

# THE PUBLIC AGENDA

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THE INSIDE SOURCE FOR PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICY ANALYSIS

## What Really Worries Americans about Public Education



April 23 marked the release of Public Agenda's latest report, *Where We Are Now: 12 Things You Need to Know about Public Opinion and Public Schools*, made possible by Washington Mutual. The study – an analysis drawn from more than 25 major opinion studies on where parents, students, teachers, school leaders, employers and college professors stand on a wide range of critical issues in public education – revealed that concerns about standards and testing are eclipsed by worries about teacher morale, out-of-control bureaucracy and a disrespectful and even violent atmosphere in American schools.

underscored his point by writing another column focusing on *Where We Are Now* the following week.

*Washington Post* Columnist William Raspberry devoted his April 28 column to the report. *Where We Are Now* was featured on the CNN home page and on the CNN headline crawl. The

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Another major first occurred on the day of the report's release: Public Agenda made available online free of charge all of the reports which were the source data for *Where We Are Now*. This invaluable new resource – which includes 25 major

studies spanning a decade of research – is designed for journalists, researchers and others interested in public education.

*Where We Are Now* garnered nationwide headlines following an Associated Press article declaring, "Demoralized teachers, unruly students, bureaucracy top concerns about schools." The story was picked up by most of the major media outlets, including

*The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *New York Newsday*, *The Boston Globe*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Education Week* and *Education Daily*. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Daniel Henninger said the report was "eye-catching" and "deserves a closer look." Henninger

"If you were looking for something to dramatize how difficult it is to make improvements in our public schools, take a look at a recent report from the New York-based policy organization Public Agenda."

– Honolulu Advertiser

most of the major media outlets, including

## Parents Say They Are Falling Short

Public Agenda's latest report on parenting produced some soul-searching revelations from American parents – and a remarkable amount of media coverage in over 200 television, radio, newspaper, magazine and online media outlets. Funded by State Farm Insurance Companies, with additional support from the Family Friendly Programming Forum, *A Lot Easier Said Than*

*Done: Parents Talk about Raising Children in Today's America* tapped into some of our nation's deepest concerns

– the difficulty of raising children of integrity and character in a society that seems to ambush parents at every turn.

Fifty percent of parents worry a lot about someone physically harming or kidnapping their child, ranking second only to their fears about drugs and alcohol. Yet, when asked how

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# The Immigrant's Voice

*A Technically Challenging Project Receives Praise from Policy Experts*



**A**t a time when the American public appears to be rethinking the country's openness to immigration, Public Agenda has released a report that sheds new light on this important and growing segment of the U.S. population. *Now That I'm Here: What America's Immigrants Have to Say about Life in the U.S. Today* helps dispel some common stereotypes about immigrants and provides greater insight into immigrants' concerns and aspirations.

Countering the assertion by some that many immigrants have a weak attachment to this country, Public Agenda found that 93% of those interviewed were either citizens already (56%) or planned to pursue citizenship. Immigrants also strongly believe that learning English is key to leading a successful life in the United States, and they express strong sentiments about earning their own way

and not relying on public assistance. While voicing some frustration with the bureaucracy, they even gave the much-maligned Immigration and Naturalization Service fairly favorable reviews. On their post-September 11 experiences, only

9 percent felt law enforcement was watching them more closely and nearly nine in ten said that the police could be trusted to protect them and their families.

The study was made possible by support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Carnegie President Vartan Gregorian said, "Public Agenda has succeeded in revealing

the voices of these new immigrants. We believe this survey will inform policy makers, national leaders and community activists in a way that is powerful and unique."

*Now That I'm Here* is doing just that. The study attracted the attention of



media outlets serving regions with high numbers of immigrants, by the ethnic press, and by specialist trade publications. *The New York Daily News* said, "One of the few things people on both sides of the immigration issue agree on is the urgency of a meaningful national debate...[*Now That I'm Here*] makes a contribution to that debate."

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said, "I am grateful for this study as we work to ensure that the needs of our vibrant immigrant communities are met. Please know that I have shared your report with others in my administration."

