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# MAIN FINDINGS

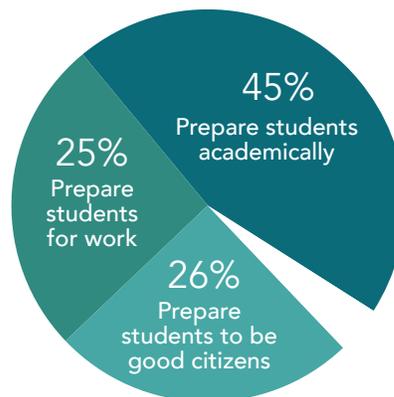
# 1 What is the purpose of public K–12 education?

Many Americans believe the purpose of K–12 education is not only to teach academics, such as math and science, but to prepare students for work and to be good citizens. In fact, most believe K–12 education has a lot of responsibility for ensuring workers have the skills and education they need to be successful in today’s economy.

- **Although preparing students academically is the most often cited goal of public education, Americans also believe that schools should prepare students to be good citizens and for work.** While about half—45 percent—of Americans believe that the main goal of public education should be to prepare students academically, 26 percent believe that the main goal should be to prepare students to be good citizens and 25 percent say it is to prepare them for work; see figure 1.<sup>8</sup> Preparing students academically may encompass a range of goals, including ensuring their success in college or providing the academic skills they need for the workforce.

## Preparing students academically is the most often cited goal of public education.

Figure 1. Percent of Americans who indicate they think the main goal of a public school education is to prepare students academically, to prepare them for work or to prepare them to be good citizens:



Beliefs about the purpose of education vary by political affiliation and residency. Residents of rural areas are more likely to indicate the main goal of education is to prepare students for work, while those in urban areas more often cite preparing students academically. Only 22 percent of conservatives and 24 percent of moderates believe the goal of public education should be to prepare students to be good citizens, as compared to 33 percent of liberals.<sup>9</sup>

NOTE: Respondents who refused the question or provided answers outside the three provided choices are not represented in the graph.

Source: PDK International, “Why School? The 48th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” 2016.

8 PDK International, “Why School? The 48th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools” (Bloomington, IN.: PDK International, 2016), [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

9 Ibid.

- **Most Americans believe the public K–12 education system has a lot of responsibility for preparing people for the workforce.** Sixty percent of Americans indicate the public K–12 education system should have a lot of responsibility for ensuring the American workforce has the skills and education to be successful in today’s economy. A slightly smaller proportion—52 percent—feels this way about colleges and universities, and 49 percent believe employers hold a lot of responsibility; see figure 2.<sup>10</sup>
- **Even more Americans—72 percent—indicate that individuals themselves should have a lot of responsibility for making sure the American workforce has the right skills and education to be successful in today’s economy.**<sup>11</sup> This sentiment also emerged in Public Agenda’s focus groups with employers from small businesses and organizations.<sup>12</sup> Many participants in the employer focus groups said they believed individuals are responsible for their own learning and success in school and in the workforce. As discussed below with regard to the challenges public education faces today, the employers in the focus groups believed laziness is a major hindrance to success; see page 32. Upon probing, however, participants also admitted that other factors, such as variation in quality among schools, can also affect students’ learning and success.

*“I think the biggest part of the human condition is to continue learning. And I think that a lot of kids don’t realize they need to continue learning as they’re getting older.”*

– Employer in Greenville, South Carolina<sup>13</sup>

*“You do get some basic skills from schooling, but real-life experience is more valuable to me than an education. I have a master’s degree, but it doesn’t change how I fight fires.”*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

Surveys of the general public show, perhaps not surprisingly, that Republicans and independents who lean Republican emphasize the importance of individuals’ own role in making sure they are prepared for the workforce, while Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents are more likely to point to public schools, colleges and the state and federal governments as being responsible for ensuring the workforce has the right skills and education to be successful in today’s economy.<sup>14</sup>

10 Pew Research Center, “The State of American Jobs: How the Shifting Economic Landscape Is Reshaping Work and Society and Affecting the Way People Think About the Skills and Training They Need to Get Ahead” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 6, 2016), [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/ST\\_2016.10.06\\_Future-of-Work\\_FINAL4.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/ST_2016.10.06_Future-of-Work_FINAL4.pdf).

11 Ibid.

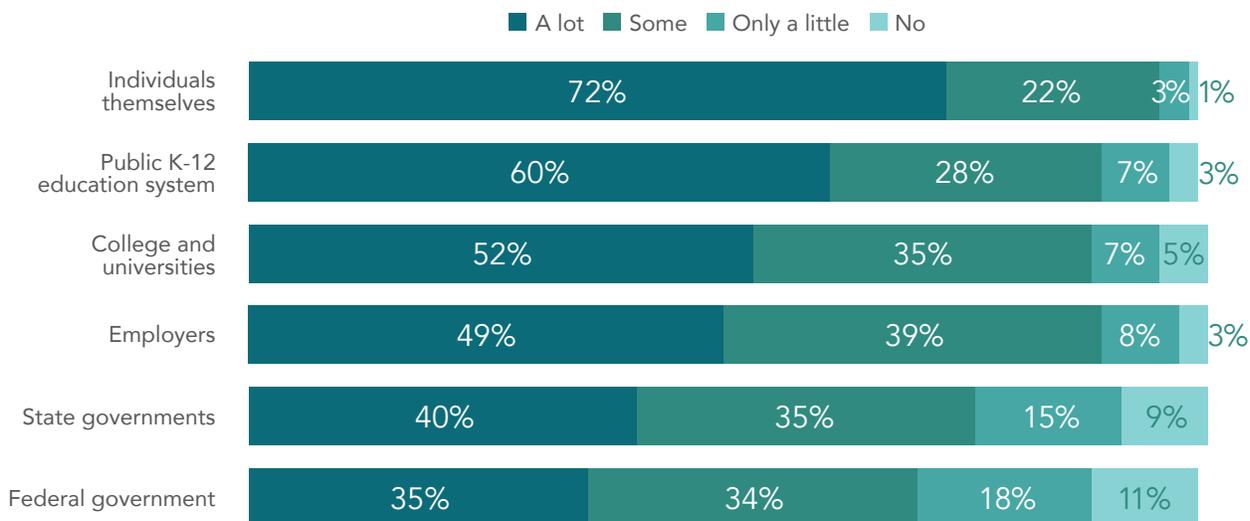
12 Although Public Agenda’s focus groups with employers concentrated on the views regarding public K–12 education of supervisors, managers and other professionals from small businesses and organizations who are involved in hiring, participants in these groups also spoke as parents or community members with vested interests in K–12 education.

