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# **Professional Development for Teachers: The Public's View**

**A Focus Group Report from  
Public Agenda for the  
National Foundation for the  
Improvement of Education**

**By Steve Farkas and Will Friedman**

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# **PUBLIC AGENDA**

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

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## **Professional Development for Teachers: The Public's View**

### **A Focus Group Report by Public Agenda**

This small-scale, pilot study of public attitudes toward professional development for teachers is based on four focus groups conducted by Public Agenda in June and July of 1995. These groups were convened in Fort Lee (NJ), Birmingham, Denver and Albuquerque. Each comprised approximately 10 participants recruited by local market research firms. Participants were recruited to conform to national census data on such demographic variables as race, income, sex, and education. Additional attention was paid to the demographic characteristics of the local population in each of the sites. Teachers and school administrators were excluded from these discussions.

#### **Overview and implications**

*Here are some key perceptions of professional development and teachers:*

- The public's foremost educational concerns are safety, discipline, social problems and kids not learning the basics. Professional development is not seen as an urgent issue and the term itself is unfamiliar to most.
- Teachers are still held in high regard. People think most teachers are doing the best they can under difficult conditions. Nevertheless, some people still complain about inept instructors and the red tape and tenure that, they feel, wrongly protects them.
- Focus group participants react very positively to professional development once the issue is broached. They see it as an important way for teachers to keep up with new information and cope with the challenges of the modern classroom. Some also think professional development will help weed out incompetent instructors from the profession.
- Participants think professional development is important enough that they would mandate it for virtually all teachers.

*Here are some of the public's key caveats on professional development:*

- The public's attention and concern is not focused on professional development.
- People expect professional development to lead to quick, significant, and measurable payoffs in student achievement.

- Professional development loses support if it becomes associated with controversial teaching methods. Citing findings from academic studies does little to lessen this resistance.
- Participants strongly oppose taking teachers out of the classroom to implement professional development. In their view, teacher-student contact is the essence of learning and should not be disturbed.
- Many participants want teachers to invest in their own development to help insure they take such programs seriously.
- Most participants think it is appropriate for school districts and taxpayers to pay for at least some of the costs of professional development. But they want "painless" ways of financing it, such as cutting administration and waste from the system. And although many say they support raising taxes to cover the costs of development, such sentiments may be lip-service and should be carefully evaluated.

The most striking implication from these focus groups is that there is a strong potential for both support and disappointment with professional development. People buy into the idea of professional development because they support education, and see the improvement of teachers as an asset to the schools. However, the potential for disappointment is strong because people expect professional development to bring quick and tangible payoffs in student achievement. Some of the public's attitudes also amount to restrictions on how to implement professional development. Fashioning professional development into a major initiative which enjoys enduring public support will require careful work.

## I. The public's primary concerns

It is impossible to accurately understand specific educational issues without first appreciating people's primary concerns with the public schools: safety, discipline, social problems and kids not learning the basics. These are the issues that absorb the public's anxieties. Professional development, aimed primarily at enhancing teacher quality, is not the foremost concern of the public.

### **The foremost problems are social ills, student discipline and the basics**

According to focus group participants, the most serious challenge in education today is the host of social ills facing the schools and the failure of schools to guarantee an orderly environment and teach kids basic skills. People are most concerned about absent parents, discipline in the classroom, violence and drugs in the schools, and kids who are not even learning the basics. These are the critical and pressing problems as far as the public is concerned. Any other issues -- professional development included -- are by definition secondary considerations.

