

A Report From Public Agenda



A LOT TO BE THANKFUL FOR

**What Parents Want Children
To Learn About America**

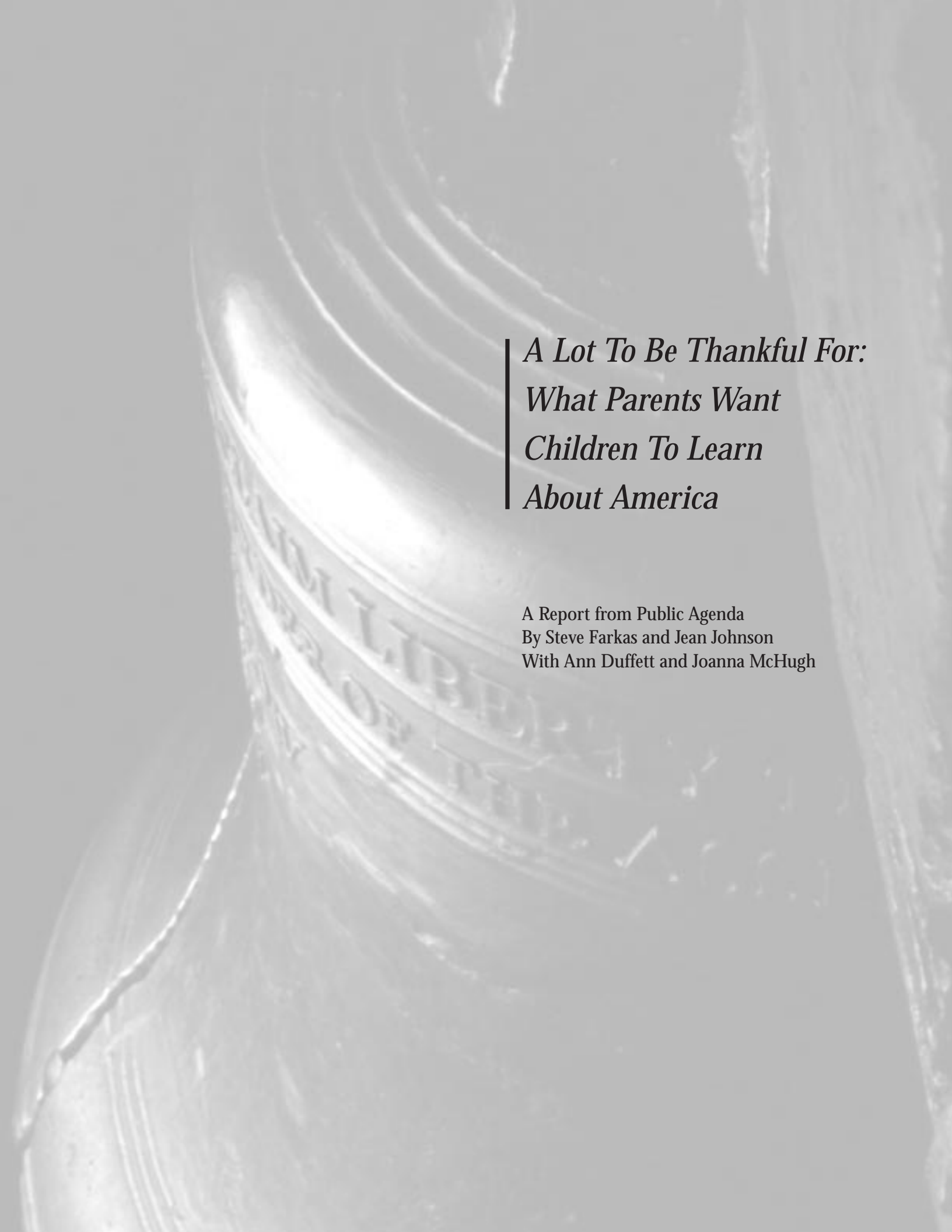
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*A Lot To Be Thankful For:
What Parents Want
Children To Learn
About America*

A Report from Public Agenda
By Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson
With Ann Duffett and Joanna McHugh

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum.

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INTRODUCTION

In the first two weeks of September, when the nation was transfixed by the release of Independent Council Kenneth Starr's report on the Monica Lewinsky affair, research organizations around the country fielded surveys asking Americans for their views on the escalating crisis.¹ Public Agenda was also "in the field" during this time, conducting a different but related study. *A Lot To Be Thankful For: What Parents Want Children To Learn About America* reports the findings from this research.

IS AMERICA SPECIAL?

Public Agenda's research included interviews with more than 800 parents, exploring their ideas on what the United States stands for and what schoolchildren should be taught about its history and ideals. The study is particularly noteworthy because it also captures the views of 200 parents who immigrated to the United States. In addition, it compares the perspectives of white, African American, and Hispanic parents, all with children now in public school.*

The news from *A Lot To Be Thankful For* is refreshingly upbeat — a finding that may be surprising given the rancor dominating the national political scene. In fact, the nation's parents — both those born in the United States and those born abroad — offer some unexpected answers to questions such as: Is there something special about America? What does it mean to be a good citizen? What should every student know about the country and its goals? Should schools encourage children from immigrant families to become "more American," and exactly what does that mean?

A CHALLENGE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, has examined public thinking on a variety of domestic and international policy issues for over two decades and in recent years has devoted considerable attention to studying attitudes about public schools. Public Agenda has completed in-depth studies looking at the views of the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers, and professors of education, among others. These studies have measured attitudes on student achievement, academic standards, curriculum, safety and discipline, integration, teacher quality, school funding, and other areas.

A Lot To Be Thankful For takes on yet another issue facing many schools nationwide: how to respond to increasing numbers of children from immigrant families — children who may not speak English and who may have learned most of what they know about the United States from television and the movies. And while most Americans would quickly say that these children are welcome in their communities, their growing presence in the public schools has created a series of dilemmas for educators.

What should every student know about the country and its goals? Should schools encourage children from immigrant families to become "more American"?

WHOSE LANGUAGE? WHOSE HISTORY?

Bilingual education has been the most visible flash point for many school districts, with the highly contentious debate in California capturing national media attention.² But bilingual education is not the

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Hispanic: Parents self-identified as Hispanic (n=203)

African American: Parents self-identified as black or African American (n=198)

White: Parents born in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Guam, or U.S. Virgin Islands; non-Hispanic; self-identified as white (n=592)

only tough issue for schools with large numbers of immigrant children. Educators face choices over how to teach American history and government, how to tackle literature and culture, what they should say about citizenship and voting, and whether it is, in fact, their job to promote patriotism and love of country.

Some experts and commentators have urged schools to stretch themselves to accommodate a more diverse student body and help immigrant children retain a pride in and connection to their country of origin. Others have argued, equally persuasively, that the schools' real obligation is to help their young charges feel at home in a new land by teaching the language, history, and culture that Americans have traditionally held in common.

At its heart, the research addresses a more traditional concept: the value of patriotism, how we define it, and whether we think it is worth preserving and affirming.

WHAT DO PARENTS WANT?

A Lot To Be Thankful For gives parents of schoolchildren their chance to contribute to this debate. With support from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and an anonymous donor, Public Agenda designed and completed a year-long project to study parents' views on these issues. The research included one-on-one interviews with experts on immigration and education; focus groups and individual interviews with parents and teachers in different parts of the country; and a random sample telephone survey of parents of school-age children fielded between September 3-16, 1998.

Since the study touched on a number of themes related to multicultural education — an issue that may be of particular concern to Hispanics and African Americans — special efforts were made to reach parents in these groups, including making Spanish-speaking interviewers available for the telephone survey. Findings for all groups — parents overall, foreign-born parents, Hispanic, African American, and non-Hispanic, U.S.-born white parents — are available in tables presented on pages 34-40. To our knowledge, *A Lot To Be Thankful For* is the first comprehensive study on these issues to offer such a full range of comparative findings.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

In some ways, the complexity of the study's research design, with its precise breakdowns and careful analysis of different subgroups in the population, is a reflection of the ways the country is changing and our need to understand more about what these changes mean. In this respect, *A Lot To Be Thankful For* has a twenty-first century, contemporary feel to it. But at its heart, the research addresses a more traditional concept: the value of patriotism, how we define it, and whether we think it is worth preserving and affirming.

At one point while preparing this report, the writers consulted the thesaurus housed in the computer's word-processing program, looking for a synonym for the word patriotism. The computer suggested a short and ugly list: nationalism, chauvinism, flag-waving, jingoism. Just four suggestions and all of them negative, even frightening. But the parents whose views are captured in this report offer a very different rendering of the word patriotism. They propose a definition that is thought-provoking, even invigorating, one that is well worth pondering in a country as diverse as this one and in times as cynical as these.

FINDING ONE: SOMETHING SPECIAL IN THE WORLD

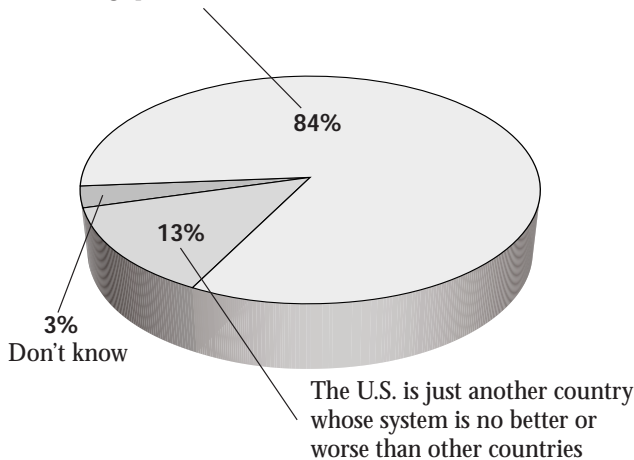
Foreign-born and U.S. native-born parents, including whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, share a belief that the United States is a special country and, in a number of findings, express thankfulness for being here. They voice a new patriotism that is calm and inclusive.

Even as the nation has been rocked by a protracted, brutally public scandal that has all but overwhelmed the presidency, the Congress, and the news media, there is a vibrant faith and pride in the United States among parents with children in public school. Nine in ten (90%) believe the United States is a better nation than most other countries in the world. Parents think of their nation as a special place: by an overwhelming 84% to 13% margin, they say the United States is a unique country that stands for something special in the world — that it's not “just another country”.

A SPECIAL PLACE

Which of the following comes closer to your own view about the U.S.?

The U.S. is a unique country that stands for something special in the world



NOTE: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available from Public Agenda in the Technical Appendix for this study. Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

THIS IS MY HOME

In the focus group conversations, thankfulness for being an American and for living in the United States came through repeatedly. “To me, being an American is a privilege,” said a Secaucus, New Jersey mom. A dad in the same group added, “I feel pretty lucky to be an American.” And one Dayton mom said, “We are really blessed and lucky.”

People who traveled often talked about what an eye-opener it was for them to see how people in other countries lived, that it made them appreciate what this country has.

“To me, being an American is a privilege.” —
Secaucus mom

What's more, virtually all parents (94%) who believe this country is a special place want the schools to help educate and reinforce that feeling in their youngsters. “This is my home,” said a New York mom who immigrated from Colombia. “This is where I live, this is where I work. I love this country with all my heart.”

STARS AND STRIPES

Typical Americans often look to concrete patriotic symbols to display their national pride. More than three in four parents overall (78%), for example, say they have an American flag in their home. A Secaucus woman said, “My husband and I try to instill some patriotism in our children. The community tends to put on a big show for Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, so they'll have the pomp and circumstance that goes right along with patriotic holidays. So hopefully, they'll feel that pride when they see the flag go by.”

Almost six in ten (58%) think a person is a bad citizen if they make it a point not to stand up when the national anthem is played during public events like a ball game. “I remember going to a ball game and you stood up and ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ played and it was great,” recalled an African American mom in Birmingham, Alabama. “Now you hear people talking through it, even booing.”

Some may scoff at these expressions of patriotism as simplistic and unsophisticated, requiring little understanding of what it means to be an American and little loyalty to the nation’s principles. As we will see in later findings, parents *do* internalize the principles and values guiding the nation. But they also rely on concrete symbols and traditions to affirm their loyalty.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Some commentators look at demographic shifts in the U.S. population — for example, the percentage of white non-Hispanics living in the United States is projected to decline to 57% by the year 2040 — and worry.³ They wonder if immigrants are as committed to their adopted country as those born in the United States; or whether minorities — who may have suffered mistreatment in the past — feel as much affection to the nation as whites. A special effort was made to interview these groups, and their views will be reported throughout this study.* But there is little doubt that such sentiments as love of country and a sense of thankfulness are pervasive and resonate among parents regardless of whether they are born here or abroad, whether they are Hispanic, African American, or white.