13 Focus group quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

14 Pew Research Center, “The State of American Jobs” 2016, [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/ST\\_2016.10.06\\_Future-of-Work\\_FINAL4.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/ST_2016.10.06_Future-of-Work_FINAL4.pdf).

**Most Americans believe the public K–12 education system has a lot of responsibility for preparing the workforce.**

Figure 2. Percent of Americans who say each of the following should have a lot, some, only a little or no responsibility in making sure the American workforce has the right skills and education to be successful in today's economy:



Source: Pew Research Center, "The State of American Jobs: How the Shifting Economic Landscape Is Reshaping Work and Society and Affecting the Way People Think About the Skills and Training They Need to Get Ahead," 2016.

- Most high school students believe they will pursue a college degree after high school, and most parents expect their children to attend college full time.** Seventy-one percent of high school students indicate they plan to attend a two- or four-year college, while only 5 percent say they will work full time after high school.<sup>15</sup> Among parents with children in public schools, 61 percent expect their child to attend college full time, and 22 percent expect their child to work part time and study part time. Only 7 percent of parents expect their child to work full time upon completing high school.<sup>16</sup>

Students' and parents' expectations about college enrollment are not far off: according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in October 2017, 61 percent of high school graduates were enrolled full time in a university or college, with women more likely to enroll than men.<sup>17</sup>

While 81 percent of Asian students, 75 percent of black or African-American students and 71 percent of white students expect to attend a two- or four-year college, only 65 percent of Hispanic or Latino students indicate this.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, fewer Hispanic public school parents—47 percent—say their child will go to college full time than do black—57 percent—or white—64 percent—public school parents. Additionally, more public school parents of girls—67 percent—indicate their child will go to college full time than public school parents of boys—55 percent.<sup>19</sup>

15 YouthTruth, "Learning from Student Voice: College and Career Readiness" (San Francisco, CA: YouthTruth, 2016), <http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/YouthTruth-Learning-From-Student-Voice-College-and-Career-Readiness-2016.pdf>.  
 16 PDK International, "The 49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" (Arlington, VA: PDK International, 2017), [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).  
 17 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates Summary" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, April 26, 2018), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm>.  
 18 YouthTruth, "Learning from Student Voice: How Prepared do Students Feel for College and Career?" (San Francisco, CA: YouthTruth, 2017), <http://youthtruthsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Learning-from-Student-Voice-College-and-Career-Readiness-2017.pdf>.  
 19 PDK International, "49th Annual PDK Poll," 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

## 2 What should students learn in public K–12 education?

Overall, Americans support the concept behind the Common Core State Standards, but the name “Common Core” provokes negative reactions. Although Americans understand the importance of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) studies, they may be shifting toward emphasizing English, reading and writing. Americans also think it is important for schools to provide factual information and teach students to think critically. They believe the most important indicator of school quality is the teaching of cooperation, respect and problem solving. Most Americans also believe it is important for K–12 education to teach students to be good citizens. In terms of career readiness, most Americans support offering more career skills classes, and most would favor having more career- or skills-based classes over having more honors classes. While most Americans do believe standardized tests should be administered and schools should be held accountable for test scores, fewer believe testing does a good job at measuring what they find most important, such as interpersonal skills.

### Academic preparation

- **Support for the Common Core State Standards has increased since 2015.**

When the Common Core was described to Americans in 2017, 61 percent supported the use of it in their states, up from 54 percent who supported it in 2015. The name “Common Core” still provokes negative reactions, however. In 2017, support dropped to 41 percent when “Common Core” was mentioned in the question.<sup>20</sup>

- **Fewer teachers than parents support Common Core.** While 57 percent of parents support the Common Core standards, teachers show less support, even when the term “Common Core” is not mentioned, with only 45 percent favoring the standards and 44 percent opposed to them.<sup>21</sup>

Most Democrats and Republicans support Common Core. Among Democrats and Republicans support holds at 61 percent and 64 percent, respectively, when the term “Common Core” is not mentioned.<sup>22</sup>

20 Martin R. West, Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson and Samuel Barrows, “The 2017 EdNext Poll on School Reform: Public Thinking on School Choice, Common Core, Higher Ed, and More,” *Education Next* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 32–52, [http://educationnext.org/files/ednext\\_xviii\\_1\\_poll.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_xviii_1_poll.pdf).

21 Michael B. Henderson, “*Education Next*—Program on Education Policy and Governance—Survey 2017” (Cambridge, MA: Education Next, 2017), <http://educationnext.org/files/2017ednextpoll.pdf>.

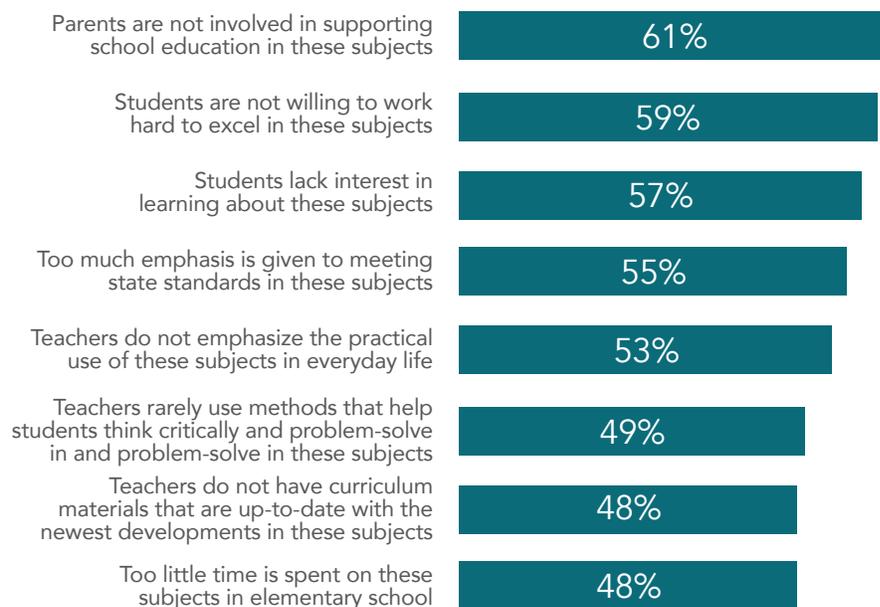
22 Ibid.