"Kids are a lot harder to teach then they used to be. Social pressures...there are a lot of problems with parents not being able to spend enough time with their kids."  
Albuquerque woman

"My wife was a hall monitor, and she hollered at one kid one day to get to school and about three periods later they found the kid with a gun... And she said 'That kid could have pulled that gun out and shot me.'"  
Birmingham man

"They need their basics. They don't have their math, their English, history, geography. You ask kids today where this country is and they say, 'Huh.' They do not have their basics."  
Albuquerque woman

"I'm younger and I can remember going through school and you got into trouble for chewing gum in class. You didn't get in trouble for whacking someone upside the head with a clipboard."  
Birmingham man

People's perceptions of today's schools are colored by a strong sense of loss. They compare the latest report of guns in the classroom to a time when violent incidents at school resulted in nothing more lethal than a black eye. They sometimes reminisce about schools that had a community "feel" to them, where the kids, the teachers, and the parents were connected through history and neighborhood.

"Twenty years ago you had more involvement from families, communities. Parents really stressed education a lot more in the home and the friends of parents were looking out for [the kids]."

Ft. Lee (NJ) man

"Everybody works now. Everybody doesn't have the time to sit down and do the homework like they used to, and put dinner on the table. There's not the sense of community like there used to be. Everybody used to know their teachers on a personal level."

Denver woman

## II. The public's view of teachers

Teachers generally enjoy a reservoir of sympathy and respect among the public. While previous research by Public Agenda indicates that teachers are not as highly regarded as they once were, they continue to elicit mostly positive and sympathetic responses. People feel that because of social issues and limited resources it is harder to be a teacher today than in the past, and tend to view teachers as well-intentioned, committed professionals. Despite these positive sentiments, there are those who complain about teachers who are "burned out" or seem to care more about being popular than being effective. People are resentful that such teachers are hard to fire because of red tape and tenure.

### Doing the best they can

In our conversations, participants stressed that today's teachers work under difficult circumstances. In addition to the pressures of social problems, people also cited a lack of resources and money. People thought that teachers' jobs are more difficult because of overcrowded classes, under-stocked supply cabinets, and outdated textbooks.

"The teachers are fighting two battles. They're not just trying to teach the kids, they're trying keep law and order too."

Denver man

"[With] some of the class sizes the teachers have to deal with, I think they do an excellent job."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

"There's not adequate supplies. Teachers spend a lot of their own money trying to do right for the kids."

Birmingham man

Some participants point out that the school system or parents themselves fail to support the teachers when they try to discipline students or instill order in the classroom.

"I think the teachers could do a better job if we, as parents, train our children to give whoever is in charge respect."

Birmingham woman

"Teachers don't have any support from the home. They'll call and say, 'I am having problems with your daughter or son' and they'll say, 'Oh that's crap, my kid's perfect.'"

Denver woman

### **The last of the well-intentioned professionals**

While people express some criticism of teacher performance -- about kids not learning the basics, for example -- they seldom point to teachers as the sole cause of the problem. The weakening of confidence toward professionals such as lawyers and doctors has been milder for teachers, and the public still places considerable trust in them. They are seen as the last of the well-intentioned professionals, whose hearts are in the right place, and who are not in it for the money.

"The majority of the teachers are doing a pretty good job. The teachers on staff are very dedicated and for the most part, they usually go the extra mile in trying to build self-esteem and self-confidence amongst the student body."

Ft. Lee (NJ) man

"Most of the teachers must be pretty dedicated people to be doing what they're doing for the amount of pay that they're getting."

Albuquerque woman

These positive sentiments tend to be grounded in direct experiences. Teachers are not distant professionals or faceless bureaucrats but part of the community. People refer to their neighbors, their children's teachers, and the teachers they had when they were growing up.

### **Qualms because of "bad apples" and tenure**

Despite such sympathetic perceptions, some participants complain about the "bad apples" -- burned out instructors whose hearts are no longer in the job and who are just coming in to collect the paycheck. These critics think it is too difficult for the system to get rid of these teachers. Some go on to complain about what they see as the more fundamental problem -- the tenure system.

"[This community] has some wonderful teachers...but there are teachers with tenure who shouldn't teach any more. And you can complain and virtually nothing happens... They're burned out."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

"You get those teachers who don't give a damn. They come to work just to get paid."