## Bilingual Education

*Should all public school classes be taught in English, or should children of immigrants be able to take some courses in their native language?*

GENERAL PUBLIC\*



IMMIGRANTS



- All classes should be taught in English
- Some courses should be taught in their native language

\*Source: Washington Post/Henry J. Kaiser Foundation/Harvard University Follow-up Latinos Survey, August 20-August 25, 1999.

"We believed from the start of this project that we could add something valuable to the immigration debate if we probed beyond the anecdotal and 'conventional wisdom' to unearth the motivations, beliefs and real experiences that define immigrant life today," Public Agenda Director of Research Steve Farkas said. ■

## What Really Worries Americans about Public Education

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report was also featured on AOL News, Yahoo! News, New York Times Online, and The Wall Street Journal Abstracts. Public Agenda President Deborah Wadsworth and Public Agenda Senior Vice President Jean Johnson were interviewed on numerous radio programs, including ABC Radio Network Family News and Focus, CNN Radio, CBS Network Radio, AP Radio Network, and KCBS in San Francisco.



Stories about the report also aired on the Telemundo and Univision networks.

The report has been in demand from major policy makers, including the Business Roundtable, which sent copies to its Education and Workforce Task Force. The Education Writers Association, the American Education Research Association, The Commission on Teaching founded

*Where We Are Now* was funded by Washington Mutual. "Both Washington Mutual and Public

Agenda are committed to listening to those who do the hard work of education every day and making those voices continue to be an important part of the ongoing dialogue," said Washington Mutual Chairman, President and CEO Kerry K. Killinger.



**Washington Mutual**

## % of Teachers Who Say:

**83%**

They have a serious problem with parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home for their kids

**81%**

They have a serious problem with parents who refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance.

by Louis Gerstner, and the publisher McGraw Hill have all distributed the report to their key education policy constituencies. ■

# America's Immigrants Pose Challenges to Creating a Representative Sample

By Ann Duffett, Public Agenda Associate Director of Research

"It's like finding a needle in a haystack." That's the thought that ran through the minds of Public Agenda's researchers at the first mention of taking on a nationwide telephone survey of America's immigrants.

Ultimately, Public Agenda interviewed a random sample of 1,002 foreign-born U.S. adults hailing from more than 100 countries for its recent report *Now That I'm Here: What America's Immigrants Have to Say about Life in the U.S. Today*.

The foreign-born make up about 10 percent of the U.S. population. Reaching any small group within the general population is always a challenge for survey researchers, but attempting to reach immigrants broke new ground for us at Public Agenda.

Language was one of the most obvious hurdles we faced. English is not the native language for many immigrants – and even those who do understand it may not speak it fluently enough to respond to a detailed questionnaire over the telephone. Not to mention the fact that it would be cost prohibitive to translate the questionnaire into the dozens of languages that would have been necessary.

Reaching any small group within the general population is always a challenge, but attempting to reach immigrants broke new ground for us at Public Agenda.

Another obstacle was telephone access. A single telephone is often shared by more than one immigrant family, making their portion of telephone households all that much smaller. But the biggest hurdle was what to do about people who may have entered the country illegally. We made it a point to let potential respondents know that their participation would be anonymous, their answers confidential and that Public Agenda was in no way affiliated with the government.

Respondents were selected using random-digit-dialing technology that makes sure that every household in the sample has an equal chance of being contacted, even

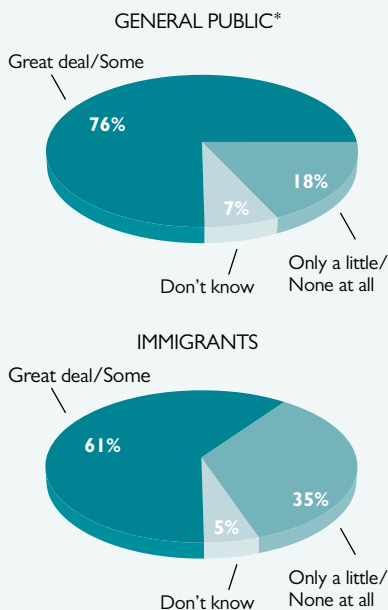
those with unlisted phone numbers. Random digit dialing is quite costly and time consuming, but it is also one of the most scientifically sound approaches for finding hard-to-reach populations. To make finding the needles in this haystack somewhat more manageable, the sample of total U.S. households was pared down to the 232 counties where 81% of all U.S. immigrants live.