Overwhelming majorities of all groups believe the United States is a better country than most other countries in the world (91% of foreign-born, 92% of Hispanic, 84% of African American, and 91% of white, native-born parents). In New York, an immigrant from India said, “My husband was dreaming about coming to this country for quite a long time.” Overwhelming majorities of all groups also think the United States is a unique country that stands for something special (80% of immigrant, 87% of Hispanic, 73% of African American, and 87% of white, native-born parents).

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White: Parents born in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Guam, or U.S. Virgin Islands; non-Hispanic; self-identified as white (n=592)

‘THANK GOD FOR AMERICA’

“We are really lucky,” said a Hispanic dad in San Jose, California. “I’ve been to a lot of other countries, and I can tell the difference in the lifestyle that a lot of people have here.” A woman in the same group said, “It’s nice to visit my mother’s country [Mexico], but that’s not my home; my home is here. When I get back here, I say, ‘Thank God for America.’” In

Birmingham, an African American dad said, “If I had to choose, I wouldn’t live anywhere else in the world — I’d live in America. With all the bad things, and all the things that history has brought not only for blacks, but for Mexicans and Jews, I still think this is the greatest place.” America may well be a changing place, but it is still a place well loved.

“It’s nice to visit my mother’s country [Mexico], but that’s not my home; my home is here. When I get back here, I say, ‘Thank God for America.’” —
San Jose mom

In an immediate sense, the pride and self-confidence with which parents regard this country is striking, coming as it does in the midst of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. But it is also remarkable because it comes after more than two decades in which Americans have been consistently expressing disappointment in their leading government institutions and elected officials.⁴ Many people — like this dad in Texas — may be decoupling their affection for the nation from their disappointment with its leadership: “If you are looking at politics, the U.S. is an evil empire because 90% of politicians are crooks, but if you can leave politics out of it, America is the best place in the world to live, there’s no question about it.”

PAST MISTAKES, PRESENT IMPERFECTIONS

Today, neither the reflexive antagonism fashionable in some circles in the sixties and seventies nor the reflexive patriotism that presumably held sway in the forties and fifties predominates. Instead, widespread — and, judging from the personal interviews, heartfelt — thankfulness about the things that are good in this country is coupled with an abiding remembrance of

Thankfulness about the things that are good in this country is coupled with an abiding remembrance of past mistakes and present imperfections.

past mistakes and present imperfections. Fully 89%, for example, agree with the view that the government sometimes lies to the public about what is really going on (55% strongly agree). “There’s a lot of crooked stuff that goes on that we don’t even hear about or we hear sugarcoated information,” said a Dayton woman.

About two in three (65%) also say the United States is doing a mixed job of living up to the ideals that are important to them; 24% say it is doing a good job.

Seven in ten (70%) say that minorities often get treated unfairly in this country. In Birmingham, an African American dad who earlier spoke of realizing how “fortunate I am to be an American” also said, “In our America we have Rodney King. We have Philadelphia, where they found a police precinct that put at least thirty African Americans behind bars who had done nothing, who were framed.”

Even the economic prosperity associated with the United States has come at a price, according to parents. While many are often thankful for living in a land of plenty, they worry that the consumer ethic has too strong a hold on American culture. Nine in ten (90%) agree with the statement that “too many Americans are materialistic and care too much about buying things” (62% strongly agree). “We have a culture that says, ‘Achieve, then want more,’” said a Dayton mom. “And you are just always wanting more — it’s never enough. The more you get, the more in debt you are and the

more you have to keep doing this game. It’s this big plastic game that a lot of people play. It’s a mixed blessing for sure.”

THE NEW PATRIOTISM

There is even some willingness to question the moral quality of U.S. policy abroad: 48% believe that the United States has done a lot of morally wrong things to other countries, while 46% disagree. In a focus group in Dayton there was an overwhelming expression of pride in the nation, yet there was no dissent (and many nods of agreement) when a woman said, “There are a lot of inconsistencies in what we profess to stand up for. We talk about human rights violations, but there are places where there are atrocious violations, and if we think it is to our benefit to somehow back off and not make a stand, we don’t. What it really boils down to is we do what’s best for the United States.”

More than a quarter of a century after they weathered the Vietnam and Watergate crises and confronted the struggle for civil rights, American parents link deep-seated appreciation for their nation with a healthy dose of skepticism and self-awareness. They believe that the United States is a fundamentally good nation, but that it can — and has — “slipped up.” “I sit here and say America is the best place to be right now, but that doesn’t mean America is perfect and that we have no problems,” said a Secaucus man. “We definitely have times in our history we would like to forget,” agreed another participant, “but I think we will grow from them, and learn from them, and hopefully not make those same mistakes.”

FINDING TWO: LET FREEDOM RING

The chief components of the American ideal — identified by all groups with very strong majorities — are individual freedom and opportunity, combined with a commitment to tolerance and respect for others.

When parents are asked for the first thing that comes to their minds when they think about the United States, freedom is what most say (53%). But the freedom ordinary people seem to be thinking of is the kind of personal freedom that enables them to choose where and how to live their lives, that gives them the chance to choose their own path. “The first thing that came to my mind was freedom,” said a Secaucus dad when asked what the United States stood for. “Freedom to come and go as you please, to say what you feel and not have it held against you in any way, freedom to work where you want, go to the schools you want.” In Dayton a woman said, “For children there is so much more here than in third world countries. Learning opportunities, cultural diversity, every kind of opportunity.”

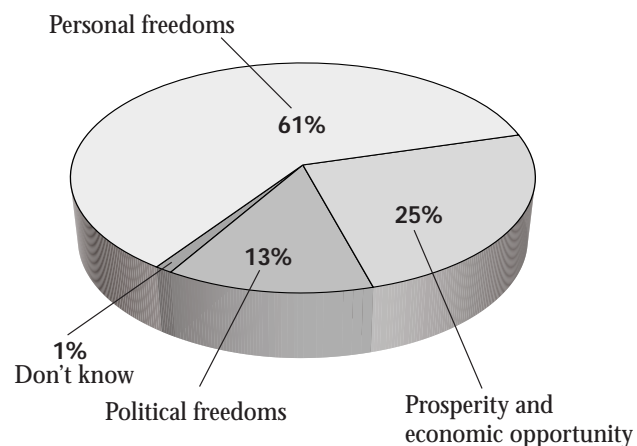
THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

Parents most easily recognize the rights and freedoms that have an immediate relevance to their lives; admiration for abstract principles of democratic governance and the rights of citizenship tends to be more submerged. When survey respondents were asked which of three things are most important to them about living in the United States, 61% point to personal freedoms; only 13% point to political freedoms, and another 25% point to prosperity and economic opportunity. A Dayton mom said she was most proud of “the right to be different. I don’t have to be the same or conform. I can be what I want to be, or work to be what I want to be. And if you choose to take a different path, then that choice is up to you.” In New York, an immigrant commenting about what made the United States different observed, “Americans mind their own business. They let you live the way you want.” Parents who are immigrants, Hispanics, or African Americans,

however, are more likely than parents overall to say prosperity and economic opportunity are most important to them (41%, 42%, and 40%, respectively). It is possible that these groups may feel less secure about achieving prosperity and that it is consequently more important to them. It is also possible that American-born whites idealize individualism and consequently put a premium on personal freedom.

VALUE OF PERSONAL FREEDOMS

Thinking about what it means to live in the U.S., which of these is most important to you personally?



THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

America, the old cliché goes, is the land of opportunity. The notion that regardless of their backgrounds, people who work hard can make progress and improve their lives and the lives of their families has historically been an integral part of the nation’s concept of itself.

The cliché may be old, but it still resonates strongly among parents: 79% of parents overall say an absolutely essential part of the American ideal is that “with hard work people have a chance to move up and prosper.” Once again, foreign-born, Hispanic, and African American parents overwhelmingly concur (75%, 69%, and 74%, respectively). “I know we have a high level of poverty,” began a Latino mom in San Jose, “but then we also have a lot of opportunities to leave that status. I think we are lucky.” An Asian immigrant compared her family’s experience in the United States with that in Kuwait: “We were in Kuwait for fourteen years. No matter how many years you are there you don’t get citizenship, you cannot buy a house, you cannot own a shop. But in this country, there is a lot of freedom.”

A RESPONSIBILITY TO WORK HARD

People in America not only have the opportunity to improve their lot, according to our nation’s parents, they also have a responsibility to take advantage of that opportunity — to work hard and to be self-reliant. Three in four (76%) say an essential part of what makes America a special place is that people are expected to work and earn their living, not rely on the government. Knowing that no one’s job is guaranteed “makes us do a better job in terms of productivity and workmanship,” said a Birmingham man. “I would think some people whose jobs were so guaranteed would just do nothing, knowing nothing is going to happen to them.”

The work ethic is such a powerful part of parents’ definition of what it means to be an American that they scorn dependency when they think it stems from an unwillingness to make an effort. “It bothers a lot of us to feel like we have been taken advantage of,” said a Birmingham man. “[Whether it’s] helping the person down the street or the person on the park bench — we want to help, but we don’t want to feel like somebody is sitting and not doing anything.” Taking advantage of society’s largesse — described in the survey as “living on government programs like welfare even though you are able to work” — means you are a bad citizen, according to 77% of the sample. In fact, this tops the list of ten possible violations of good citizenship — outpolling such breaches as believing in communism, avoiding the draft for moral or religious reasons, and never voting.

AND GET AN EDUCATION

Education is crucial if one is going to be able to take advantage of the opportunities in the United States, according to parents. Nearly eight in ten parents (78%) say the fact that “all children can go to public school free of charge” is absolutely essential to their ideal of what America stands for.

Previous Public Agenda research has indicated — not surprisingly, given the stock people place in perseverance and hard work — that parents want the public schools to teach their children good work habits, discipline, and the value of trying hard.⁵ These are things they believe will stand their children in good stead.

And when parents suspect there are imbalances in the quality of schools different kids attend, they would like to see them redressed. Most parents — white or black — believe, for example, that the majority of African American students do not attend good schools with good teachers. And fully 86% of both groups believe it is society’s responsibility to make sure black students have teachers and schools that are just as good as those of white students.⁶

“We were in Kuwait for fourteen years. No matter how many years you are there you don’t get citizenship, you cannot buy a house, you cannot own a shop. But in this country, there is a lot of freedom.” — Asian-born mom

LIVE AND LET LIVE

A powerful “live and let live” ethic of tolerance pervades parents’ expectations of how people should treat each other and be treated by the government. Nearly nine in ten (89%) say an absolutely essential part of their American ideal is that everyone should have the right to their individual religious beliefs. “People can practice whatever religion they want to, they have that right,” said a Birmingham mom. “We can do anything we want to here as long as we are not harming someone. We can say what we want to — that’s living in America.” About the same number (88%) say equal opportunity for people regardless of race, religion, or sex is an absolutely essential component of the American ideal. Nearly three

in four (72%) go so far as to say they would consider a person a bad citizen if they refused “to work with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.” The ethic of tolerance plays out with clarity around the issue of religion. Americans seem to be the most religious of Western democratic societies’ citizens, some surveys have suggested. For example, 44% say they attend religious services at least once a week, compared with 14% of the British and 29% of Spaniards; 60% of Americans say they never doubt the existence of God, compared with 31% of the British and 54% of Spaniards.⁷ Asked in

a recent poll to choose between two competing values, 78% of Americans said encouraging a belief in God was more important to them than encouraging a modern scientific outlook.⁸ Yet despite their strong religious faith and personal commitment to God, only 36% of parents responding to this study say that, to them, living “in a society that is based on Judeo-Christian beliefs” is an absolutely essential American ideal. And only one in three (33%) would think someone who avoids a war-time draft because of moral or religious reasons is a bad citizen. To American parents, how someone approaches religion and faith is clearly a concern for individual conscience — not a matter for public consideration.

AMERICAN IDEALS

“Absolutely Essential” American Ideals	Parents Overall
Everyone should have the right to their religious beliefs	89%
There should be equal opportunity for people regardless of race, religion, or sex	88
Police should follow strict rules on how they collect evidence and treat people they arrest	81
With hard work, people have a chance to move up and prosper	79
All children can go to public school free of charge	78
People should work and earn their living — not rely on the government	76
People can protest or criticize the government without fear of punishment	67
People are supposed to help those who are less fortunate	64
People are supposed to be tolerant of others whose backgrounds or lifestyles are different	61
The press can report the news without government censorship	57
People can enjoy a better standard of living here than in most countries	55
The U.S. helps promote and defend democracy around the world	41
We live in a society that is based on Judeo-Christian beliefs	36

TAKING PRIDE IN DIVERSITY

Diversity and tolerance for different ways of doing things is not merely something that our nation’s parents have learned to put up with; it is something they uphold as a value in and of itself and something they often say they benefit from as individuals. “The diversity of this country is very appealing to me,” said a Secaucus mom. “You have a great flavor of people, you can learn about different cultures. You don’t have to travel to another country to learn about different people.” “The U.S. is unique,” said a Dayton mom. “There is no other place in the world where they open the doors for such a huge influx of immigrants. We are all a bunch of mutts here.”