Denver woman

"I've seen situations where we do have good teachers, and I've seen situations where teachers are not adequately prepared. And we have no mechanism right now to remove them."

Birmingham man

In addition to concern about the occasional bad apple and some criticism of the tenure system, in Denver and New Jersey there seems to be a more general wariness of the "politics" that can sometimes come into play with teachers and their unions.

### **What would help teachers do a better job?**

Since people think the critical challenges facing the schools stem from discipline and social problems, they naturally think of ways to redress these problems when asked what would help teachers do a better job. More discipline in the classroom, more resources and smaller classes are the solutions that people turn to first and about which they feel the most urgency. Professional development is a concept that emerged spontaneously on only rare occasions, and the term is an unfamiliar one to most. When people mention additional teacher training on their own, it is sometimes meant as a way to weed out burned-out teachers. It is also seen as a necessary response to a rapidly changing world.

"[In my field] the state instituted a program where you have to take additional credits in order to keep up with your license, and if you don't, you'll lose your license... I think this should also be done with teachers. That's how you separate the burned out ones."

Ft. Lee (NJ) man

"I think you have to look at the way the day and age is going, and there is no way you can ignore it, everything is going towards technology [and] computers... Everything is taking off and if your not taking off with everyone else you're going to be left behind."

Denver woman

### III. Strong support for professional development

Once broached by moderators, professional development receives strong and broad support from virtually all participants. Professional development resonates for a host of reasons:

- Teachers need to keep pace with a world that is constantly changing in order to transmit new discoveries and knowledge to their students.

"They need to go back to get updated on new things that have come along, new ideas."

Denver woman

- Teachers today face so many complicated challenges that they need multi-faceted training.

"Even if the subject you are teaching is not changing, people and society are. Research is going on, they need to be continually learning about new motivation methods, coping skills, stress reduction, dealing with difficult students."

Albuquerque woman

- Teachers should learn better ways to educate children.

"[Training] not only improves the teachers themselves but the way they teach the students too."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

- Teachers who are unfit for the job can be weeded out or improved through higher standards and professional training.

"I'm sure there's a test they have to take to be approved for teaching... There should be a standardized test...and there should be more education involved. I feel like the standards are too low."

Birmingham man

"I think teachers are just like any other profession. After so long you drift, and when you drift you tend to slip up on modern things. I think they need to go back and get more training."

Denver woman

Moderators probed the strength of participants' commitment to professional development with the argument that teacher training goals could be achieved naturally, through on-the-job experience. There is a strong sense, however, that in-class experience is not enough to substitute for ongoing professional training. Teachers, like many other professionals, need to regularly up-date their knowledge and up-grade their skills.

"I think that experience does help but they also need to get feedback on whether they are doing a good job."

Birmingham man

"I don't think there is ever any room to stop learning. No matter what profession you are in you should always be continuing your education."

Albuquerque woman

### **What subject-areas should professional development cover?**

People think teachers of almost any subject can gain from professional development. Those teaching subjects that change rapidly, such as computers, must constantly update their skills for obvious reasons. But participants also feel that even for basic subjects that change little, teachers will benefit from professional development.

The moderators played devil's advocate and argued that professional development in such areas as basic math is unnecessary because adding and subtracting are simple tasks that do not change. A few participants -- like this Albuquerque woman -- agreed: "I think it would depend on what they're teaching. If it is a field that's growing all the time and new things are happening, yes they have to know it." But most participants are not swayed. There are always new things to learn, they argue, always fresh ways to approach the same subject.

"If you are not updated to the new procedures...you're going to fall behind. And if you fall behind you are not going to be able to teach somebody else."

Albuquerque man

"Even if [grade school] teaching isn't as sophisticated as it would be at a high school level, I think they still need to have the refreshers."

Denver man

Given the public's concern with safety and order in the classroom, it is not surprising that additional teacher training in discipline techniques were especially popular.