- **The percentage of Americans who believe mathematics is the one subject K–12 schools need to emphasize more has dropped since 2013.** In response to an open-ended question, 30 percent of Americans in 2013 indicated math was the one subject schools should emphasize more, but in 2017 only 18 percent indicated math was the subject schools should emphasize more.<sup>23</sup> The percentage of Americans who indicated English/grammar/writing/reading should be emphasized more remained consistent in 2013 and 2017, at 19 percent. In 2017, the third most cited subject was history/civics/current events, with 12 percent indicating this was the topic to emphasize more and 9 percent indicating science/engineering.<sup>24</sup>
- **Americans believe parents’ lack of involvement in supporting STEM courses and students’ lack of motivation and interest are big problems with regard to teaching STEM. Nearly half believe not enough time is spent on STEM courses in elementary school.** Too little time spent on STEM courses in elementary school is seen as a big problem in the teaching of STEM by 48 percent of Americans, but it is not the top problem Americans believe STEM courses face.<sup>25</sup> More cite lack of involvement by parents and lack of interest or willingness on the part of students to work hard in these subjects as big problems in the teaching of STEM; see figure 3.

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### Most Americans see many problems related to STEM in public K–12 schools.

Figure 3. Percent of Americans who say that, when thinking about science, technology, engineering and math education in the nation’s K–12 public schools these days, each of the following is a big problem:



Source: Pew Research Center, “Survey Questionnaire and Topline: 2017 STEM Survey Questionnaire,” 2017.

23 Math is defined in 2013 as including math/mathematics/arithmetic and in 2017 as including math/statistics.

24 Pew Research Center, “Survey Questionnaire and Topline: 2017 STEM Survey Questionnaire” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017), [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/01/08155828/PS\\_2018.01.09\\_STEM\\_TOPLINE.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/01/08155828/PS_2018.01.09_STEM_TOPLINE.pdf).

25 Pew Research Center, “2017 STEM Survey,” 2017, [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/01/08155828/PS\\_2018.01.09\\_STEM\\_TOPLINE.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/01/08155828/PS_2018.01.09_STEM_TOPLINE.pdf).

- **Most Americans believe it is important for schools to provide factual information and teach students to think critically.** Eighty-five percent of Americans believe it is extremely or very important to provide students with factual information, and 82 percent believe it is extremely or very important for students to learn to think critically across subject areas; see figure 4.<sup>26</sup> Employers in focus groups also reinforced the importance of factual information, specifically citing when studying history.

*“Don’t try to change history. If it was a bad part of history, say, ‘This was a dark part of our history, but this is what we as a country can learn from.’”*

– Employer in Greenville, South Carolina

**Americans believe it is important for schools to provide factual information and prepare students to think critically.**

Figure 4. Percent of Americans who indicate each of the following is extremely or very important for schools to do:



Source: PDK International, “Why School? The 48th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” 2016.

### Interpersonal skills

- **For Americans, teaching interpersonal skills is the most important factor of school quality.** Thirty-six percent of Americans believe teaching cooperation, respect and problem-solving skills is the most important factor of school quality—an even greater percentage than Americans who believe technology and engineering or advanced academic classes is the most important; see figure 5. Only 8 percent believe extracurricular activities and only 6 percent believe standardized test performance are the most important factors of school quality.<sup>27</sup>

Liberals and women are more likely than moderates, conservatives and males to indicate that teaching cooperation, respect and problem solving and offering art and music classes are highly important to school quality. Additionally, while 84 percent of liberals indicate advanced academic classes are highly important to school quality, only 70 percent of moderates and 77 percent of conservatives say this.<sup>28</sup>

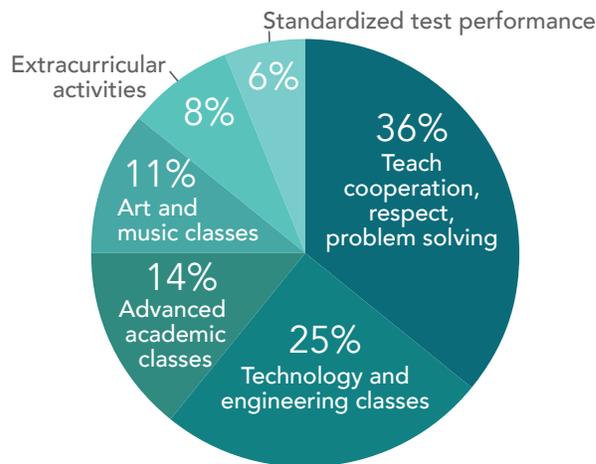
<sup>26</sup> PDK International, “48th Annual PDK Poll,” 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> PDK International, “49th Annual PDK Poll,” 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

**Teaching interpersonal skills is the most important factor of school quality for Americans.**

Figure 5. Percent of Americans who indicate each of the following factors is the most important in school quality:



Source: PDK International, "The 49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 2017.

- **Americans may not prioritize standardized test scores because nearly half believe the tests do not measure everything they think is important in education, such as interpersonal skills. But that does not mean Americans want to get rid of testing.** Although over half of Americans—58 percent—are confident that standardized tests do a good job at measuring how well their children are learning, only 42 percent of Americans believe performance on these tests is a highly important factor of school quality. One possible

explanation for why many do not believe standardized test performance is an important factor of school quality is that around half of Americans—49 percent—do not think standardized tests measure the aspects of education that are most important to them personally. Furthermore, only 39 percent of Americans are somewhat or very confident that standardized tests do a good job at measuring interpersonal skills.

Non-white Americans, conservatives, Americans with household incomes less than \$50,000 and Americans without college degrees are more likely than others to indicate standardized test scores are an important indicator of school quality.<sup>30</sup>

The large majority of Americans, however—84 percent—still believe the tests should be administered, and 66 percent believe schools should be held accountable for bad scores.<sup>29</sup>

*“The teachers are so focused on making sure the students pass the test that they can’t teach the social skills or anything that they really need in life. How’s that test they didn’t pass in sixth grade going to help you learn how to deal with people? It’s not.”*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

- **Most Americans value preparing students to work successfully in groups.** Seventy-six percent of Americans believe it is extremely or very important for schools to prepare students to work successfully in groups.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, many employers in the focus groups also emphasized the importance of working together.

*“We look for people who are able to work with the team.”* – Employer in Oakland, California

- **In focus groups with employers, participants believed all six competencies of deeper learning are important qualities for employees. When asked where employees learn these skills, however, employers did not immediately think of K–12 but, rather, raised home life and personal experiences.** Although the term “deeper learning” was not introduced in the focus groups, most employers indicated the six competencies of deeper learning—academic knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving, working collaboratively, communicating effectively, directing one’s own learning and having a belief in one’s ability to grow—were important qualities in employees. When asked where they believed employees learn these skills, most did not think of K–12. When prompted, though, most participants agreed these skills should be taught in K–12 schools.