IN THE SCHOOLS

It may not be surprising, therefore, to learn that 85% of parents say it is absolutely essential for the public schools to teach their children to respect others who are from different ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds. Parents often speak with pride about how their kids bring home friends from so many different backgrounds that “it’s like the United Nations.” Previous Public Agenda research has shown that one of the few areas where parents think public schools outperform private schools is in teaching kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds — by a 54% to 19% margin.⁹ The emphasis on diversity extends to higher education: a recent survey found that 69% of registered voters believed preparing people to function in a more diverse society to be a very important goal of colleges and universities.¹⁰

FINDING THREE: HISTORY 101

America's parents display an impressive love of country but they are not very knowledgeable about (or particularly attuned to) its historic and constitutional foundations. They also express somewhat submerged fears that others — and sometimes they themselves — take the country for granted and that there's too much emphasis on "the things that divide us." These fears are widespread, but they rarely relate to increased immigration or ethnic diversity.

Despite their love for the country and their dedication to its principles, many parents demonstrate serious gaps in knowledge about the nation's history. Only 44% say they would be able to give a good answer if their child asked them to explain the reasons for the Cold War — the majority (56%) say they would have to look it up. Only 47% could explain to their child the rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights; 53% would have to look it up first.

THE FACT GAP

Other surveys have routinely shown an information gap among Americans about presumably "no brainer" questions such as who their elected representatives are or what parts of the Constitution they would recognize.¹¹ In the midst of congressional proceedings on the issue of impeaching President Clinton, only 40% of the general public say — correctly — that impeachment does not mean removal from office, while 42% mistakenly believe it does.¹²

Most parents responding to this survey say they could explain to their children what the Fourth of July celebrates and the reasons for the Civil War. Yet given that so many are unclear about various key parts of their history, some may be hardly reassured and ask: Is this cause for concern?

NO HISTORY REQUIRED

For their part, parents themselves do not seem particularly troubled by a lack of historical knowledge — their own or that of others. "I probably don't remember most of my history, to be quite honest. I don't think you have to know it to be a good citizen," said a Dayton woman. Only 36% would consider a person who knows virtu-

ally nothing about America's history or Founding Fathers to be a bad citizen. Only 48% would consider a person who has no interest in the issues facing the nation to be a bad citizen. Only 44% think it is absolutely essential for the schools to teach kids to read the newspaper on a regular basis to be informed, responsible citizens. Why?

For one thing, parents think thorough knowledge of specific information, such as historical dates, names, and incidents, is not nearly as valuable as knowing — and working under — the principles of the American system. "You need to be able to think, analyze, and be able to use the free enterprise system rather than chapter and verse of 1776," said a Secaucus man. "You are not going to be able to live by showing how smart you are, by all the facts you know."

SECOND NATURE

Though most parents would have to look up the rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, many of the personal freedoms it guarantees have become part of the standard lexicon of ordinary folks — the native-born or new arrivals — when they talk about America. The notion of individual liberties seems naturally threaded into the culture, so much so that people do not have to think about them to know and speak of them. "You can speak your mind — if you feel something, you can talk. It's not like other countries where you cannot say certain things," said a woman from India.

Thus ordinary citizens may not be able to point to the First Amendment or even know that the Bill of Rights is the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Nevertheless, they have often internalized the principles of these amendments. And sometimes parents are quite adamant that knowing those principles is important:

“This country was founded on certain principles — I think that’s important. If someone wants to come over here and live in our country, they should know what we stand for, what we believe in. There have been a lot of Americans who died for this country, for our freedom. And if you want to be a part of this country, I think you have to know something about it,” said a Hispanic man in San Jose. Finally, they want their children to learn these principles: 83% of parents want the schools to teach kids “to appreciate the freedoms they are guaranteed under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.”

IS IT ON THE TEST?

There is also a longstanding tradition of pragmatism in the United States that values practical, applied knowledge and skills over conceptual, theoretical knowledge. A Birmingham woman said, “The schools should concentrate more on things that everybody uses in their everyday life, rather than on who the president was. Sure, I think history is important, but I think they should concentrate more on how to go out and get a job, more than the history.” More than seven in ten parents (72%) say, for example, that it is absolutely essential for the public schools to teach kids practical skills such as how to balance a checkbook or write a résumé. In contrast, fewer parents (58%) say the same about teaching kids that a representative government is the best system for Americans.

IS SOMETHING SLIPPING AWAY?

But despite the disinterested, “hardly worried” mentality they evince about the facts and figures of being an American, parents here are actually quite concerned — even somewhat alarmed — by a threatening sense that something, some part of America’s identity as a nation, is eroding and slipping away. One of our initial survey questions asked parents to choose one of four things we should be trying to accomplish as a nation. Preserving America’s ideals and traditions held its own (23% said this should be our top goal) against some pretty stiff competition: lowering taxes (27%), improving the public schools (26%), and reducing crime and violence (22%). Moreover, by a sizable 61% to 35% margin, parents believe America’s beliefs and values — its national identity — are being lost rather than secured.

Some might immediately assume that the root of these concerns about America’s national identity is the new wave of immigration bringing non-European, non-English-speaking people to the United States. But this research strongly suggests that immigration is not the source of these concerns. Most parents (62%) think immigrants come here to settle and become loyal Americans, and only one-third (34%) disagree. Even more important, when people in the focus group discussions spoke of their concern that America was losing its way, immigration almost never came up. Most of the parents were talking about themselves, their children, and their neighbors — and worrying that the country was being taken for granted, that the work ethic and sense of community were being lost.

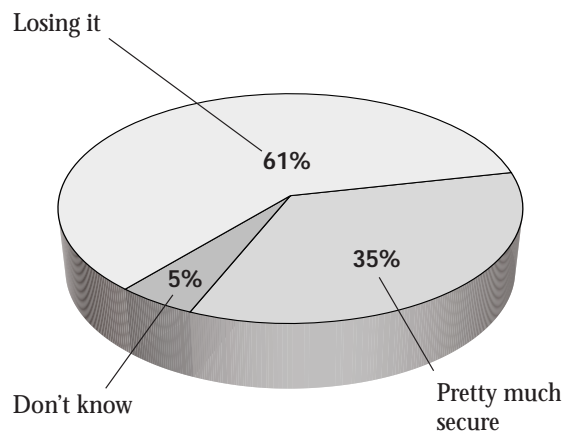
“We live in a land of plenty, and a lot of people forget that and go about on a day-to-day basis with a lack of gratitude for the incredible abundance that surrounds us.” —

Dayton mom

A Secaucus parent had this story to tell: “There are a lot of freedoms that we very often take for granted. We recently took a friend to the Statue of Liberty. He was an immigrant from China whose family is not allowed to leave, and he fell to his knees and kissed the ground. And it was the most moving thing I ever saw in my life because I realized the basic things we take for granted. My children were awed, just absolutely dumbstruck. And you know teenagers are hardly ever without something to say.”

ARE OUR VALUES SECURE?

Do you think America is losing its identity — its beliefs and values — or is it pretty much secure?



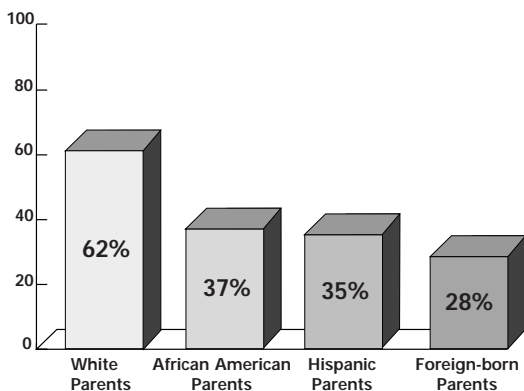
FORGETTING TO GIVE THANKS

There is a widespread conviction that most people fail to appreciate how lucky they are to be living in this country. Almost all respondents (90%) say most people living in America tend to take the freedoms we have for granted — only 8% say they appreciate them. “We have so many wonderful things here, but I think people just take it for granted,” said a woman in Birmingham. In Dayton a woman said, “We live in a land of plenty, and a lot of people forget that and go about on a day-to-day basis with a lack of gratitude for the incredible abundance that surrounds us.”

In surveys, it is far harder to get people to evaluate themselves critically and to admit to their personal shortcomings. Yet 55% of respondents say they themselves sometimes take the freedoms available in the United States for granted, while 45% say they always appreciate them. And it is very interesting to note that the parents most likely to say they are taking the United States for granted are non-Hispanic whites born in the United States (62%). In sharp contrast, only 28% of immigrant, 35% of Hispanic, and 37% of African American parents say they sometimes take U.S. freedoms for granted.

TAKING FREEDOMS FOR GRANTED

Parents who say they sometimes take U.S. freedoms for granted



This inattention to the special nature and ideals of the country often came through in the focus groups, where parents usually took time to gather their thoughts and warm to the conversation. For example, at the end of a discussion in Secaucus, one participant commented, “I don’t think I realized the importance of this topic until we actually started talking about it.” “Most people don’t have time to think about it — you are just consumed with your own life,” a woman tried to explain.

This concern rarely stems from worries about immigration. Instead people seem more concerned that self-interest and personal greed have become the norm.

As with so many parental worries, the concern about taking things for granted is projected onto children: 91% say too many of today’s youngsters fail to appreciate how good this country is (61% strongly agree). And, as we report in Finding Four, parents expect schools to play an important role in rectifying this situation.

EVERYONE WANTS SOMETHING

Yet another reason parents are concerned that something precious is at risk stems from their sense that the “pluribus” is getting more emphasis these days than the “unum.” But again this concern rarely stems from worries about immigration. Instead people seem more concerned that self-interest and personal greed have become the norm. “Has anyone seen the movie *Independence Day*?” asked an African American mom in Birmingham. “Do you remember at the end when everyone pulled together? We don’t have that anymore. We are all doing our own thing. There is nothing in this country that we all bond together with.”

About nine in ten parents (89%) believe “there’s too much attention paid to what separates us and not enough to what we have in common,” with 59% saying they *strongly* agree with the statement. “Our country is really this loose fabric, and we need to tie it together,” said a Dayton woman. “There is so much factionalism and division in our culture that if we don’t have something that is a threat that everybody can recognize, then how are we going to hold ourselves together?”

THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY

Often, this sentiment was expressed as something as plain and old-fashioned as caring about neighbors or jumping in to help without expectation of reward. This loss of a sense of community is what sometimes troubles parents when they talk about being disappointed with how people are pulling together. "People don't seem to care. They are wrapped up in their own lives

and their own worlds, and they just don't put themselves out to go out of their way to help anyone else," said a Dayton woman. A Birmingham mom described a good citizen as one who "doesn't just take and take from the community. A good citizen is one who would give back to the community because you want to do it, just out of the goodness of your heart. But I think people these days are greedy. Everyone expects something in return."

FINDING FOUR: THE HEROES AND TRADITIONS OF AMERICA

Large numbers of both U.S. and foreign-born parents expect the schools to teach all children about the ideals and history of the country. There are only minor differences in the views of whites, blacks, and Hispanics.

There is debate in some education circles over how the schools should teach American history given the changing demographic character of the student body of America's public schools. Some believe the schools should help maintain children's ties to their ethnic group or nation of origin and that the stories and heroes (mostly white, mostly male, mostly European background) of the nation's founding cannot speak to kids whose backgrounds and traditions are so different. Others say that because they are the nation's most important public institutions, public schools have an even greater obligation to help forge American citizens out of students who are new to the nation.

AN ENDURING HISTORY

Among parents, however, there is little debate: through their responses to a wide variety of questions, all demographic groups — white, black, or Hispanic, immigrant or U.S.-born — clearly and resoundingly want the schools to teach children the traditional ideals and stories of what it means to be an American.

Well over eight in ten parents (85%) say it is absolutely essential for kids to learn in school that, whatever their ethnic or racial backgrounds, they are all part of one nation; an identical percentage (85%) think that before students are allowed to graduate, they should be required to understand the common history that ties Americans together. "It's important to learn history," said a Hispanic mom in San Jose. "In order for you to love and respect the country you live in, you have to know where you are living and what happened there." A mom in Colorado thought that children from families who settle in the United States "need to form bonds with America. They shouldn't forget about their old bonds, but they need to form new ones. Don't forget your heritage, but you're going to have to go on."