"Going through the workshops...and socializing and communicating with other teachers can help them handle their students better."

Albuquerque woman

#### IV. The public's caveats on professional development

People support the idea of professional development but have high expectations of quick and measurable results. Participants also set conditions on how to implement such programs.

##### Get results, and fast

Perhaps the most critical expectation people have of professional development is that it show concrete results and do so quickly. This expectation holds important implications for public support of professional development. People simply expect students to learn more as a result of teacher training programs. They also want concrete evidence of improving student achievement, such as rising test scores and grades. Moreover, they expect concrete results in a relatively short time span -- often less than two years and sometimes almost immediately. Citizens have a straightforward equation: professional development is a bottom-line investment in children's learning, and as such should bring quick dividends. According to this logic, if the investment does not bring returns, why continue it?

"If they haven't improved in six weeks, then to me that's a waste."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

"My expectation would be standardized scores go up, something like that, something tangible."

Birmingham man

"If you send a teacher to school you're assuming it's going to transfer to the job. And if the child's test scores go up, you assume that they were taught better methods and...it's starting to show results."

Birmingham man

"I want to see results go through the roof....If something is just going to change a little bit, don't go out and change the system and spend millions and millions of dollars."

Ft. Lee (NJ) man

Professional development is also expected to bring other benefits, such as increased teacher satisfaction. Many think that if teachers feel better about their work this will inevitably have a positive effect on student achievement.

"Inspire the teacher, inspire the student."

Denver woman

"Happy workers do better jobs. Enthusiasm is contagious. People who enjoy their jobs will teach better. Teachers who enjoy their jobs are going to be better to the kids...and kids will have less resistance."

Albuquerque woman

But in the end such "softer" benefits cannot justify the effort if they do not improve how well kids learn.

"If making them feel better makes them a better teacher then I would say, 'yes I think that's great.' But the teaching of the children is what it's all about." Denver man

### **Teach methods that make sense**

While participants endorse the principle of training teachers in new approaches, they reject training in methods that contradict their own notions of sound classroom practices. For example, previous research has shown strong public resistance to teaching math through early use of calculators. It is not surprising, therefore, that participants recoil at the idea of training teachers to use calculators with students in the early grades.

"I think all you're doing with them is teaching them how to operate a machine. You're not teaching them how to think."

Birmingham man

"If you can add twenty numbers quick with a calculator this doesn't mean that you learn how to add. You don't learn how to add on a calculator, you only learn how to add faster... You still got to know the basics." Birmingham man

Professional training thus loses support if it becomes associated with new teaching methods that the public finds counter-intuitive or faddish. Public Agenda research indicates that heterogenous grouping of students, teaching composition without correcting grammar and spelling, or using street language to teach inner-city kids will trigger similar skepticism. It does little good to advance the argument that scientific research demonstrates the benefits of a counter-intuitive teaching method. People want to see evidence, and lots of it. For most this means substantial real-life observation: they want to *see* the kids who are doing better. Few participants display a routine faith in the reliability of academic, statistical studies. When facing a conflict between innovative, research-based teaching methods and their own common-sense perceptions, people's instinct is to remain skeptical.

"My two children are the most important people in my life and I have to fall back on what I know. If I know what works and I am not sure about this study, I am going to go with what I know until it can be proven to me... There are studies that say smoking doesn't cause cancer. I know that the traditional ways worked for me and I would have to stay with that."

Albuquerque man

"I think most people want something better for their child if it would really help them to learn better and faster...But personally I would want to know the percentage rate of what it was escalating to in the students."

Denver man

Only careful and insistent probing seemed to move a few participants on the calculator example. If a consensus among the professional community emerged and all the experts agreed this was the way to go, perhaps then a few would consider it.

"I would have to be pretty sure it was working in order to go along with it."