In fact, focus group participants consistently held that people learn interpersonal skills from their parents, or that they are simply born with or without these skills. When asked specifically about K–12 education, an employer in Oakland did say that learning these skills “happens indirectly” in school. Similarly, participants in focus groups conducted by Hattaway Communications with parents, teachers and students believed it was necessary for students to develop and strengthen the six competencies of deeper learning in K–12.<sup>32</sup>

*“Things like communication—I always had to do presentations in class. Working in teams happens in the classroom. Being self-sufficient—when it came to getting work done and turning it in. Adaptability—I’ve always had to move from one grade to another. Being reliable—I had to get to school on time. Being detail oriented—definitely. It’s not written into the curriculum, but you have to have the skills to make it through.”*

– Employer in Oakland, California

31 PDK International, “48th Annual PDK Poll,” 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

32 Hattaway Communications, “Deeper Learning Audience Research Insights” (Washington, DC: Hattaway Communications, 2017).

## Citizenship and life skills

- **Most Americans think it is important for schools to prepare students to be good citizens.** Eighty-two percent of Americans say it is extremely or very important for students in public K–12 to learn to be good citizens.<sup>33</sup>
- **Employers in focus groups stated that schools could provide good opportunities for students to learn to become good citizens.** Across all three focus groups, employers often indicated schools are good places for students to learn about diversity, different cultures and how to work with people who are different from them. Consistent with our focus group findings, a survey conducted by PDK found 49 percent of parents would strongly prefer their child attend a diverse school, and 55 percent say diversity is very important.<sup>35</sup> Although focus group participants admitted they were unsure about the current state of civics curricula in schools, their ideas for student objectives included learning how to fulfill civic duties and understanding how the government works.

Fifty-seven percent of blacks believe it is extremely important for schools to prepare students to be good citizens, making it the most important objective of education among blacks. Only 37 percent of Hispanics and 43 percent of whites say preparing students to be good citizens is an extremely important school objective. Instead, Hispanics and whites are most likely to prioritize developing good work habits.<sup>34</sup>

Democrats are more likely than Republicans and Black and Hispanic parents are more likely than white parents to cite the importance of diversity in schools. Seventy-two percent of Black parents, 57 percent of Hispanic parents and 48 percent of white parents say racial and ethnic diversity is very important.<sup>37</sup>

- **About half of parents strongly prefer racially diverse schools, and about half say diverse schools create better learning environments. Few, however, would be willing to make longer commutes for diversity.** Forty-nine percent of parents would strongly prefer their child attend a diverse school, and 55 percent say diversity is very important. Fifty-one percent of parents say racially diverse schools produce a better learning environment for white students, while 55 percent say diverse schools create better learning environments for black and Hispanic students. Fifty-seven percent of parents, however, say they would send their child to a closer, less diverse school if the racially diverse school was farther away.<sup>36</sup>
- **Employer focus group participants believed that, in addition to offering academic and career courses and helping students develop interpersonal skills, K–12 education should help them develop life skills.** Employers participating in the focus groups thought schools should offer financial literacy courses that would teach students about debt, savings and budgeting; courses in home economics; and courses providing basic communication skills. Participants also believed schools should help students develop such skills as accountability, time management and how to present oneself professionally.

33 PDK International, "48th Annual PDK Poll," 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

34 Ibid.

35 PDK International, "49th Annual PDK Poll," 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

*“When my 24-year-old was in middle school, he took this class called lifestyle and that was the best class he has ever taken. It taught him how to live on his own and how to manage a checkbook, how to do a budget. I mean, it’s just basic living. How to run a washing machine and dryer. That basic stuff, they taught them that.”* – Employer in Greenville, South Carolina

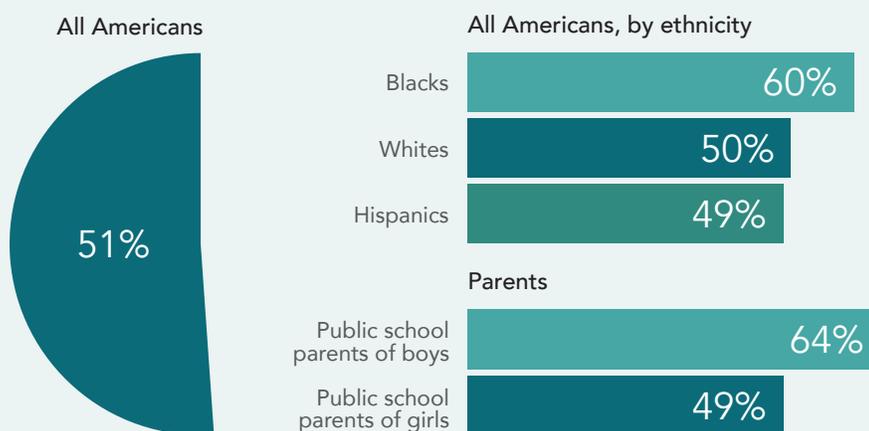
## Workforce preparation

- **Most Americans support offering programs or classes that will help students when they enter the workforce, and most believe schools should offer more career skills classes.** Eighty-six percent of Americans think schools should offer licensing or certificate programs in specific fields that will allow students to enter the workforce directly from high school, and 82 percent think career skills classes should be offered even if they take time away from academic classes. Eighty-two percent of Americans indicate engineering and technology classes are extremely or very important to school quality, and 51 percent of Americans believe more career-focused courses should be offered in high schools in their community than are offered now.<sup>38</sup>

Support for offering more career skills classes than are offered now varies by race/ethnicity and between parents of boys and parents of girls. While 60 percent of blacks support offering more of these classes, only 50 percent of whites and 49 percent of Hispanics do. Additionally, while 64 percent of parents with a boy in a public school believe more job or career skills courses should be offered, only 49 percent of parents with a girl in a public school believe this; see figure 6.<sup>39</sup>

**About half of Americans believe schools in their communities should offer more career skills classes than they do now. Support for these classes varies among different groups, however.**

Figure 6. Percent who think public high schools in their community should offer more job or career skills classes than they do now:



Source: PDK International, “The 49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” 2017.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

- **When forced to choose, most Americans favor having more career- or skills-based classes over having more honors classes.** In a forced-choice question, Americans were asked if they thought it was better to have more honors or advanced academic classes or more career, technical or skills-based classes. Only 21 percent of Americans chose more honors classes, while 68 percent chose more career, technical or skills-based classes. Compared to all Americans, however, parents with at least one child in public schools are 9 percentage points more likely to indicate they would prefer more honors classes.<sup>40</sup>
- **An overwhelming majority of Americans value the teaching of good work habits in school.** Ninety percent of Americans believe it is extremely or very important to help students develop good work habits.<sup>41</sup>
- **Some focus group participants believed K–12 education should do more to meet the needs of students who will not attend college.** Overall, focus group participants believed college is not for everyone, and that some students should be prepared to enter directly into the workforce from high school. They favored schools offering distinct pathways for those looking to go to college and those looking to enter the workforce. They said students who do not wish to pursue college should still have an opportunity to be successful in the workforce, and public high schools should help them develop the necessary skills to do so. Participants saw this dual-pathway approach as a pragmatic way to meet the needs both of students they described as not necessarily cut out for college and of employers who need blue-collar employees.