By a virtually unanimous 91% to 8% margin, parents think all students — not just those who show an interest and aptitude — should be studying American history so they can understand what the nation stands for. For this African American mom in Birmingham, it seemed only natural that the schools make this part of their agenda: "They spend a lot of time at school, so I think part of what you would want for them to learn is about being a citizen."

SCHOOLS' RESPONSIBILITIES

Parents who say these statements come "very" or "somewhat close" to their view

	Parents Overall	Foreign-born Parents
Schools should make a special effort to teach new immigrants about American values	88%	87%
To graduate from high school, students should understand the common history that ties Americans together	85	88
Kids should learn ethnic pride at home — they should learn what it means to be an American at school	80	80
Schools should teach about the holidays and traditions of different cultures	69	80

LEARN ETHNIC PRIDE AT HOME

As for ethnic diversity among students, by a 79% to 18% margin parents think the bigger priority for the schools should be to teach kids to be proud of being a

part of this country and to learn the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, not to focus on instilling pride in their ethnic group's identity and heritage. (Parents' attitudes about multicultural education are complex and will be discussed in greater detail in Finding Six.)

It is not that parents are anxious to sever kids from their ethnic bonds, nor is their goal to create schools that function as cookie cutters, creating uniform, single-minded Americans. Fully 85% believe it is absolutely essential for the schools to teach children to respect others who are from different ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds. Moreover, virtually seven in ten (69%) think the schools should teach students about the holidays and traditions of different cultures from around the world.

But a large majority of parents (80%) believe "the best place for kids to learn to take pride in their ethnic or racial identity is at home — school is where they should be learning about what it means to be an American." One mom in San Jose with Mexican roots said, "My first-grader is learning about the history of the United States. When he gets home he tells me about Abraham Lincoln and the flag, why it has stars. It is important to me that he learn this, definitely. I want him to learn the history of Mexico, too — but that, I am going to teach him." The schools are best used, in

the view of parents, for passing on a shared American identity to their youngsters.

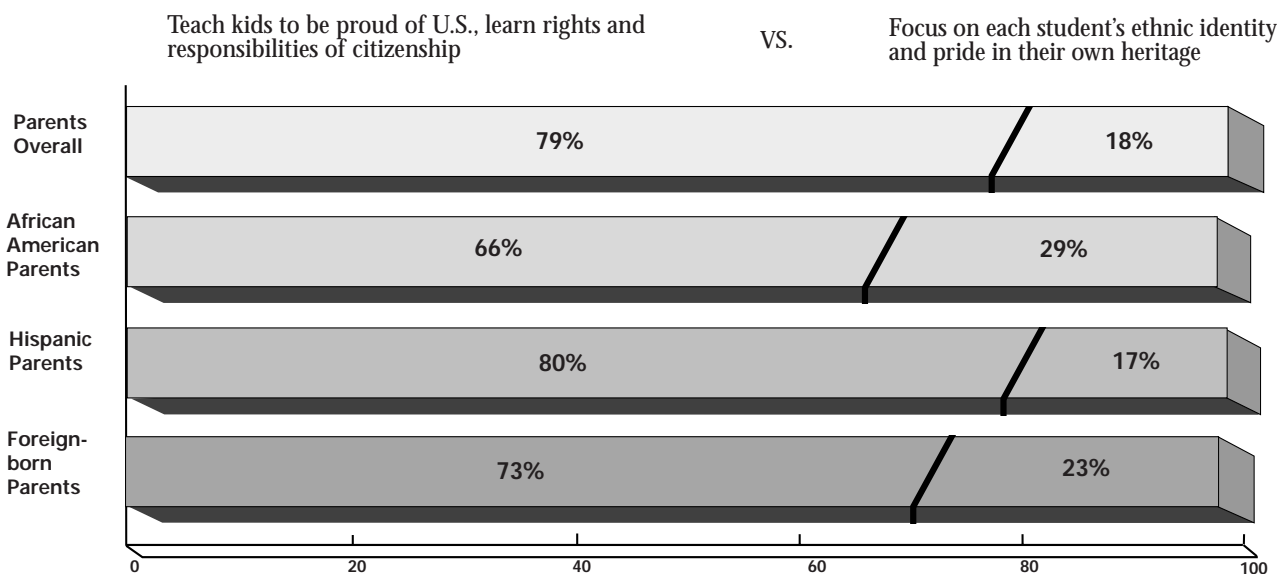
FOREIGN-BORN PARENTS AGREE

It is even more critical for the schools to play this role, according to parents, when the kids are new immigrants. For this Secaucus mom, it is vital for the schools to teach kids what it means to be an American because "a lot of times their parents don't know things about America, so they can't rely on their parents." More than nine in ten parents overall (92%) say it is important for schools that have a lot of immigrant students to concentrate on teaching them heroes, traditions, and beliefs of the United States.

This sentiment is not simply a self-protective response of those who are white and native-born: immigrant parents (92%), Hispanic parents (95%), and black parents (86%) agree in decisive numbers. About nine in ten (88%) also believe the schools should make a special effort to teach new immigrants about American values and beliefs. Once again, nearly identical proportions of immigrant parents (87%), Hispanic parents (91%), and black parents (89%) concur. "It's good for kids that there are other holidays, religions, cultures," said a Nevada mom. "It's important to teach those

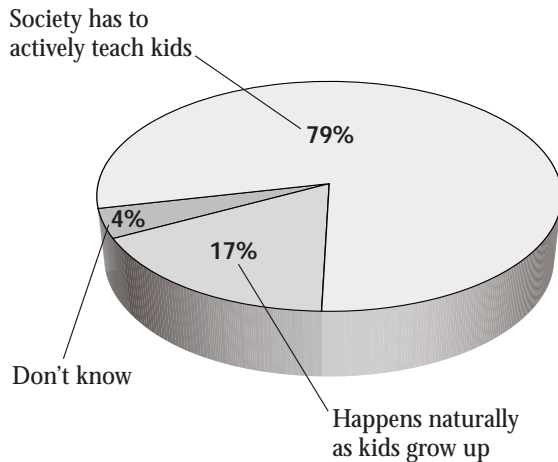
SCHOOLS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

What should be a bigger priority for your own children's schools?



TEACHING ABOUT AMERICA

Do you think that learning what it means to be an American happens naturally as kids grow up, or is it something society has to actively teach kids?



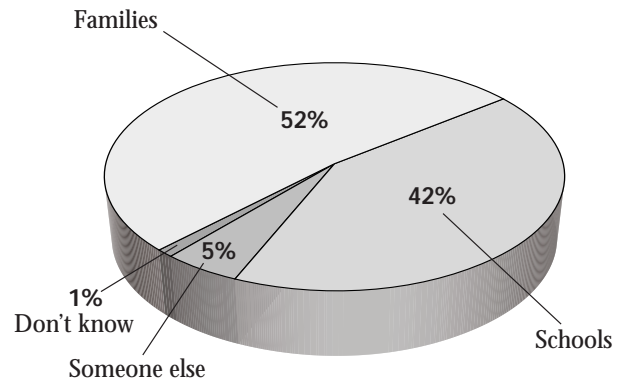
because we all came from somewhere else. I want my daughter to understand these things.”

But what about concerns that emphasizing the stories and men who founded the United States may alienate youngsters who look nothing like those men? Parents are not afraid this will happen: 87% think that given the great diversity in the backgrounds of kids today, it is more important than ever for the public schools to teach all kids the history of our Founding Fathers and how this country was created; only 9% worry that such lessons will seem irrelevant or make kids feel shut out and unwelcome. Once again, strong majorities of parents who are themselves immigrants, or who are Hispanic, or African American, agree (88%, 79%, and 73%, respectively).

A SUBTLE, SELF-CONFIDENT PATRIOTISM

Although the implication of these overwhelming numbers is clear, they disguise a more subtle thought process. In the focus group conversations, many parents spoke about the need to transmit to kids the sense that their nation was good and something to be proud of, but in a way that affirmed the restrained patriotism

Who should take most of the responsibility for teaching young people what America stands for?



they feel as adults. “They are going to be citizens of the United States. You could be proud and teach pride in the United States and our system of government without saying it’s the only way, it’s the best way. And that’s what I would hope the schools do,” said a Dayton mom. “You don’t want to teach that Americans are better than everybody else, but you do want to teach that this is the better place,” said a Secaucus dad. “Not that we are better than anybody because we are Americans, but that the way we do things in comparison to others is better. If the schools don’t do that, you are going to have children coming out of school that don’t really understand what it is to be an American.”

Two-thirds of American parents (67%) believe it is absolutely essential that the schools teach kids that the United States is a fundamentally good country; another 66% want schools to teach kids to be patriotic and loyal toward the nation. But two-thirds (66%) also believe it is absolutely essential to teach kids that “it is good to question the actions and policies of the U.S. government.” These attitudes are but another manifestation, identified in Finding One, of the restrained, relaxed pride with which Americans regard their nation. There is little appetite among America’s parents for jingoism or chest-thumping patriotism in the schools’ curriculum.

SKILLS FIRST

It is important to emphasize what may be an obvious point: that when parents think about what their public schools do, political socialization is not the first thing they typically think of. Asked to choose the most important of three educational goals, only 9% say teaching the ideas and history that tie all Americans together is the most important goal for public schools to accomplish; 68% say it is to teach students basic academic skills such as reading, writing, and doing math; and 21% say the most important goals are learning social skills and how to get along.

Their inattention, however, could mean some things that are important to parents may slip through the cracks. Asked how often their child recites the Pledge of Allegiance at school, 61% of parents with kids in grammar school say it is every day; by high school, the number drops to 29%. But the truly telltale number is that 35% of all parents admit they did not know, and even 29% of parents with kids in grammar school — commonly expected to be more involved in their children's education — also did not know. And parents seem to care, at least on some level, about reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: 47% of parents whose kids did recite the Pledge would be upset if the school stopped the practice, and another 37% would be somewhat concerned; only 15% would not take it seriously.

FAMILIES HAVE A ROLE

Our nation's parents overwhelmingly believe that society has to actively teach kids what it means to be an American, rather than thinking that it happens naturally (79% to 17%). Moreover, parents are hardly in a rush to put the entire responsibility for achieving this on the shoulders of the schools. "Society tends to be giving more and more responsibility to schools that really does belong at home," said a Dayton mom. And a Secaucus woman was clear about who would teach her kids the importance of voting: "Since I've been eighteen I've never missed an election — primaries, school board, anything — and my children come with me, I show them how to vote. They know this is part of the plan. They'll say, 'Mom, remember we've got to vote tonight.' It's something they realize this is part of what they do as a citizen." But an African American mom in

Birmingham recalled learning an important lesson about what it means to be an American at school: "I vote because I was taught in school that it was important. My mom is not a registered voter because she was taught that they were going to do what they wanted to do anyhow. But I learned in school that my vote makes a difference."

About half (52%) say parents should take most of the responsibility for teaching young people what America stands for; however, a significant proportion (42%) points to the public schools. The more typical view is that this is a shared responsibility between the schools and the parents, where in the best of worlds, one reinforces the other.

"IF APATHY IS THE NORM. . ."

Some of the parents in this study expressed disappointment in the indifference and disregard that kids, schools, and parents display toward the nation's history. The vast majority of parents (82%) who thought the family should teach kids what it means to be American thought families were doing only a fair or poor job, and 51% of those who thought it should be the schools' responsibility thought the schools were doing only a fair or poor job as well.

The more typical view is that this is a shared responsibility between the schools and the parents, where in the best of worlds, one reinforces the other.

"If you go to a teenager and ask them who won World War Two, they'll say, 'Was that a Star Wars game?' It just amazes me, with this younger generation, how lame or stupid they are. I blame that on the public schools. That was a major event not only for the United States, but in world history. If that starts getting diluted through the next generation, who knows?" said a Hispanic dad in San Jose. Meanwhile many parents acknowledge that they themselves would often have to "look things up" to answer questions of fact; and many parents say they are not paying close attention to what the schools are teaching about what it means to be an American. "If parents aren't voting, if parents don't know, if they don't care, if apathy is the norm — how can you expect any better from the kids?" said a mom in Secaucus.

FINDING FIVE: ENGLISH A.S.A.P.

Learning to speak English is seen as the cornerstone of assimilation — both as a practical necessity and as a symbol that a person intends to become an American. Parents fully reject the theory of bilingual education; parents who immigrated to the United States are even more opposed to it.