In the end we offered respondents the choice of completing the survey in English or Spanish (roughly 40% in our sample come from Spanish-speaking countries). We pre-tested the questionnaire extensively with non-native English speakers to avoid troublesome idiomatic phrases and complex sentence structures to help make it as easy to understand as possible.

We believe Public Agenda's research provides a balanced and accurate picture of the immigrant experience in America today. The final results may not tell everything. But the study is a comprehensive and methodologically sound exploration of the views of immigrants in America today, one that tells an important and powerful story. ■

## How Much Discrimination Is There?

Would you say there is a great deal of discrimination against immigrants in the U.S. today, some, only a little, or none at all?



\* Source: Survey by National Conference for Community and Justice. Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, January 20-March 19, 2000.

## Coming Soon

### Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters

Slated for Release: June 4, 2003

Do teachers support pay-for-performance initiatives? Do teachers think tenure is an essential protection or a hindrance to eliminating ineffective teachers? What do teachers think about unions and the role they ought to play?

This new study is the most comprehensive examination to date of American teachers' views on unions, tenure, merit pay and other issues. This research is made possible with support from The Broad Foundation, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Sidney J. Weinberg, Jr. Foundation.

### Principals, Superintendents and the New World of School Leadership

Slated for Release: November 2003

What does it mean for school leaders to be "chief instructors" or "lead teachers"? How do school leaders really spend their time? How do principals and superintendents feel about each other? What would it take to improve school leadership?

This report picks up where Public Agenda's 2001 report *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* left off. The 2001 school leadership study found principals and superintendents under pressure from nearly overwhelming daily demands. The new report will build on expert interviews, focus groups, and a mail survey of 1,000 principals and superintendents nationwide. Both the previous and current research have been made possible with support from the Wallace-Readers Digest Funds.

### Clarifying Issues 2004

Slated for Release: January 2004

Public Agenda will again produce its highly-acclaimed voter's guide – *Clarifying Issues* – in time to help Americans sort through the politics and policies of the 2004 elections. The online guide will gather facts and figures on key issues, and will present an extensive body of information in an easy-to-use format.

The guide has been cited as a useful link by CNN's *Your Voice, Your Choice* site, Yahoo! Politics, and PBS Kids On-line. Others will join that list in 2004, and if you would like to connect your site to *Clarifying Issues 2004*, contact Lara Saxman at Public Agenda.

# New Jersey Tax Reform

*Mention taxes in New Jersey and you could have a fight on your hands. The New Jersey state legislature may be wary of taking on the tough issues, but Public Agenda is not.*

With nearly every state in America grappling with budget shortfalls or significant challenges finding funds for essential programs, Public Agenda's newest engagement program to involve New Jersey citizens in discussing possible approaches to tax reform has national implications.

"The central purpose is to show by example that New Jerseyans are able to venture where their elected representatives will not go," says Will Friedman, Public Agenda's Senior Public Engagement Consultant.

"Tax reform is an issue that absolutely requires thoughtful consideration and citizen input for productive solutions to be developed," says Director of Programs Jean Johnson. "I think Public Agenda's work in New Jersey could provide a very practical and affordable model for many other states desperate

to find ways to break partisan deadlock on these complex issues."

This project has been developed in partnership with the New Jersey Coalition for the Public Good – a group of New Jersey legislators, business leaders and concerned citizens – and made possible with support from the Fund for New Jersey. The centerpiece is a statewide Fall 2003 forum bringing together approximately 100 people from all parts of the state and representing diverse points of view.

In addition to helping citizens compare different tax plans and make realistic choices about them, the forum will also inform policy-makers and opinion leaders of the kinds of

concerns, ideas, values and solutions that citizens in New Jersey generate when they engage tax reform issues under conditions well-suited to productive deliberation.

Prior to the forum in Fall 2003, Public Agenda will conduct focus groups in different parts of the state to help explore how people react to tax reform issues, and to test various ways of presenting and framing issues. The Public

Agenda engagement team will produce an Issue Book and Participant Guide and create a companion Video Discussion Starter for use during key sessions.