*“I went to the regular high school. I took electrical classes, I took woodshop, I took welding, I took car mechanics. But my wife went to the same high school and she was brought up on the path to college. We both went to the same school, but they had her on a college path. I was on the blue-collar path. I made a living and built my way up because of my hands and having to develop those skills.”*

– Employer in Greenville, South Carolina

40 PDK International, “48th Annual PDK Poll,” 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

41 Ibid.

# 3 What do employers say about employees, the workforce and public K–12 education?

According to multiple studies and findings from the focus groups with employers, most employers look for employees who can work with others, solve problems and think critically, yet many employers indicate these are difficult skills to find in applicants. Among hard skills, employers say it is difficult to find applicants with writing proficiency, public speaking and data analysis skills. Employers in focus groups stated finding good applicants was difficult, even for entry-level positions.

- **Ability to work with others, solve problems and think critically are among the essential qualities employers look for in job applicants and employees.** Multiple studies have found that most employers say it is essential for job applicants to be able to work with others, solve problems, think critically and communicate effectively in person and online.<sup>42</sup>

*“I think problem solving is important to a supervisor. I want people who can solve their own problems because it’s going to take more off my plate when errors occur. I think it’s impressive when someone can say this is when the error occurred, this is how we can fix it for next time.”*

– Employer in Oakland, California

*“We look for people who are resourceful, can communicate and work with the team.”*

– Employer in Oakland, California

- **Teachability is among the characteristics employers in focus groups said they seek in employees.** In addition to emphasizing teamwork and communication skills, employers at small businesses and organizations in Public Agenda’s focus groups said they look for employees who are teachable, honest, self-motivated, reliable and eager to learn and develop skills.

42 Guy Berger, “Data Reveals the Most In-Demand Soft Skills Among Candidates,” *LinkedIn Talent Blog*, August 30, 2016, <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2016/most-in-demand-soft-skills>; Kevin Gray and Andrea Koncz, “The Key Attributes Employers Seek on Students’ Resumes” (Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers, November 30, 2017), <https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/press/2017/the-key-attributes-employers-seek-on-students-resumes>; Committee for Economic Development of the Conference Board, “What Are Essential Competencies on the Job?” (Arlington, VA: Committee for Economic Development of the Conference Board, 2015), [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/151007%20CED%20Survey%20Results%203.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/151007%20CED%20Survey%20Results%203.pdf).

*“They’re really motivated, really interested in learning—those are the type of employees I like. They excel in what they’re doing because they have the interest in doing it.”*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

*“I just think that somebody that’s willing to want to learn and is teachable—that’s extremely important. You have to be willing to want to learn and be able to be teachable to do it.”*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

- **In general, focus group participants felt it was difficult to find good applicants.** Employers said they receive many applications, but most applicants do not have all the skills required for the positions they need to fill. Some expressed surprise about how difficult it can be to fill even entry-level positions, such as receptionist. One employer in Cincinnati who worked in construction said people don’t have the skills for entry-level positions or may not be interested in attaining them.

*“Hiring task workers and laborers for construction is getting harder and harder. The job market is tight. They’re not teaching crafts at schools anymore like they were—carpentry and masonry and those types of things. And kids don’t want to do that.”*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

- **Only half of managers feel college graduates are prepared to enter the workforce.** In a survey conducted by PayScale of about 64,000 employers who directly supervise at least one employee, 50 percent of managers said they do not feel college graduates are prepared to enter the workforce, indicating potential employees may not be learning the workplace skills they need in either K–12 or higher education.<sup>43</sup>
- **Most employers believe critical thinking and problem solving are difficult soft skills to find in new applicants.** In multiple studies and our focus groups, most managers indicate critical thinking and problem solving are the soft skills they have the most difficulty finding in recent college graduates; see figure 7.<sup>44</sup> Focus group employers said that, although they get many applicants, it is rare to find someone with all the skills they need.

*“I think that a majority of the population do not have the skills. I don’t know which ones are lacking, but I want to say common sense. I think a lot of people appear to be lacking common sense.”*

– Employer in Oakland, California

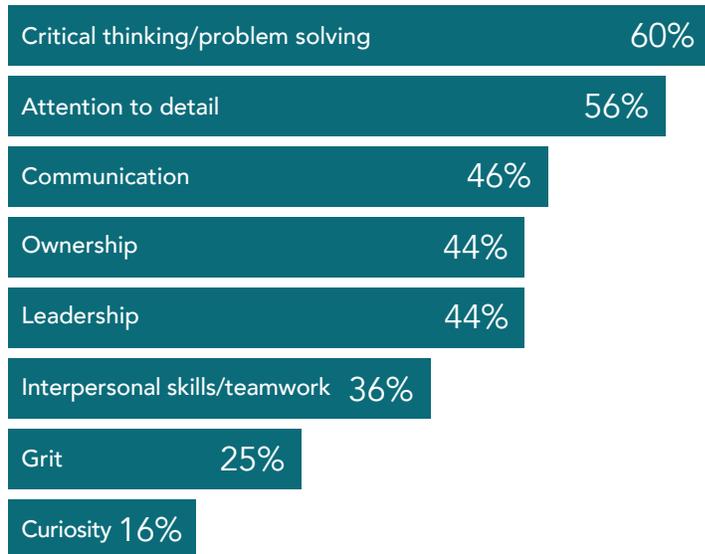
43 PayScale, “Leveling Up: How to Win in the Skills Economy” (Seattle, WA: PayScale, 2016), <https://www.payscale.com/data-packages/job-skills>.

44 Committee for Economic Development of the Conference Board, “What Are Essential Competencies?” 2015, [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/151007%20CED%20Survey%20Results%203.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/151007%20CED%20Survey%20Results%203.pdf); PayScale, “Leveling Up,” 2016, <https://www.payscale.com/data-packages/job-skills>.