Denver woman

The reluctance to support counter-intuitive teaching methods does not mean that people reject all research-based approaches for improving teaching. Research has shown that people support team-work learning, for example. It does mean that people will have a hard time with professional development that involves new teaching methods which defy their own intuition and experience of what works best.

### **Don't take teachers out of the classroom**

Participants feel strongly that professional development efforts *not* take teachers out of the classroom, because teacher-student contact is the key to whatever learning takes place. Cut into that, they reason, and you cut into learning.

"I don't think you should take them out of school, out of contact with the kids. I think teachers belong in the class room with the kids. I think there is adequate time outside of the class room."

Birmingham man

The suggestion that substitute teachers could fill in for teachers when they go off for training does little to assuage resistance. People do not think substitutes can effectively carry on with class-work. They assume that learning time will simply be lost.

"They'd send in a substitute teacher and in my school kids would see a substitute teacher and be like 'shwoom' [out of there]."

Denver male

The argument that American teachers have more student contact time and less class preparation time than teachers in European countries fails to convince people that teachers can therefore be taken out of the classrooms. People are simply strongly protective of student-teacher contact time.

### **Training in social issues is needed, but tread carefully in sensitive areas**

People think that teachers need training in order to deal more effectively with the social problems of today's student body.

"They have so much more to teach now... They have sex education, drug abuse, so many things that they don't know... They need to get together to figure how they can direct kids in the right direction."

Denver woman

Respondents have some reservations on child abuse as a subject for professional development (the moderators suggested it as one area where professional development could take place). They do not want to make the issue off-limits but do want special care to be taken. They want to make sure that teachers do not over- react. The most common fear is that parents might be falsely accused by overzealous teachers. Concerned that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing," they want to make sure teachers are carefully trained to recognize the problem. Participants also expect experts -- not teachers -- to ultimately decide whether intervention is necessary and what to do about it.

"If you can see it and maybe you can snoop around or investigate without impairing the situation, or changing the environment or anything like that or getting into somebody's business, I think it's OK. But it's bad if you jump off into something because you got a little education in college on how to spot abused children, and find you're way off track."

Birmingham man

## V. Implementing professional development

Professional development seems so promising to participants that they want to require all teachers to participate and resist suggestions to limit involvement. Attitudes toward financing such a program are complicated. People think teachers and school districts might share the costs. But they want the district's share to come from squeezing waste and bureaucracy out of the system, not from cuts in extra curricular activities.

### Which teachers should enroll in professional development?

Respondents think that virtually all teachers should receive professional development. A measure of the importance people attribute to it is their desire to make it mandatory, not voluntary. Furthermore, although some think development should focus on high school teachers, most feel it should include teachers across all grade levels. There is also little support for limiting development to teachers from low-achieving schools. The principle guiding people's thinking is that virtually all teachers will benefit from professional development.

"It should be required... I want my son to have the most advanced education possible...and to do that you have to teach the teachers more. You have to have them be willing, not only be willing but give them incentives. Give them paid workshops to go and learn these techniques and do the best job possible for the children."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

"I kind of feel that maybe it should be a mandatory thing. They have the three months off in the summer. Maybe one workshop over the summer, one course, something to keep up with the times."

Albuquerque woman

"I think every grade needs it. There are other aspects other than just academics that they're dealing with."

Denver woman

A few respondents reject making professional development mandatory.

"Parents and teachers should [decide], they know what's going on. Who is the state? How could they tell you what you need to go back to school for?"

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

### Who should pay for professional development?

Many participants think at least some of the costs should be borne by the district because professional development ultimately represents an investment in student achievement. Many also think that some payment or quid pro quo from teachers is essential. Applying their sense of a basic principle of human psychology, many reason that unless teachers invest or contribute toward their education, they will not value the program. Paying some or all of the costs of professional development, or requiring participant to get good grades for reimbursement of costs were key, according to this view.

"When you get something for free it is not worth as much to you. And the system doesn't have the money to put all these teachers through school."