Perhaps the most concrete and sharply divisive debates in the nexus of education, immigration, and assimilation have been about how best to teach students who do not speak English and how to teach them English itself. It is recurring fodder for ideological and cultural wars; for political battles in districts and states; and for education research. But among parents — be they white, Hispanic, or African American, native or foreign-born — there is little debate: parents consistently and firmly believe that teaching immigrant students English should be the schools’ first and foremost priority.

PRIORITY ONE: ENGLISH

Parents want the schools to have a single-minded focus on teaching English as quickly as possible. They are not rigid or formulaic when it comes to how much time or how much help kids need, but this preeminent goal — learn English first — is non-negotiable, to their minds. No other purpose — not keeping up with other academic subjects, not maintaining an immigrant student’s native language or culture — should be allowed to interfere.

Advocates of bilingual education believe that students who are immigrants should be taught in their native language so they can keep up with other subjects while they are learning English. But two out of every three parents overall (67%) say that it is more important for the public schools to teach English as quickly as possible to students who are new immigrants, even if this means they fall behind in other subjects. Only 27% say it is more important to teach them other subjects in their native language, even if this means it takes them longer to learn English. “It’s more important for [immigrant students] to learn English; they will fit in sooner and better,” said a Colorado mom. “Even if we have to put math behind a little bit — they’ll catch up.” A Hispanic mom in California agreed, saying, “The schools should teach them in English. I know some will fall back a little bit, but in the long run, they’ll catch up and reach their goals.”

It is striking to note that an even higher percentage of foreign-born parents — 75% — believe teaching English as quickly as possible is the greater priority, even at the cost of falling behind in other subjects. Majorities of Hispanic (66%) and black (68%) parents agree as well. “It is of course the official language,” said

BILINGUAL EDUCATION

When it comes to students who are new immigrants, which is more important for the public schools to do?

	Parents Overall	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
To teach them English as quickly as possible, <i>even if</i> this means they fall behind in other subjects	67%	68%	66%	75%
OR				
To teach them other subjects in their native language, <i>even if</i> this means it takes them longer to learn English	27	27	30	21

a New York City parent who immigrated from Korea. “If they don’t understand English it is going to be difficult for their future, going to college, getting a good job. I think English is the main language, and then if they have another language it is a plus.”

SINK-OR-SWIM?

In a San Jose focus group with Hispanic parents, the language issue provoked a heated debate between those who firmly believed in a sink-or-swim approach to learning English and those who were afraid this would hurt the children. One said, “The best way to learn any language is when you are forced to learn the language to survive. You learn a lot quicker, you pick it up quicker.” However, another parent responded: “I am going to ask you a question. If you go to Mexico, and I ask you to learn Spanish in a hundred and eighty days, [because] that way you can survive and go to the next grade, you are not going to make it. Nobody is going to make it.” Still a third parent urged that the goal was so important that it should be the single focus for children who have just arrived in the United States: “Take the year off instead of trying to ‘get them through, get them through.’ Before they can proceed on, make sure they understand the English language.”

The tension in San Jose and elsewhere was between a kind of “tough love” approach — kids will benefit if you push them hard and early to absorb the English language — and the thought that the sink-or-swim approach will cause unnecessary pain. In New York City a parent who had immigrated from Colombia referred to her own experiences and recalled, “When I came here I learned English in six months. We didn’t have any bilingual classes. Sometimes you have to force yourself a little bit.” But in the same group, a mom who immigrated from India said, “When they come to this country it’s a sort of mental shock. So why do we want to scare the kids? Give them one or two years.”

But despite these differences about how much help children who are learning English need, virtually all parents envision bilingual education as a strictly limited transitional experience, one whose main purpose is to smooth the shift from one language to another. No one

questioned the ultimate goal to learn English as quickly and effectively as possible, even at the cost of children falling behind in other areas.

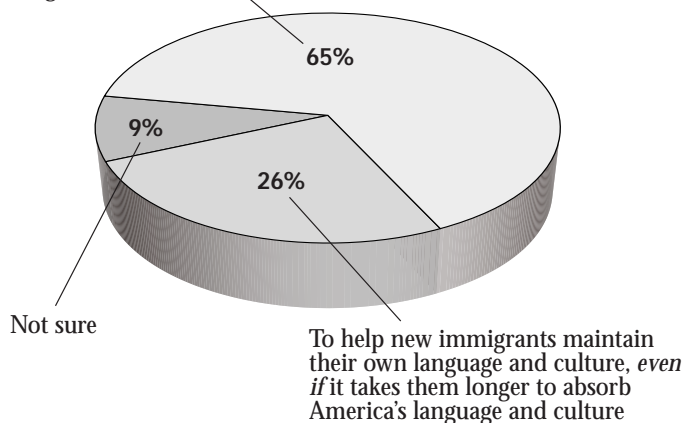
HOLDING ON TO WHO YOU ARE

Another argument on behalf of bilingual education is that it allows students to hold on to their cultural/ linguistic connection to their country of origin, making the process of assimilation less painful. But in a previous Public Agenda survey — which did not include an oversample of foreign-born parents — most parents rejected this priority in favor of learning English as quickly as possible. Sixty-five percent of parents thought that when it comes to students who are new immigrants, the public schools’ primary goal should be to help them absorb America’s language and culture as quickly as possible, even if their native language and culture are neglected. Only 26% said instead that the primary goal should be to help new immigrants maintain their own language and culture, even if it takes them longer to absorb America’s language and culture.¹³

ENGLISH A.S.A.P.?

When it comes to students who are new immigrants, what should the public schools’ primary goal be?

To help new immigrants absorb America’s language and culture as quickly as possible, *even if* their native language and culture are neglected



* Source: *Assignment Incomplete*, Public Agenda, 1995

WHAT ABOUT PARENTS WHO SPEAK A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT HOME?

But what about parents who use a foreign language in their everyday lives? Are they more likely to support a “go slow” approach when it comes to teaching English to students who are new to the country? To answer this question, two special analyses were conducted: one of Hispanic parents who were interviewed in Spanish on

“If they don’t understand English it is going to be difficult for their future, going to college, getting a good job. I think English is the main language, and then if they have another language it is a plus.”

— *Korean-born mom*

the telephone survey; and another of foreign-born parents who reported speaking a language other than English at home with their kids. Spanish-interviewed Hispanic respondents were about as likely as English-interviewed Hispanic respondents to say the schools’ bigger priority should be to teach English quickly to their youngsters (73% and 65%, respectively). Interestingly, Spanish-interviewed parents were more likely than other Hispanic parents to think that a person who does not make an effort to learn English is a bad citizen (87% to 52%).

Foreign-born parents who mostly speak a language other than English at home with their children also place a premium on having English taught in the schools. The differences between immigrants who speak a language other than English at home and those who do speak English are slight and statistically insignificant. They are about as likely as other immigrants to stress teaching English as quickly as possible, even if it is at the cost of having students fall behind in other subjects (68%, compared with 79% of immigrants who speak English at home). They are also about as likely to feel that a person who does not make an effort to learn English is a bad citizen (60%, compared with 70%, respectively).

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LANGUAGES

Parents who speak a foreign language with their kids sometimes do so with the conscious calculation and assumption that the schools would take care of teaching English. An immigrant from Colombia said, “I have a

two-year-old, but I am teaching her only to speak Spanish because I want her to learn it well until she goes to school. When she goes to school, she can learn English in six months.” An immigrant from Italy made a distinction between public and private conversations: “My son speaks Italian. In public I speak to him in English, but in private I try to speak to him in Italian because I want him to know my language.”

These findings may confound those who are used to seeing opinion statistics showing that the public supports bilingual education. For example, when the General Social Survey asked, “How do you feel about bilingual education?” 64% were in favor of it and 31% were opposed.¹⁴ But when Yankelovich Partners asked about bilingual education, the public’s emphasis becomes learning English: 48% of the public says public schools should teach all children in English; another 39% say children of immigrants should be taught in their native language only until they know enough English to join regular classes; and only 10% say children should be taught in their native language as long as it helps them learn.¹⁵ What accounts for this discrepancy?

BILINGUAL MEANS: LEARN ENGLISH

The term “bilingual education” may have a clear and precise meaning to educational policy makers and experts, but the public — parents included — is not attuned to the specialized language and shorthand labels used so comfortably by leaders. Indeed, interviews conducted for this project suggest that parents generally interpret bilingual education to mean offering help in learning the English language to children who are struggling to master it. “Bilingual education means trying to teach kids who speak Spanish, English,” said a dad in Florida. “English should be their first priority.” A mom in Texas also thought the primary purpose of bilingual education was to add English to the language abilities of those who spoke another language: “They [bilingual classes] make sure the student can speak both languages, not just Spanish. They’re already fluent in Spanish, now they need to make sure they read, write, and speak English.”

When people are asked in face-to-face conversations what they want the schools to focus on when teaching immigrant students, they can explain their answers;

when they are asked survey questions in clear and ordinary language, they can make quite clear what matters most to them. When the ideas and trade-offs of bilingual education are described, parents' values and priorities — not the label itself — drive their responses.

A SO-SO PERFORMANCE

Some educators might argue that results — what works in the classroom — not parental opposition or support, should determine the fate of bilingual education. But at the very least, parental perceptions carry political weight. One perception that may be important is the fairly high level of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the schools' current efforts to teach English. When asked how good a job the public schools are doing of teaching immigrant children to speak English as quickly as possible, only 28% of parents overall say good or excellent, and nearly half — 47% — say fair or poor (another 26% don't know). Parents who are foreign-born, Hispanic, or African American show similar levels of dissatisfaction: 43%, 45%, and 50%, respectively, say the schools are doing only a fair or poor job.

Most of America's parents (61%) would consider a person who decides to settle in the United States but never tries to learn English to be a bad citizen, and immigrant parents concur. Behind this perception lie some practical — and symbolic — considerations. Parents wonder how someone who cannot speak the dominant language would communicate with the schools, or in emergency situations, or even as their neighbor. "An immigrant parent should be able to communicate with us at least if there was an emergency situation," said a Birmingham mom. "They should not lose their total heritage but should be able to learn enough of ours to be able to communicate, to be able to work in the American environment."

CHEATING THE CHILDREN

There is a powerful sense that not teaching kids English as quickly as possible amounts to cheating them. "Teach them English first," said a Minnesota mom. "You need to be able to function daily in the U.S.; without it you're lost. Really, it will be a disadvantage to teach them in

their own language. I mean, how are they going to go to the grocery store or deal with the currency?"

Others respond more viscerally and look at the question — Is the person trying to learn English? — as a kind of litmus test of an immigrant's intentions, almost as a sign of "good manners." "This is America. You *should* speak English. You should speak English if you are going to live here. I think it's great to speak a variety of languages, but if you are going to live here, you ought to be able to get by with English," said a Secaucus woman. There is little animosity — and even some envy — of people who can speak more than one language. Nor is there widespread panic about the possibility that English in America is under threat. When survey respondents were told, "Some people say that the United States is becoming a bilingual nation, with Spanish as its second language," 37% believed "we should discourage this trend," but 45% wanted to "let things develop naturally," and another 16% even wanted to "encourage this trend."

AT LEAST MAKE THE EFFORT

But there is a great deal of bewilderment over why trying to learn the language of the United States — adopted or inherited — should not be automatically expected. "If you go to Mexico, they expect you to learn their language, don't they?" asked a dad from Texas. "So when they come to America, they need to learn English."

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

How good a job do public schools do teaching immigrant children to speak English as quickly as possible?

	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
Excellent	5%	4%	8%	11%	10%
Good	22	21	21	35	36
Fair	28	28	28	30	25
Poor	19	19	21	15	18
Don't know	26	29	22	8	12

My wife is from Mexico, but she speaks fluent English. It doesn't bother me whatsoever when she speaks in Spanish, but she does know how to speak English."

No one — not public opinion analysts or, for that matter, education researchers — can point to findings that definitively “prove” the value of a program, especially one as complex and varied as bilingual education. But ultimately an institution as democratic as the public schools cannot help but take this into account: through different questions across different demographic groups and including both Spanish- and English-speakers, a large majority of parents voice this straightforward, resolute expectation — that the schools teach English as quickly as possible to kids who are new Americans.

If one had to produce a list summarizing what our nation's parents expect to see, at a minimum, of good, loyal citizens, the list would not be long, but it would be telling: work hard, obey the laws, be tolerant of others. And, they would add — for symbolic and practical reasons — make a full-hearted effort to speak English.

There is a great deal of bewilderment over why trying to learn the language of the United States — adopted or inherited — should not be automatically expected.

FINDING SIX: INCLUDE, BUT DON'T DIVIDE

Parents do not currently view lessons or texts that emphasize the history and accomplishments of different groups as a problem. Parents from all groups, however, recoil at hypothetical examples of lessons or courses that demean the United States or, in parents' views, seem to encourage divisiveness and discord among groups of Americans.