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**Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are among the most difficult soft skills to find in an applicant.**

Figure 7. Percent of managers who feel new college graduates are lacking the following skills:



Source: PayScale, "Leveling Up: How to Win in the Skills Economy," 2016.

- **Most employers look at a candidate's grade point average (GPA).** Although GPA is not usually one of the first qualities mentioned as important in a good candidate, 70 percent of employers indicate they do screen candidates by GPA, with most of those who plan on screening having a cutoff of 3.0.<sup>45</sup>
- **Employers across the three focus groups often indicated prior work experience is important, since employees learn most of their technical skills on the job.** Many employers indicated that, although having a degree or college education proves an individual is willing to put in time and is dedicated to accomplishing a goal, it does not necessarily mean the person has the real-life skills needed for a job.

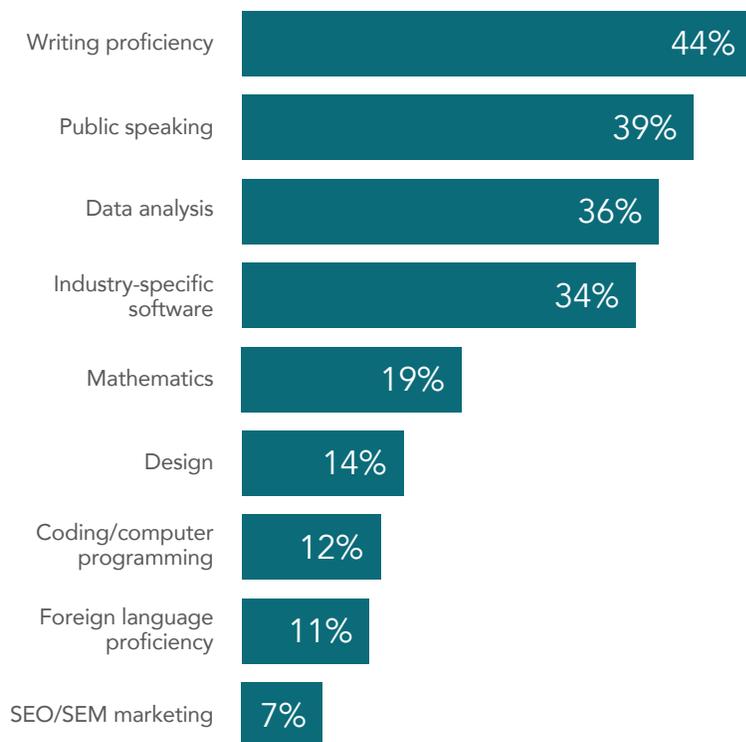
*"You do learn from your mistakes, and that's where you get your experience in real life. But they don't teach real-life stuff in college. Everyone in college is trying to get an A. They're not actually doing anything but for themselves. They don't have a company that they're trying to grow. They don't have a paycheck that they're trying to get. So I would say experience in the actual workforce is most important."* – Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

<sup>45</sup> Gray and Koncz, "Key Attributes Employers Seek," 2017, <https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/press/2017/the-key-attributes-employers-seek-on-students-resumes>.

- **Among hard skills, writing proficiency, public speaking and data analysis skills are the most difficult to find in recent college graduates.** Out of about 70,000 managers who completed the PayScale employee compensation survey, 44 percent feel recent college graduates lack writing proficiency, making it the skill most often cited as lacking in new college graduates; see figure 8.<sup>46</sup>

**Writing proficiency and public speaking skills are among the hard skills most difficult to find in an applicant.**

Figure 8. Percent of managers who feel new college graduates are lacking the following skills:



Source: PayScale, "Leveling Up: How to Win in the Skills Economy," 2016.

- **While some skills are prioritized across careers, others are more highly valued in specific fields.** One study found that communication, organizational and writing skills are, on average, most commonly sought by employers. There are, however, unique skills that are valued by job function. For example, while attention to detail and creativity are highly valued for design jobs, with less emphasis placed on customer service skills, customer service skills are more highly valued for sales positions.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, demand for interpersonal skills varies with industry. Not surprisingly, soft skills are most in demand in industries where interpersonal interactions are most frequent, such as retail and human resources.<sup>48</sup>

46 PayScale, "Leveling Up," 2016, <https://www.payscale.com/data-packages/job-skills>.

47 Burning Glass Technologies, "The Human Factor: The Hard Time Employers Have Finding Soft Skills" (Boston, MA: Burning Glass Technologies, November 2015), [https://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/Human\\_Factor\\_Baseline\\_Skills\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/Human_Factor_Baseline_Skills_FINAL.pdf).

48 Berger, "Data Reveals the Most In-Demand Soft Skills," 2016, <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2016/most-indemand-soft-skills>.

# 4 How do people think public schools measure up?

Americans rate their local public schools more favorably than schools nationally, and most parents rate private or parochial schools in their communities more favorably than they do public schools, including charter schools. 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 career options, and many workers say they learned their interpersonal skills through work and life experience, not formal education.

- **Overall, Americans rate their local public schools more highly than public schools nationally—a consistent trend since 1974.**<sup>49</sup> One survey found 54 percent of Americans would give the public schools in their community a grade of A or B, whereas only 23 percent would give public schools nationally an A or B.<sup>50</sup> This survey also found more teachers and parents rate their community schools favorably than do Americans in general; see figure 9. In an AP-NORC survey, 45 percent of Americans rate the quality of education at their local schools as excellent or good, whereas only 26 percent feel the same about the nation’s public schools.<sup>51</sup>

Confidence in public schools varies by political affiliation and residency. Forty-one percent of Democrats have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the public schools, while only 30 percent of Republicans do.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, 70 percent of urban parents say their child’s school is good or excellent, compared to 81 percent of suburban parents and 76 percent of rural parents who say this.<sup>53</sup>

