids have really learned to rebel. -- Sacramento woman, non-college group

Some non-college respondents also felt that kids understand themselves well enough to make the call whether to pursue academic or vocational course work once they have learned the basics.

By the time kids are in high school... they are going to have their own individual interests and decide what they want to do for their future. -- Cincinnati woman, non-college group

In contrast, many in the college groups felt that one can and should be more directive with kids about their educations.
One of my jobs as a parent is to not allow that child to do something to hurt themselves...
If the child says I don't want to take music appreciation, I say to him you're hurting yourself, you're damaging your education.... -- Birmingham man, college group

I don't think kids in tenth and eleventh grade know enough about what they're going to need for the future, what they're going to need five years, ten years, thirty years down the road. -- Denver woman, college group
VI. COMPLEMENTARY RESEARCH

As mentioned at the outset, many of the observations and hypotheses of this focus group study tie directly to a new national survey by Public Agenda with the general public, parents, teachers, school administrators and community leaders. This report, entitled "Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform," includes sections on "Why Support for Public Schools is in Jeopardy," "Why Americans are Obsessed with the Basics," "Raising Standards -- What People Want and What They Fear," and "What About the Pursuit of Knowledge?" It thus complements the conversations of parents reported in "The Public's Attitudes Toward the Basics" with many related quantitative survey results.

For instance, "Assignment Incomplete" points out that "Out of 16 areas that might be emphasized in school - with categories ranging from 'a love of learning,' to chemistry and physics, to values such as honesty and tolerance - the basics easily tops the list." In the survey, the 92% of the general public who say that teaching the basics is "absolutely essential" are joined by an even greater percentage of community leaders, teachers and school administrators. Yet the report also notes that almost half of the public (47%) and about a third of teachers (32%) say they "do not believe a high school degree is a guarantee that a student has learned the basics." That's a considerable gap between the importance of the basics and the performance of the public schools, and reinforces the observation in the focus groups that the public's concern with the basics is a fundamental one.

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