America's parents are quite supportive of teaching students about the experiences, traditions, and histories of people other than themselves — as long as such lessons are inclusive, not divisive. Since they believe diversity is built into the foundations of their society, they think broadening kids' perspective is healthy — even essential. About seven in ten (69%) say the schools should teach students about the holidays and traditions of different cultures from around the world. “This is something kids need to know — there are so many different people these days,” said a Texas mom. “You cannot judge another person unless you know something about the world they live in. You run the risk of insulting people if you don't know what they're doing, their lifestyles, the way they think. We all have to live together.”

TEACH DIVERSITY — IT'S GOOD

A Minnesota mom was pleased by the range of cultural experiences her children were getting through school: “It's good for kids to learn about other people's holidays, religions, cultures. This is important. We are a melting pot and the world is getting smaller.”

There is also a belief, shared by 73% of parents overall, that the schools of the past did not do justice to the contributions minorities made to American history. “I went to school in the South,” said a Minnesota mom. “History was all white, what the whites did, what they accomplished, and we downplayed all the minorities. It would have been better for me if I was taught a little about other cultures, to learn about other people. We should teach kids about Martin Luther King; he was a very strong man who tried to bring people together instead of bringing them apart.” The schools could and should now teach history accurately and faithfully,

according to parents. “When minorities like a Mexican American or black American had an impact on our history,” said a Texan dad, “I don't see a problem with studying that. That's part of our history.”

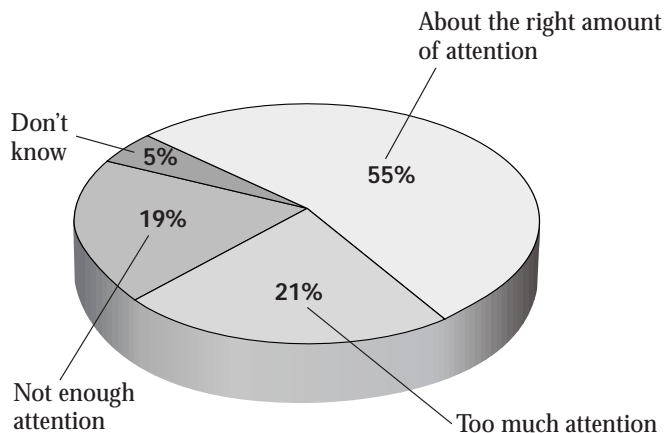
In Birmingham several white parents did complain that the schools were going overboard these days, paying too much attention to African American history and culture. “There's not a month devoted to Italian culture, there's not a month devoted to the Spanish culture,” protested one dad. “I want my kids to know about it, but I don't want it shoved down my throat,” chimed in another.

FEW SEE PROBLEMS NOW

But these parents were the exception, not the rule: across the country, only one in five (21%) parents overall say the public schools have been paying too much attention to celebrating the holidays and

PAYING ATTENTION TO DIFFERENCES

Do the public schools pay enough attention to diversity and celebrating the holidays and traditions of different groups?



traditions of different groups. Most parents (55%) say the public schools are paying the right amount of attention, and 19% even say too little. “I don’t see it as a problem for my kids now,” said a Florida dad. “People themselves are paying too much attention to the things that divide them, not the schools. The schools aren’t making it an issue.”

These perceptions hold when it comes to how the schools are dealing with the history of African Americans in the United States. About half (47%) say the public schools are paying about the right amount of attention to the harm done to African Americans, and more believe too little attention is paid to the issue rather than too much (26% to 20%). Parents who are black are a notable exception — six in ten (60%) say the schools now pay too little attention to the mistreatment of African Americans. Previous Public Agenda research identified a sense among black parents that school textbooks should place a greater emphasis on African American figures.¹⁶

CROSSING THE LINE

But parents draw a sharp line — up to here and no further — if they think schools or educators may be fostering factionalism and disunity or are encouraging group loyalties at the expense of a shared American identity. Parents show little tolerance for lessons that could drive students apart. Parents seem to be thinking, “Why give kids a reason to walk around with a chip on their shoulder? Why divide them?”

About three in four parents (74%) would be upset or at least somewhat concerned if a history teacher spent all of class time teaching the history of different ethnic groups instead of common American history. And about seven in ten (68%) of those who express concern say they would go further and take it up with the school. “I wouldn’t like that at all,” said a Florida dad. “I’m an Irish-American, but I know about Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, the Boston Tea Party. These are the things that build unity among Americans. If everybody is classifying themselves differently, we lose what we have in common. We’re all Americans, we all need to learn that common history. We keep getting more and more divided; whether it’s along racial or ethnic or religious lines, everybody’s in their own clique.”

Interestingly, although African American parents voice a concern that schools pay too little attention to the black historical experience, they too believe that a teacher who totally ignored common American history would be crossing the line and doing something improper. Most (67%) say they would be somewhat concerned or upset; and most (69%) say they would take up the issue with the school.

APART IS WRONG

Some educators argue that the best way for schools to reach minority students in inner-city neighborhoods is to design courses in literature and history that mostly present writers and heroes who are themselves minorities. But a broad majority of America’s parents (80%) think this is a bad idea. What’s more, immigrant (78%), Hispanic (69%), and black (70%) parents are not far behind in rejecting this notion.

Two reasons seem to be driving this rejection: first, that minority kids would be cheated by getting a narrowly defined education instead of a broad one; and second, that the schools would be promoting communities — and a nation — divided along racial and ethnic lines. “They would lose out if they learned only about black heroes and writers,” said a Minnesota mom.

“We should teach kids about Martin Luther King; he was a very strong man who tried to bring people together instead of bringing them apart.” — Minnesota mom

“They’d be losing out on a lot of information and important people that were not black. We should not be putting one color against another, white against black. They should be teaching history as a whole.” Another parent took the scenario further, arguing, “If blacks were taught by only black teachers, and Chinese were taught by Chinese, pretty soon we’d have a bunch of bigots running around. One-sided education is worthless. Next thing you have kids fighting each other about which side is better — we’d have a civil war.”

WHAT ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM?

Two in three parents overall (66%) say this teaching approach will encourage racial division and stop kids

from learning important things; only 27% accept the opposing view, that this will improve students' self-esteem and motivate them to learn. Most immigrant, Hispanic, and black parents agree (56%, 53%, and 54%, respectively). "To show kids that it's good to be divided — that will just cause tension in the community," said a Hispanic dad in Florida.

Most parents (54%), for example, think students would suffer if a teacher taught American history to a class with all black students by focusing almost completely on African American experiences and struggles. "It's a bad idea; they're getting short-changed," insisted a mom in Texas. "They'll never learn what others have contributed to the country. Thomas Edison wasn't black, but they've got to know what he did, they've got to know what other nationalities have contributed to our country. And it leaves room for prejudiced thoughts to come in. The people who built the Underground Railroad were not only black. And the people who built the regular railroad, laid down the tracks, they were mostly Chinese." But black parents — perhaps reflecting a concern that the black experience has been short-changed — are divided on this question: 36% say kids would suffer and 39% say they would benefit.

DON'T "SWEEP HISTORY UNDER THE RUG"

Parents apply a principle of "do not divide us" to the content of classroom lessons. Nearly six in ten (59%) would be at least somewhat concerned if a teacher emphasized that the United States mistreated minority groups such as African Americans and Native Americans throughout its history. Half of those (51%) say they would take their complaints to the school. Black parents stand out again, but this time they are more disturbed than parents overall: 68% would be at least somewhat concerned, and 62% would complain to the school.

But lessons that portray the nation as fundamentally bad truly touch a nerve among parents and would trigger wholesale rebuke among them. If a teacher taught that America was and still is a fundamentally racist country, for example, 84% of parents would be concerned; of those, 65% would complain to the school. Black parents also see this as a wrong lesson to be teaching kids: 81% would be concerned, and of those, two in three (68%) would complain to the school.

People are not interested in trying to "sweep history under the rug." "Slavery was a fact," said a Minnesota mom. "But you have to show kids the other aspects of history. There were people who tried to help. I'd have to straighten out my child, go through the history books with him. Then I'd have to talk to the school about it."

DISTURBING LESSONS

Parents who would be concerned and would complain to the school about a teacher who:

	% of parents who would be "upset"/ "somewhat concerned"	% of these parents who would complain to the school*
Taught that America was and still is a fundamentally racist country	84%	65%
Spent all of class time teaching the history and experience of different ethnic groups instead of common American history	74	68
Emphasized that the U.S. mistreated minority groups throughout its history	59	51

* Base: Parents who said "upset"/"somewhat concerned"

LESSONS THAT TOUCH A RAW NERVE

This theme of refusing to accept truly negative or divisive lessons in the classrooms emerged in a previous Public Agenda study, *First Things First*. In that study, seven in ten white parents (72%) and African American parents (71%) said it was not appropriate to bring into classrooms a guest speaker who advocated black separatism. Parents interviewed for the current study voiced a similar concern. "To teach that doesn't do my child any good," said a Florida dad. "That's just trying to cause divisions among people, and we have to get along. You're just causing conflict, and kids look up to a teacher — after a parent, they're the biggest influence. He needs to be taught history, not somebody's opinion." By contrast, white (82%) and black (87%) parents thought it wholly appropriate to study the struggle for black civil rights in the fifties and sixties.

Bringing in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened struck white (84%) and African American (71%) parents as inappropriate in the earlier study. And the parents in this current study also recoiled at this example. “I’d be extremely upset,” said a mom in Texas. “I would take it to the school board. It’s not just another point of view; they ought to teach the truth instead of a lie. You can’t hide six million people. Fact is fact, fiction is fiction.” Another lesson parents found offensive in the previous study: teaching that Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans (68% of white and 67% of black parents said this was inappropriate).¹⁷

NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT

Most parents have an intuitive understanding that the public schools serve an important unifying function in a society that is quite diverse. They seldom stop to think consciously about it, but they can talk about it once asked. About eight in ten parents (79%) say their own children’s schools should focus on teaching kids to be proud of being a part of this country and to understand their rights and responsibilities (73% of immigrant, 80% of Hispanic, and 66% of black parents agree). Only 18% instead believe it’s more important for the schools to focus on each student’s ethnic identity and for the students to feel proud of their group’s heritage (23% of immigrant, 17% of Hispanic, and 29% of black parents). Parents may not be especially vigilant overseers of the lessons schools teach about what it means to be an American — only sharp violations of their principles evoke an outraged response. This may be because their foremost concerns are the basics and practical skills or because they believe the family is central to teaching the meaning of citizenship. It may also be that some of America’s parents are quietly confident that kids will ultimately learn to value their nation and its principles, even if they get sidetracked along the way. About eight in ten parents (81%) would be at least somewhat concerned if a youngster became very critical

of the United States and believed “its system of government was unfair and should be replaced.” But more than two-thirds of parents (69%) also think that “this youngster would eventually believe in the American way of doing things.”

A patient optimism may be at work, a sense that in the end kids themselves will realize what their parents had come to realize. “I was raised on ‘My Country ‘Tis of Thee’ and all that stuff,” said a Dayton mom.

“And there certainly came a time when I felt sarcastic toward that. Teenagers can go through a time when they think, ‘Patriotism, that’s a bunch of crap.’ Once they have world experiences or travel, they might find a happy medium. I think it’s important that we teach them these solid ideas, then let them naturally wander but hopefully come back around to recognize the blessings that are provided in this country.”

Lessons that portray the nation as fundamentally bad truly touch a nerve among parents and would trigger wholesale rebuke among them.

THE PARENTS’ AGENDA

Yet another, less hopeful explanation, is that parents may not really be focused on the specific, day-to-day events and lessons taking place in school. Some commentators might ask: If the more divisive and jarring of the lessons and texts used as examples in this study were prevalent in today’s schools, would parents realize it? As reported earlier, more than a third of parents overall (35%) do not know how often — if at all — their children recite the Pledge of Allegiance at school.

What is ultimately clear, however, is that parents do have an agenda for what they want schools to be teaching students about being American: to broaden their children’s perspective and simultaneously convey a shared understanding — and appreciation — of the nation they call home.

AFTERWORD

By Deborah Wadsworth

In a time when public attitudes toward many of the nation's institutions have been variously characterized as mistrustful, cynical, even outraged, *A Lot To Be Thankful For* offers an alternative perspective. Parents responding to this research sing out in unison their pride in being American. Foreign-born and native-born alike, they embrace a common agenda that they expect the public schools to teach their children about what it means to be an American.