49 PDK International, “49th Annual PDK Poll,” 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

50 Henderson, “*Education Next—Survey 2017*,” 2017, <http://educationnext.org/files/2017ednextpoll.pdf>.

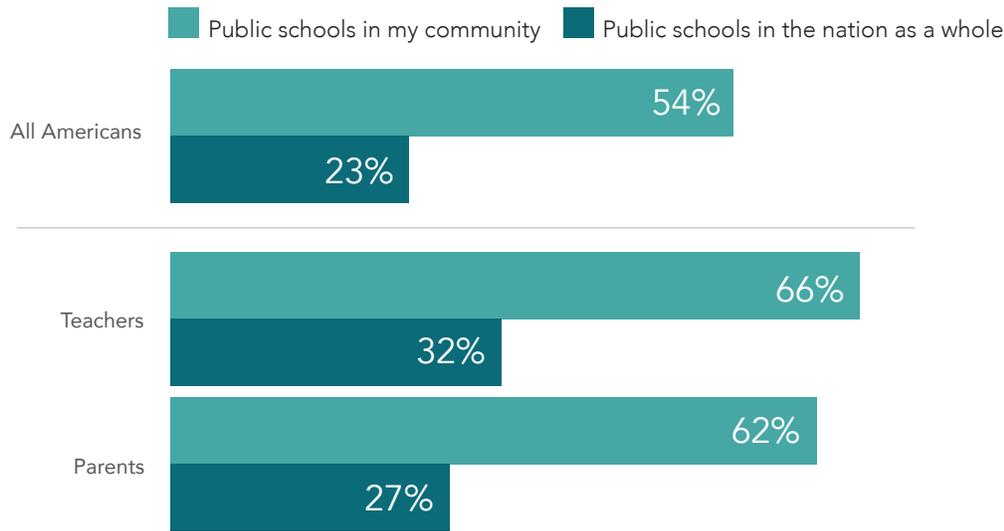
51 Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Education in the United States: Choice, Control, and Quality,” Issue Brief (Chicago: Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, May 2017), [http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC\\_Education%20in%20US.pdf](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC_Education%20in%20US.pdf).

52 Frank Newport, “Americans’ Confidence in Institutions Edges Up” (Washington, DC: Gallup, June 26, 2017), <http://news.gallup.com/poll/212840/americans-confidence-institutions-edges.aspx>.

53 Trevor Tompson, Jennifer Benz and Jennifer Agiesta, “Parents’ Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States” (Chicago, IL: Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, August 2013), [http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Parent%20Attitudes/AP\\_NORC\\_Parents%20Attitudes%20on%20the%20Quality%20of%20Education%20in%20the%20US\\_FINAL\\_2.pdf](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Parent%20Attitudes/AP_NORC_Parents%20Attitudes%20on%20the%20Quality%20of%20Education%20in%20the%20US_FINAL_2.pdf).

**Americans rate their local public schools more highly than public schools nationally.**

Figure 9. Percent who give an A or B to public schools in their community and public schools in the nation as a whole:

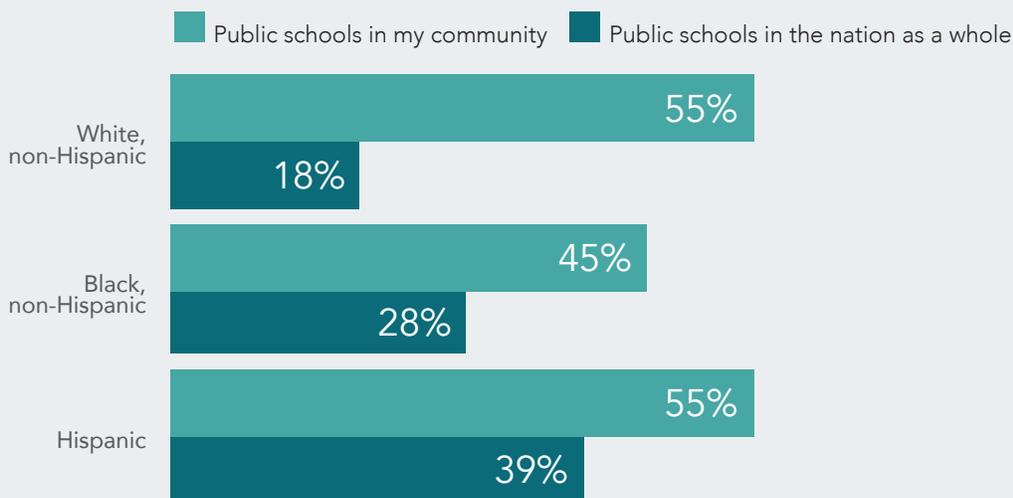


Source: Michael B. Henderson, "Education Next—Program on Education Policy and Governance—Survey 2017," 2017.

Fewer black Americans give the public schools in their communities an A or B than do white or Hispanic Americans. Only 45 percent of black, non-Hispanic Americans would grade their local public schools with an A or B, as compared to 55 percent of white non-Hispanics and 55 percent of Hispanics. White non-Hispanics are least likely to give public schools nationally an A or B, however, while blacks, non-Hispanics and Hispanics rate them more favorably; see figure 10.<sup>54</sup>

**Fewer black Americans give the public schools in their communities an A or B than do white or Hispanic Americans.**

Figure 10. Percent who would give an A or B to the public schools in their community, by race and ethnicity:



Source: Michael B. Henderson, "Education Next—Program on Education Policy and Governance—Survey 2017," 2017.

54 Henderson, "Education Next—Survey 2017," 2017, <http://educationnext.org/files/2017ednextpoll.pdf>.

Compared with white parents, fewer non-white parents say African-American, Latino and other minority children receive an education equal to that of white children. Among parents of school-age children in the AP-NORC survey, 81 percent of white parents and only 58 percent of non-white parents believe African-American, Latino and other minority children get about the same quality of education as white children in their community; see figure 11.<sup>55</sup> Other surveys have also found African-American and Latino or Hispanic parents or family members are aware of racial inequalities in the quality of education and cite racial disparities in school funding as the cause.<sup>56</sup>

**White parents are more likely than non-white parents to say African-American, Latino and other minority children receive an education equal to that of white children.**

Figure 11. Percent of parents who think African-American, Latino and other minority children get about the same education as white children, by race/ethnicity:



Source: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, "Education in the United States: Choice, Control, and Quality," 2017.

**Public vs. Private School**

- **Parents tend to view private or parochial schools in their communities as better than public charter or public district schools.** When asked to give a grade to the different types of schools in their communities, more parents award an A or B to private or parochial schools than to public charter or public district schools; see figure 12.<sup>57</sup> One must be cautious, however, in interpreting these findings, since research has also shown many Americans are unable to identify the differences between charter and other types of schools.<sup>58</sup>

**Parents rate local private schools more highly than local district schools.**

Figure 12. Percent of parents who give an A or B to the following types of schools in their community:



Source: DiPerna, Shaw and Catt, "2017 Schooling in America," 2017.

55 Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, "Education in the United States," 2017, [http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC\\_Education%20in%20US.pdf](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC_Education%20in%20US.pdf).

56 Leadership Conference Education Fund, "New Education Majority: Attitudes and Aspirations of Parents and Families of Color" (Washington, DC: Leadership Conference Education Fund, April 2016), <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/education/new-education-majority/New-Education-Majority-whitepaper.pdf>.