According to Will Friedman, "There are other organizations doing this kind of work, but Public Agenda has had much greater hands-on experience with public opinion research for so long, and that really adds to the public engagement work. It gives our approach a real perspective and grounding.

Plus, Public Agenda has a

great reputation for non-partisanship that is absolutely essential." ■

Public Agenda's work in New Jersey will set a standard for the many other states that are desperate to find ways to break partisan deadlock on these complicated issues.

## Parents Say They are Falling Short continued from page 1

successful they've been in teaching their children self-control and self-discipline, only 34% respond "very." The frankness

of America's parents was quite remarkable, said Public Agenda's Director of Programs Jean Johnson.

State Farm Chairman and CEO Edward B. Rust, Jr. explained "In many ways, the family is a microcosm of society at large. Knowing what parents value most gives us insights into what society values and what we can expect of future generations."

A major Associated Press story and a *Newsweek* cover story ensured that the report appeared in dozens of newspapers across the country. In-depth reports also appeared in *USA Today*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Washington Times*, *Parenting*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, ABC, CBS, Fox, CNN Interactive, and many other news outlets. With TV and radio coverage, combined circulation put these findings before over 20 million people nationwide.

In a column entitled "A Father, a Son, an Essay," Knight-Ridder syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. wrote movingly of his own

feelings of inadequacy as a parent.

"*A Lot Easier Said Than Done*, by Public Agenda...produced a number of fascinating statistics on parents and parenting," Pitts wrote. "One set of questions from the survey particularly intrigued me. It sought to ascertain how good a job parents feel they've done in transmitting basic values to their children. The short answer: not very good... I thought it was just me who felt overmatched. Turns out it's most of us."

*The Washington Post* focused on the "over-protectiveness" of many of today's parents and cited the report's finding that "parents worried more about demons outside the home – drugs, kidnappers, their children's friends – than the ordinary devils of mortgage payments and not enough family time."

Jean Johnson explained the appeal of the report and its findings, noting "the universal intensity of reactions makes sense when one realizes that every person who brushes up against this study inevitably and immediately conjures memories, images and events of a personal passage from childhood to maturity. Whether the journey was happy or troubled, secure or lonely, successful or not, I suspect every reader of this study cannot help but compare his or her own childhood 'then' with what parents say their children are experiencing today." ■

### Potential Hazards

Parents who say they worry "a lot" or "some" about each of the following:



## Public Agenda and the Constitution

“For citizens to truly understand the Constitution, people must grasp the importance of its philosophical ambiguities and its essential role in creating and fostering democratic values,” researcher Carl Bonomo says of the high school and college curriculum his Bonomo Institute is developing for the Constitution Education & Engagement Project (CEEP). “Students will achieve a greater mastery of the Constitution’s specifics and they will engage with the document as a living

thing, something that truly underlies every on-going national conversation.”

CEEP grew out of Public Agenda’s recent study *Knowing It By Heart: Americans Consider the Constitution and its Meaning*, which found that most Americans have internalized the key elements of the Constitution even though they may not be able to recall its specifics. The study was conducted for the National Constitution Center and funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The CEEP curriculum is being developed for 2003-2004 use in several high schools and colleges, including Townsend-Harris High School in Queens, NY, and Queens College. The curriculum uses various aspects of Public Agenda’s research – including findings on people’s attitudes toward voting rights, access to fair and equal judicial procedures, and application of the law to various segments of our society – to teach students about how the Constitution is an integral part of life in the United States. ■

## Higher Education Issue Guide Brings 30,000 Visitors to Public Agenda Online



“This is a great resource. I’m going to bookmark it and return to it often.” That’s what one education reporter said of Public Agenda’s new Higher Education Issue Guide. Many in the media and public policy circles apparently agreed, as the new issue guide had 30,000 visitors in the first week of its release.

Supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education, Public Agenda’s new issue guide provides easy access to the latest facts, figures and analysis of the major debates on higher education today. The new issue guide on higher education joins a roster of Public Agenda guides used by thousands of journalists, policy makers, and citizens to better understand controversial topics such as abortion, gay rights, terrorism, immigration and the economy.