THE ABC'S OF CITIZENSHIP

Much has been written about the decoupling of rights and responsibilities in our democracy these days, and certainly some of this criticism of contemporary life is deserved. But parents in *A Lot To Be Thankful For* recite an unexpected litany of the ABC's of American citizenship that reunites both elements of democracy. The right to individual freedom and opportunity in America is paramount... but so is the responsibility to work hard to take advantage of that opportunity. Freedom of religion is guaranteed... but with it comes the requirement to honor diversity. The right to education is crucial... but with it comes the absolute necessity to learn the English language.

ACKNOWLEDGING IMPERFECTIONS

Loyalty to the nation is a deeply felt response, though it differs from the almost jingoistic patriotism of the forties and fifties. Tempered by the experiences of the sixties and seventies, these contemporary parents acknowledge the nation's warts and imperfections but hold fast to a mature understanding of the special ideals that define us as a nation.

While we may not always do the right thing, they seem to be saying, there is nowhere else we want to be. Although many are unable to recite the specifics of the Bill of Rights or the particulars of the Constitution, they appear to have internalized the very essence of these documents, as large numbers of all groups point to individual freedom and opportunity combined with a commitment to tolerance and respect for others as the essence of "Americanness."

Freedom of religion is guaranteed... but with it comes the requirement to honor diversity. The right to education is crucial... but with it comes the absolute necessity to learn the English language.

DIVERSITY, BUT NOT DIVISION

Those who have migrated to America, like those born here, say they believe this to be a country where differences are tolerated, and diversity is celebrated. But let no one mistake this sensitivity to the "pluribus" as a rejection of our "unum." On the contrary: parents in this study strongly reject divisiveness — any attempt to use the schools to pit one group against another. Thus, though fiercely ideological battles may be raging in Washington, the body politic of the country at large is in reasonably good health.

Beyond this unified vision, however, a concern is raised by parents who worry that the country may be vulnerable to a loss of identity — not from the influx of immigrants with their distinctive ethnic heritages, they say, but from the perceived loss of neighborliness among all of us, our collective loss of the work ethic, and a diminishing sense of personal responsibility and even of tolerance. The real threats to America, they suggest, come not from immigrants but from our taking our freedoms — and our success as a nation — for granted.

IT'S NOT "TO EACH HIS OWN"

Most of the news from *A Lot To Be Thankful For* is heartening, but a few results suggest a note of caution. First, some of the findings seem ready-made for misinterpretation by those bent on doing so.

Parents — across every group studied — bring their own particular definitions to two of the most controversial issues in education today. Parents seem well disposed to the term “bilingual education.” But by this they mean teaching immigrant children English as expeditiously and effectively as possible. No other goal — not maintaining ties to an original heritage, not “keeping up” with other subjects — comes even close in importance. For parents, bilingual education means just this: Some children speak a foreign language; they will learn English; they will then speak two languages and will thus be truly bilingual.

A similar phenomenon occurs with the phrase “multicultural education.” Parents want children to learn about different ethnic and racial groups and to appreciate their contributions and experiences. They want children to learn about the positive and worthwhile aspects of *multiple* cultures. They do not mean, as some educators and interest groups have proposed, that children need, or will even benefit from, a “to each his own” approach. Indeed, from the parents’ point of view, it is learning about cultures in addition to their own that is beneficial for all children, given the special nature of the country we live in.

Parents — across every group studied — bring their own particular definitions to two of the most controversial issues in education today.

ON AUTOMATIC PILOT

Second, most parents — across all groups — demonstrate some serious gaps in knowledge about the nation’s history and don’t seem particularly troubled by this. Few draw a connection between good citizenship and understanding the issues we face as a country. Many seem to be on automatic pilot when it comes to civic awareness.

American democracy has not evolved seamlessly nor without struggle. Those interviewed for this study acknowledge it is a precious commodity. Thus, a warning bell tolls quietly in the background, causing one to pause and ponder whether the relaxed, even complacent mood we found comes from having absorbed the lessons of democracy too easily, simply by living them or as a result of a de-emphasis in the teaching of American history in the nation’s schools.

Whatever the reason, such complacency may not stand us or future generations in good stead when our democratic ideals are seriously challenged — as history suggests will almost inevitably occur. It may be entirely appropriate, therefore, if not necessary, to challenge both American parents and the public schools to which they entrust their children to redouble efforts to transmit a more rigorous understanding of who we are and how we got here.

TABLE 1

DEFINITION OF A BAD CITIZEN

Now I am going to ask a different kind of question. What if a person [Insert Item]. Would you consider them to be a bad American citizen, or not?

Percent responding “bad citizen”	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
Lives on government programs like welfare even though they are able to work	77%	79%	73%	74%	83%
Refuses to work with people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds	72	72	77	72	77
Decides to settle in the U.S. but never tries to learn English	61	63	56	53	65
Makes it a point never to stand up when the national anthem is played during public events like ball games	58	62	52	63	61
Firmly believes that communism, not democracy, is the best political system	56	58	51	60	56
Is called for jury duty but always finds a way to avoid it	52	55	47	56	55
Who is able to vote but never does	51	52	49	55	63
Has no interest in the issues facing the nation	48	47	49	49	55
Knows virtually nothing about America’s history or Founding Fathers	36	36	34	36	46
Avoids the draft in a time of war because of moral or religious reasons	33	35	22	38	36

Note: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies between numbers in tables and numbers in texts. Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Samples were defined as follows:

Parents Overall: National random sample of parents; all races and ethnicities (n=801)

Foreign-born: Parents born outside the U.S., Puerto Rico, Guam, or U.S. Virgin Islands (n=200)

Hispanic: Parents self-identified as Hispanic (n=203)

African American: Parents self-identified as black or African American (n=198)

White: Parents born in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Guam, or U.S. Virgin Islands; non-Hispanic; self-identified as white (n=592)

TABLE 2**VIEWS ON AMERICA**

For each of the following statements, please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree.

Percent responding “strongly/somewhat agree”	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
Too many of today’s youngsters fail to appreciate how good this country is	91%	93%	83%	88%	88%
The U.S. is a better country than most other countries in the world	90	91	84	92	91
Too many Americans are materialistic and care too much about buying things	90	90	86	87	91
There’s too much attention paid these days to what separates different ethnic and racial groups and not enough to what they have in common	89	90	88	84	85
The government sometimes lies to the public about what is really going on	89	90	85	86	88
Minorities often get treated unfairly in this country	70	66	84	73	71
Most of today’s immigrants come to the U.S. to settle and become loyal Americans	62	59	62	68	78
The U.S. has done a lot of morally wrong things to other countries	48	47	47	41	57
It is harder to raise kids in America than in other countries	30	27	31	35	52

TABLE 3

ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL AMERICAN IDEALS

Now I'm going to read you a list of American ideals. For each please tell me if it is absolutely essential to you personally, important but not essential, or not that important. If you haven't really thought about it much, please say so.

Percent responding "absolutely essential"	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
Everyone should have the right to their religious beliefs	89%	91%	83%	78%	85%
There should be equal opportunity for people regardless of their race, religion, or sex	88	88	88	82	89
The police should follow strict rules on how they collect evidence and treat the people they arrest	81	80	79	74	82
With hard work, people have a chance to move up and prosper	79	81	74	69	75
All children can go to public school free of charge	78	79	69	72	75
People should work and earn their living — they should not rely on the government	76	80	69	70	70
People can protest or criticize the government without fear of punishment	67	68	52	51	63
People are supposed to help those who are less fortunate	64	65	68	56	62
People are supposed to be tolerant of others whose backgrounds or lifestyles are different	61	62	56	50	63
The press can report the news without government censorship	57	61	38	45	59
People can enjoy a better standard of living here than in most countries	55	55	60	58	53
The U.S. helps promote and defend democracy around the world	41	41	39	41	40
We live in a society that is based on Judeo-Christian beliefs	36	38	34	31	31

TABLE 4**PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF AMERICAN HISTORY**

If your child asked you to explain [Insert Item], could you immediately give a good answer or would you be more comfortable looking it up first?

	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
What the Fourth of July holiday actually celebrates					
Could immediately give good answer	89%	91%	82%	80%	89%
Would be more comfortable looking it up first	11	9	18	19	11
The causes of the Civil War					
Could immediately give good answer	65	69	53	47	52
Would be more comfortable looking it up first	34	30	48	52	47
The rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights					
Could immediately give good answer	47	48	47	41	50
Would be more comfortable looking it up first	53	52	53	59	48
The reasons for the Cold War					
Could immediately give good answer	44	45	25	33	52
Would be more comfortable looking it up first	56	55	75	65	46

TABLE 5

PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

How important do you think it is for the public schools to teach kids the following things? [Insert Item] Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not that important?

Percent responding “absolutely essential”	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
That whatever their ethnic or racial background, they are all part of one nation	85%	85%	84%	78%	81%
To respect others who are from different ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds	85	85	88	83	88
To appreciate the freedoms they are guaranteed under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights	83	84	83	79	82
Practical skills such as how to balance a check book or write a résumé	72	73	76	62	63
That the U.S. is a fundamentally good country	67	69	63	61	61
To be patriotic and loyal toward the nation	66	68	59	66	64
That it is GOOD to question the actions and policies of the U.S. government	66	66	70	54	58
That a representative democracy is the best system for Americans to live under	58	60	52	49	62
That the American economy works best under capitalism and the free market	44	46	48	41	40
To read the newspaper on a regular basis in order to be informed and responsible citizens	44	42	57	44	51

TABLE 6

SCHOOLS AND DIVERSITY

How close does each of the following statements about the public schools come to your own view — [Insert Item]
Would you say very close, somewhat close, not too close or not close at all?

Percent responding “very/somewhat close”	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
The schools should make a special effort to teach new immigrants about American values and beliefs	88%	88%	89%	91%	87%
To graduate from high school, students should be required to show they understand the common history and ideas that tie all Americans together	85	88	83	89	88
The best place for kids to learn to take pride in their ethnic or racial identity is at home — school is where they should be learning what it means to be an American	80	81	81	87	80
In the past, the schools unfairly overlooked the contributions that minorities made to U.S. history	73	70	80	76	74
The schools these days pay too much attention to the differences between different ethnic and racial groups and not enough to what they have in common	70	70	69	70	66
The schools should teach students about the holidays and traditions of different cultures from around the world	69	67	78	77	80

TABLE 7

HISTORY LESSONS THAT DISTURB PARENTS

Suppose your child had a history or social studies teacher who did the following things. For each I'll ask you if it would upset you, if you would be somewhat concerned or if you would not take it too seriously.

[Probe respondents who would be “upset” or “somewhat concerned”]: And would you complain to the school, work it out at home, or would you not make an issue of it?

Percent who would be “upset/somewhat concerned”	Parents Overall	White Parents	African American Parents	Hispanic Parents	Foreign-born Parents
Taught students that one person’s vote could never make a difference in an election	91%	92%	93%	92%	87%
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	64	62	66	62	64
Constantly criticized America’s economy and political system	87	89	84	88	81
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	65	66	66	62	62
Taught that all forms of government other than democracy are morally wrong	87	88	86	80	82
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	58	56	60	59	57
Taught that America was, and still is, a fundamentally racist country	84	86	81	80	84
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	65	66	68	69	61
Spent all of class time teaching students about the history and experience of different ethnic groups instead of common American history	74	78	67	69	71
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	68	68	69	63	68
Always tried to show America in a positive light, even when the country may have been wrong	70	69	72	66	67
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	35	30	50	42	36
Emphasized that the U.S. mistreated minority groups such as African Americans and Native Americans throughout its history	59	59	68	70	63
<i>Parent would complain to the school</i>	51	50	62	53	46

ENDNOTES

1. R. W. Apple Jr., "Testing Of A President: The Politics; Now, the People Will Have a Chance to Judge," *The New York Times*, 12 September 1998, late edition, sec. A, p. 1, col. 2.
2. Nick Anderson and Louis Sahagun, "Battle Intensifies On Compliance With Prop. 227," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1998, home edition, sec. Metro, part B, p. 1.
3. Day, Jennifer Cheeseman, *Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, pp. 25-1130, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1996.
4. For example: Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. National telephone survey of 1,000 adults, conducted between January 14-18, 1998. "As far as people in charge of running [read item] are concerned, would you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?" From 1978 to 1998, percentages for those who have "a great deal of confidence" in "the White House" have not risen above 30%, except once in 1984 to 42%; for "the Congress" percentages have not risen above 28%, and in 1998 were as low as 12%; for "the U.S. Supreme Court" percentages have not risen above 37%.
5. Respondents were asked how essential various things were to teach in local public schools. Seventy-nine percent of parents said teaching "good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined" was absolutely essential for the local schools to be teaching. This was second in importance to teaching "basic reading, writing and math skills," which 91% of parents said was absolutely essential. Teaching the "value of hard work" was fourth, with 77% of parents saying it was absolutely essential. *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform, Public Agenda*, 1995, p. 43.
6. Respondents were asked, "About how many of the nation's black students are currently attending good schools with good teachers?" Fifty-six percent of black parents and 54% of white parents said less than half of black students are attending good schools with good teachers. Respondents were also asked, "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: It is society's responsibility to make sure black students have teachers and schools that are just as good as those of white students." Eighty-six percent of both black and white parents agree. *Time To Move On: African-American and White Parents Set An Agenda For Public Schools, Public Agenda*, 1998, pp. 18, 21.
7. For example: World Values Study Group. World Values Survey, 1990-1993. Samples consisted of adults age 18 and over in 45 countries. Sample sizes varied from country to country. "Would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist?" "Religious person": U.S. respondents, 82%; France, 48%; Britain, 55%; Mexico, 72%.
8. For example: Chilton Research (conducted for *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University). National telephone survey of 1,200 adults, conducted between August 10-27, 1998. "Now here are some values that everyone agrees are important. But sometimes we have to choose one value over another. If you absolutely had to choose between each of the following two values, which is more important to you, personally: Encouraging a belief in God or encouraging a modern scientific outlook?" "Belief in God," 78%; "modern scientific outlook," 15%; both equally important, 5%; no opinion, 3%.
9. Parents were asked, "Now I'm going to ask you to compare your community's public schools and the private non-religious/Catholic/Christian schools. In your area, which schools are generally more likely to provide an environment that teaches kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds?" "Public schools," 54%; "private schools," 19%; both the same, 8%; don't know, 19%. *Assignment Incomplete*, 1995, p. 38.

