

FINDINGS IN BRIEF

Although many state and federal policies are designed to promote academic success, this report shows Americans believe public education should not only focus on academics and college preparation but should also help students develop career and interpersonal skills and prepare them for citizenship and the workforce. While Americans do most often cite academic preparation as the main goal of public education, half believe the main goal should be either to prepare students to be good citizens or prepare them for work. The aspects of school quality considered most important are the teaching of cooperation, respect and problem-solving skills and the offering of technology and engineering classes.

This report also reveals a desire for new standards of assessment. Americans understand the importance of measuring student growth but recognize that current standardized tests do not measure everything that is important in education, such as the development of interpersonal skills.

While Americans consistently rate their local public schools more favorably than schools nationally, few Americans believe schools are doing a good job at developing work habits, providing factual information, preparing students to think critically or preparing them to be good citizens. Only about half of high school students think their schools are helping them understand their career options.

Additionally, employers in focus groups said it was difficult to find good applicants. In surveys, most employers say college graduates lack critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Employers in focus groups indicated that lack of resources, insufficient support and outdated systems prevent teachers from being as effective as possible, while Americans surveyed consistently cite lack of funding as the biggest problem schools face.

According to most Americans, no single entity or institution is solely responsible for improving public education. When considering the responsibilities of various levels of government, Americans believe state and local governments should have the largest role in deciding how to fix failing schools and setting educational standards, while the federal government should play the largest role in ensuring everyone has access to a high-quality education. Employers in focus groups suggested ways local businesses can also take part in career preparation. Surveys with parents found they believe their roles include helping children develop social skills.

The report concludes with implications and recommendations for research, engagement and communications.

METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

This report is based on a review of existing opinion research and on original focus groups with employers conducted by Public Agenda.

Review of opinion research

The review of existing opinion research synthesizes the results of surveys of the general public, parents, teachers, students and other stakeholders. The surveys were identified through searches of research databases, gray literature and peer-reviewed articles.⁷ Only surveys published since 2015 are included, except for one published in 2013 that provides additional data on parents' perspectives. As much as possible, this report uses the exact wording of questions and responses from each survey to present findings accurately. As it also uses the racial and ethnic terminology used in the original surveys, this terminology varies throughout the report. Some surveys, for example, use the term "black," while others use "African-American," and some use "Hispanic," while others use "Latino." Many surveys, including the U.S. Census's American Community Survey, combine "black or African-American" and "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin," respectively, into single response categories, so, for the purpose of this report, we assume "black" and "African-American" represent largely the same population, as do "Hispanic" and "Latino."

Employer perspectives

Public Agenda convened three two-hour focus groups across the United States with a total of 30 supervisors, managers or other employees who were involved in the hiring process at their businesses or organizations. All participants were employed at businesses or organizations with fewer than 500 employees. In all groups, participants were recruited by professional market research firms according to Public Agenda's specifications. Participants were recruited so that at least four industries were represented in each group, and the groups included a mix of people who manage, supervise or hire high school graduates, college graduates and both. Participants were recruited to represent a cross section of the public in the three locations.

Focus groups took place in market research facilities in April and May 2018 in Oakland, California; Blue Ash, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati; and Taylors, South Carolina, an unincorporated suburb of Greenville. These locations were chosen for their variety in size, region and economy.

⁷ Some non-opinion studies are included on topics for which opinion research is limited or unavailable.