The newly-launched guide provides a running analysis of public attitudes as captured in periodic surveys conducted by respected polling organizations, informational background, and more on higher education issues.

“With renewed debate on affirmative action, increasing demands for accountability and widespread anxiety about how to address skyrocketing costs of

higher education, this issue guide couldn’t come at a better time,” said Public Agenda President Deborah Wadsworth. “This new online resource is meant to help concerned citizens, journalists and others gain greater clarity on topics that can be extremely complicated.”

The Higher Education Issue Guide includes: a digest of recent news stories related to higher education; a fact file of graphs, tables and charts; break-outs of particularly interesting facts, findings and perspectives; a links page with contact information for the major players in the field and links to their web sites; highlights of the public’s chief concerns about higher education; public opinion findings on the major proposals; and cautionary notes about questionable survey findings. ■

### NEW TO PUBLIC AGENDA ONLINE

#### Public Agenda Online is a Library Journal “Best Reference Source”

Public Agenda Online was praised in the April 2003 edition of *Library Journal* – a must-read for library professionals – as one of its Best Reference Sources, Best Web Sites. *Library Journal* said Public Agenda is “noted for its nonpartisanship, and its site provides a new mechanism to help accomplish this. It covers topics from abortion to social security, and issues are portrayed from multiple viewpoints.”

#### Public Agenda’s Reports Are Now Available for Free Download

Along with the release of Public Agenda’s latest report *Where We Are Now: 12 Things You Need to Know about Public Opinion and Public Schools*, Washington Mutual has supported Public Agenda’s efforts to place its major studies that explored questions related to education online in PDF format.

# Reflections from the President

by Deborah Wadsworth

*Many of you are already aware of my impending retirement. Public Agenda's Board of Directors, aided by my colleagues on our staff, has been hard at work for many months in an effort to find a talented and dynamic person to lead this organization in the challenging years that lie ahead. Our search is nearing an end, and shortly we will be able to present to you Public Agenda's next president. I am certain that the transition will be seamless, and that Public Agenda's mission will be strengthened and renewed in the process.*

It is difficult for me to believe that I first joined Public Agenda 17 years ago. It has been an extraordinary experience for me – one I will cherish for a lifetime. But, it is time to catch up with my husband in his retirement and see more of my children and grandchildren. I will be leaving by the end of this calendar year feeling much pride in the accomplishments of Public Agenda. Over the years, the challenges have been varied, as has the context in which we have done our work. The increased visibility and respect which Public Agenda has achieved are inextricably linked to the superb talent and professional commitment of my very gifted colleagues.

Several important studies covered in this newsletter have already had an impact on policy makers and leadership groups focused on family issues, education reform and immigration. There is work underway exploring public attitudes about crime and law enforcement and a new study on the country's cadre of public school teachers.

A major redesign of Public Agenda Online will launch this September, and we're in the field, as I write, assisting with community forums on tax reform across the state of New Jersey.

Over the past 25 years, Public Agenda has focused on issues with international dimensions – goals for national security in the '70s; US-Soviet relations pre-Gorbachev; Latino leaders' perspectives on US foreign policy in the '90s; and immigrant's concerns in 2002. A domestic agenda has absorbed us as well over all these years, exploring education, healthcare and welfare reform; risks and benefits of environmental policies; and views about retirement and saving,

crime and punishment, and the anxieties and aspirations of American families.

In light of present circumstances at home and abroad, we hope to turn our attention domestically to an analysis of how American families imagine "The American Dream" today – what matters most to families at various stages of life. We believe it is also essential to probe beneath current polling data to better gauge Americans' true comfort level with American foreign policy. A Public Agenda "consumer confidence index" might help leaders look beyond the ups and downs of weekly polls tied to critical events to determine whether Americans believe we're headed in the right direction internationally.

And, we hope soon to re-engage an issue that Public Agenda first undertook in 1976. We focused then on moral leadership in government; and for 2004, we hope to tackle moral and ethical behavior in corporate America.

Our energy level is high; we have no shortage of important issues to take on. As they say, stay tuned. ■

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that seeks to raise the level of public discussion about critical policy choices facing the nation.

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