10. DYG, Inc. (sponsored by the Ford Foundation). Telephone survey of 2,011 registered voters, conducted July 14-August 4, 1998. Sixty-nine percent of voters said, "courses and campus activities that emphasize diversity and diverse perspectives have more of a positive than negative effect on the education of students." Twenty-two percent of voters said it had more of a negative effect.

11. The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and The Freedom Forum's Media Studies Center and the Newseum. National telephone survey of 1,500 adults, conducted January 10-26, 1997. "As you may know, the First Amendment is part of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution. Can you name any of the specific rights that are guaranteed by the First Amendment?" Cannot name any, 29%; Free speech, 64%; Free press, 15%; Freedom of religion, 16%; Right to bear arms, 15%; Right to assemble, 11%; Right to privacy, 1%; Right to an attorney, 1%; Right to a trial by jury, 2%; Right to vote, 4%; Others, 4%.

12. Fox News/Opinion Dynamics. National telephone survey of 900 registered voters, conducted October 7-8, 1998. "As far as you know, if the U.S. House of Representatives impeaches President Clinton, is he automatically removed from office?" Yes, 42%; No, 40%; Not sure, 18%.

13. Parents were asked, "When it comes to students who are new immigrants, what should the public schools' primary goal be?" Sixty-five percent said, "to help new immigrants absorb America's language and culture as quickly as possible, even if their native language and culture are neglected as a result." Twenty-six percent said, "to help new immigrants maintain their own language and culture, even if it takes them longer to absorb America's language and culture as a result." *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform, A Technical Appendix, Public Agenda*, 1996, p. 98.

14. National Opinion Research Center (for the General Social Survey 1994). National personal interviews with 2,992 adults, conducted from January 27-May 31, 1994. "How do you feel about bilingual education? Are you strongly in favor of it, somewhat in favor of it, somewhat opposed to it, or strongly opposed to it?" "Strongly in favor," 26%; "somewhat in favor," 38%; "somewhat opposed," 16%; "strongly opposed," 15%; don't know, 5%.

15. Yankelovich Partners, Inc. (sponsored by *Time*, CNN). National telephone survey of 1,000 adults, conducted September 27-28, 1995. "Which of these three statements comes closest to your view on bilingual education?" Ten percent said, "public schools should teach children of immigrants in their native language as long as it helps the children learn or improves their self-esteem"; 39% said, "public schools should teach children of immigrants in their native language only until they know enough English to join regular classes"; and 48% said, "public schools should teach all children in English."

16. Respondents were asked, "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?" Fifty-six percent of African American parents said "blacks" were treated unfairly in textbooks. *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*, Public Agenda, 1994, p. 45.

17. Respondents were asked to rate how appropriate various class textbooks and lesson plans would be for their community's public schools, using a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 means it is highly appropriate and 1 means it is not at all appropriate. Respondents were asked to rate the following items: "Studying the struggle for black civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s"; "Bringing in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened"; "Bringing in a guest speaker who advocates black separatism"; "Teaching that Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans". *First Things First*, 1994, pp. 46, 48.

METHODOLOGY

A Lot To Be Thankful For is based on telephone interviews with a national random sample of 801 parents of public school students. Interviews were also conducted with 200 foreign-born, 203 Hispanic, and 198 African American parents. The survey was preceded by six focus groups with parents and 14 telephone interviews with a variety of educators, authors, and policy makers. Open-ended follow-up interviews were also conducted with respondents who had completed the survey.

THE TELEPHONE SURVEY

Telephone interviews were conducted between September 3 and September 16, 1998, with parents or guardians of students who attend public school in grades kindergarten through twelve. Interviews were approximately 31 minutes in length.

The 801 parents in the national random sample were selected through a standard, random-digit-dialing technique whereby every household in the continental United States, including those with unlisted numbers, had an equal chance of being contacted. The margin of error for the national random sample of 801 parents is plus or minus three percentage points.

This study reports the views of 200 foreign-born, 203 Hispanic, and 198 African American parents. These groups were derived in the following way: Respondents matching the demographic criteria were culled from the national random sample and pooled with additional respondents obtained through a targeted sampling method. The targeted samples included only those telephone exchanges in census tracts with at least a 30% density of households meeting the demographic criteria for foreign-born, Hispanic, and African American, respectively. Households were contacted randomly within these exchanges and only parents of public school students in grades K-12 were accepted for the survey. The margin of error for each of these groups is plus or minus seven percentage points.

Of the 200 foreign-born parents, 57 came from the national sample and 143 from the targeted sample; of the 203 Hispanic parents, 42 came from the national sample and 161 from the targeted sample; of the 198 African American parents, 76 came from the national sample and 122 from the targeted sample. The foreign-born sample includes respondents from any race or ethnicity. Similarly, the Hispanic and African American samples include foreign-born respondents. These three groups contain mutually exclusive sets of respondents; e.g., a parent included in the foreign-born sample would not be included in the Hispanic sample, even if he or she were Hispanic. Demographic criteria were defined as follows:

- Foreign-born: Parents who answered the question “In what country were you born?” by saying something other than the United States, Puerto Rico, Guam, or U.S. Virgin Islands.
- Hispanic: Parents answering “yes” to the question “Do you consider yourself Hispanic or not?”
- African American: Parents answering “black or African American” to the question “Are you white, black or African American, Asian, or something else?”

Special efforts were undertaken to make the interview process comfortable for foreign-born and limited-English-speaking respondents. Interviewers were instructed to read questions slowly, to offer to repeat questions, and to give respondents as much time as needed to respond. In addition, the survey instrument was

translated into Spanish and households identified as Spanish-speaking were recontacted by bilingual interviewers as needed. A total of 30 interviews were conducted in Spanish; these responses were compared to those of Hispanic respondents who completed the interview in English. Overall, we found only minor differences between the two groups.

As in all surveys, question-order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

The survey instrument was designed by Public Agenda, and Public Agenda is solely responsible for all analysis and interpretation of the data. Survey Sampling Inc. supplied the sample. Interviews were conducted by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc.

THE FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews. These quotes were supplemented by open-ended telephone interviews with survey respondents who agreed to be recontacted.

Six focus groups with parents of public school students were conducted for this study during the spring and summer of 1998, as follows:

Secaucus, New Jersey	White parents
Dayton, Ohio	White parents
San Jose, California	Hispanic parents; most bilingual
New York, New York	Foreign-born parents; living in U.S. for at least four years; most bilingual
Birmingham, Alabama	African American parents
Birmingham, Alabama	White parents

Local professional market research organizations recruited participants to Public Agenda's specifications. All focus groups were moderated by Public Agenda senior staff.

To prepare for the focus groups and survey, Public Agenda conducted interviews with 14 practitioners in relevant fields, including K-12 teachers, college professors, policy makers, and other experts on immigration and education.

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS

Time To Move On: African American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools. 1998. This comprehensive national study takes an in-depth look at the views of black and white parents toward integration, academic standards, student achievement, and expectations of the public schools, as well as teacher quality and safety and discipline. The study also sheds light on parents' individual experiences with the public schools. Price: \$10.00. Technical Appendix: \$40.00.

Reality Check. 1998. Surveys of five groups — parents, students, K-12 teachers, employers, and college professors — find sharp differences on the impact of higher standards in the classroom. The debate about standards has caught hold, but has yet to produce results employers and college professors expect. *Reality Check* is included in *Education Week's Quality Counts '98* (call 301/280-3100 for a copy). *Fully Annotated Reality Check Survey Results* are available from Public Agenda for \$40.00.

Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation. 1997. A comprehensive study of Americans' attitudes toward our nation's youth, including a special focus on the views of black, Hispanic, and white parents. Will today's children, once grown, make this country a better place? Are parents teaching their kids right from wrong? What solutions do Americans propose to the problems children face? These questions, and what kids have to say, are addressed in this study. Price: \$10.00.

Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education. 1997. This is the first comprehensive survey of the views of education professors from U.S. colleges and universities. Their vision of education and the mission of teacher education programs are explored, including their attitudes toward core curriculum, testing, standards, and the public's parameters. Price: \$10.00.

Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools. 1997. Public high school students are the focus of this national telephone survey, which looks at how teens view their schools, teachers, and the learning process. Includes insights into what students say would motivate them to work harder in school and how they define "good" and "bad" teaching. Special sections on black and Hispanic students, private high school students, and students from Jefferson County (KY) and the San Francisco Bay Area are included. Price: \$10.00.

Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today. 1996. Focuses on how public school teachers view the performance of the public schools; what children need to learn; and what schools need to be effective. A special focus on black and Hispanic teachers is included, along with a comparison of the views of teachers, the public, parents, and community leaders. Price: \$10.00.

Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform. 1995. A follow-up study to *First Things First* (1994), this report examines why public support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so focused on the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. Price: \$10.00.

First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools. 1994. Looks at how the general public, including parents of children currently in public schools, views education reform efforts as well as values issues in the schools. Included are detailed analyses of the perspectives of white and black public school parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians. Price: \$10.00.

Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think About the Education Press. 1997. Prepared for the Education Writers Association, this study explores the attitudes of the general public, parents with children in public schools, educators, and education reporters and editors, toward media coverage of education. Price: \$7.00.

Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda. 1996. Prepared for the 1996 Education Summit, this assessment draws from Public Agenda's extensive archive of public opinion research on education — including surveys and focus group reports — and from studies by other prominent opinion analysts. Price: \$7.50.

Some Gains, But No Guarantees: How New York City's Employers Rate the Public Schools. 1998. Conducted on behalf of the New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce, this survey explores the views of the leaders of New York City-based businesses and nonprofits concerning the City's public schools and the young people graduating from them, and ways in which business could help. Copies are available from the New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce (call 212 493-7400).

What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education. 1997. Prepared for the South Carolina Department of Education, this comprehensive study examines how South Carolinians view their public schools. The differences among the public, educators, and community leaders in how they look at their schools and what solutions they feel are most promising are identified. Copies are available on the South Carolina Department of Education's Web site: www.state.sc.us/sde.

Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education. 1996. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Missouri Partnership for Outstanding Schools, this report describes how Missouri citizens feel about public education. Gaps in perspectives among educators, community leaders, and the public, including a special focus on blacks, are outlined. Copies are available from the Missouri Partnership (call 800/659-4044).

The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education. 1994. Prepared by Public Agenda for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, this study describes how the citizens of Connecticut feel about public education and integration in their state and why they hold these attitudes. The gaps among educators, business leaders, and the public, including a special focus on blacks and Hispanics, are outlined. Price: \$5.50.

Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation, this study of educators, education administrators, parents, and business executives looks at the substantial infighting and communication gaps among these groups of education stakeholders. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

Clarifying Issues. 1996. A nonpartisan issues guide uniquely designed to help voters clarify their own views and values on eight major issues: Race and Opportunity; the Economy; Juvenile Crime; Immigration; the American Family; the Federal Deficit; America's Global Role; and Poverty and Welfare. For each issue the guide provides a comparison of three different points of view, an outline of public initiatives consistent with each perspective, and a reference section of charts and graphs providing essential facts. Price: \$5.00.

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