Albuquerque woman

"I think their grades should be brought back to the school for evaluation to see if they went to that class just to kill time and get credit or if they went to that class to learn something that they could convey to class."

Birmingham man

In a few cases, participants thought teachers should bear all of the cost. There were also some participants who thought it was wrong to expect teachers to have to pay anything for professional development, especially if it was mandated.

"If you're going to require them to go to school then I think you should pay for it, or give them enough money to spend towards education."

Birmingham man

Assuming that teachers do pay only a portion of the costs, there are two ways to make up the difference: raising taxes or cutting back in other school areas. Public preferences toward both options can be easily misconstrued. With cut backs, people gravitate to the painless and familiar solutions of cracking down on waste in the system and getting rid of a top-heavy bureaucracy.

"It should be built into the budget, if they don't have enough budget then get rid of a few administrators."

Denver man

There is strong resistance to reducing school services to pay for the program, even in extracurricular areas such as music or sports.

"Certain things they learn in those [activities] may not be academic but they're still important."

Albuquerque woman

"I feel like people may look at band as band and football as football but then again it's a learning experience. You learn how to get along with other children."

Birmingham man

### **Are people willing to pay more in taxes for teacher development?**

Some people voiced support for raising taxes to pay for professional development.

"It is our responsibility as tax payers to improve the teachers if we want our kids to have a great education."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

But ostensible support for tax hikes should be regarded warily. Opinion research on many issues, including education, strongly suggest there is often a discontinuity between verbally supporting tax hikes and actually voting to support them (or the candidates who propose them). First, people start with the assumption that there is fat in the system so it is often difficult to convince them a tax hike is necessary. Second, people often say they favor a tax increase as a symbolic way of showing they care about an issue, not because they actually intend to vote for it when they step into the voting booth. Third, supporters of a tax increase often want assurances the money will be funneled directly and effectively to the intended objective.

"I would agree to a tax if I knew and could firmly believe that tax hike or increase was going straight into my child's education."

Birmingham man

Finally, some people predict a political backlash from some taxpayers or even say they would resist additional taxes. A few people without kids in the public schools said they resented being asked to shoulder an additional tax burden for services they did not use.

"Let the parents pay for it. I don't have children... There are a lot of people out there who say, 'I don't have children, why should I have so much of my money go in to the schools?' Let the people who are having babies pay for those babies."

Albuquerque woman

"If the tax payers bare the burden I think [in] an election it...most likely won't go because the senior citizens are the ones who don't want it..."

Ft. Lee (NJ) woman

### **Who should decide what professional development involves?**

Participants cast a wide net when discussing who should determine the content and procedures of a professional development program. Given the limited time people spent with this issue it was not surprising that the conversation took on a "laundry list" quality. They were simply trying to come up with a set of likely characters. Almost every stakeholder is consequently mentioned: parents, administrators, school boards, teachers, and even state level bureaucrats. Some call for a standard-setting body with input from all of these.

"I think it should be a joint decision with everyone in the community."

Albuquerque woman

"Probably all three; administrators, teachers and parents. They should all have a part."

Denver woman

"I think it should be a situation of school based management, with shared decision making with the teachers as well as the parents as well as department heads."

Ft. Lee woman

Most participants reach for cooperative and inclusive arrangements but a few fear that politics and partisanship would derail a process that was too inclusive. This was especially the case for teachers' unions. The unions rarely came up spontaneously among respondents, but when moderators brought them up people had mixed reactions. Their involvement was not rejected out of hand, and some appeared open to the idea. Others were skeptical, suspicious, or confused. Often the sentiment was along the lines of, "why would the unions care about this issue?"

"I don't think the union would have anything to do with it. I've never seen the union involved in a request for teacher education."

Ft. Lee (NJ) man

The underlying assumption for many seemed to be that unions do not care about an issue that does not directly effect their members' pocket-books.

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