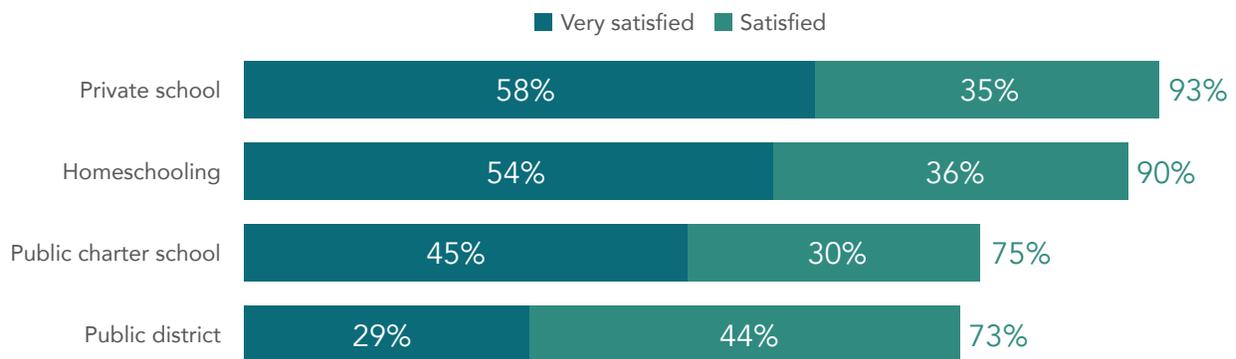
57 Paul DiPerna, Michael Shaw and Andrew D. Catt, "2017 Schooling in America: Public Opinion on K-12 Education, Parents Experiences, School Choice, and the Role of the Federal Government," Polling Paper No. 31 (Indianapolis, IN: EdChoice, November 2017), <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017-Schooling-In-America-by-Paul-DiPerna-Michael-Shaw-and-Andrew-D-Catt.pdf>.

58 Public Agenda, "A Guide to Research: Charter Schools in Perspective" (New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2015), <http://www.in-perspective.org/pages/a-guide-to-research>.

- More private school than public school parents are satisfied with the schools their children attend. Given a choice, nearly four in ten public school parents would prefer private schools over public or charter schools.**
 Ninety-three percent of current and former private school parents express satisfaction with their child's private school experience, while 75 percent of current and former charter school parents express satisfaction with their child's charter school experience and 73 percent of current and former public district school parents express satisfaction with their child's public school experience. Far fewer current and former public school parents, however, are very satisfied with their child's school experience than are current and former private school parents; see figure 13.<sup>59</sup> If provided with public funding to cover full tuition for a private or religious school, 39 percent of public school parents would send their child to a private or religious school. Only 21 percent of public school parents, however, indicate they would send their child to a private or religious school if funding covered only half of the school's tuition.<sup>60</sup>

**More private school parents are satisfied with their children's school experience than public school parents.**

Figure 13. Percent of parents with a child currently or previously enrolled in a given type of school who say they are very satisfied or satisfied with their child's school experience, by school type:



Source: DiPerna, Shaw and Catt, "2017 Schooling in America," 2017.

59 DiPerna, Shaw and Catt, "2017 Schooling in America," 2017, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017-Schooling-In-America-by-Paul-DiPerna-Michael-Shaw-and-Andrew-D-Catt.pdf>. Due to low sample sizes among parents who have enrolled children in charter schools or have homeschooled, findings from these groups must be interpreted with caution.

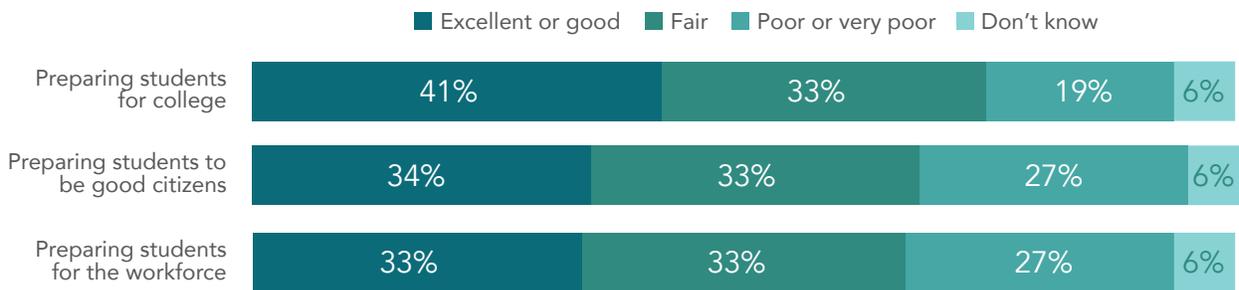
60 PDK International, "49th Annual PDK Poll," 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

## Citizenship, college readiness and workforce preparation

- **Fewer than half of Americans believe their local public schools are doing a good job at preparing students for college, the workforce or to be good citizens.** Only 33 percent of Americans think their local public schools are doing an excellent or good job at preparing students for the workforce, and only 34 percent think schools are doing a good job at preparing student to be good citizens; see figure 14.<sup>61</sup>

### Few Americans believe their local public schools are doing an excellent job at preparing students for college, the workforce or to be good citizens.

Figure 14. Percent of Americans who indicate their local public schools are doing an excellent or good job, a fair job or a poor or very poor job, or they do not know, at each of the following:



Source: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, "Education in the United States: Choice, Control, and Quality," 2017.

Hispanics are more likely than whites and blacks to say public schools are doing very or extremely well at teaching students to be good citizens. Forty-four percent of Hispanics think schools are doing well at preparing students to be good citizens, while only 31 percent of whites and 27 percent of blacks feel this way.<sup>62</sup>

- **More parents believe local public schools are doing a good job at preparing students for college, while fewer say they are doing a good job at preparing students to be good citizens or for the workforce.** Fifty-seven percent of parents indicate local schools are doing an excellent or good job at preparing students for college, 55 percent say they are preparing them to be good citizens and 45 percent say they are doing an excellent or good job at preparing them for the workforce.<sup>63</sup>

61 Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, "Education in the United States," 2017, [http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC\\_Education%20in%20US.pdf](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC_Education%20in%20US.pdf).

62 PDK International, "48th Annual PDK Poll," 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

63 Tompson, Benz and Agiesta, "Parents' Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States," August 2013, [http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Parent%20Attitudes/AP\\_NORC\\_Parents%20Attitudes%20on%20the%20Quality%20of%20Education%20in%20the%20US\\_FINAL\\_2.pdf](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Parent%20Attitudes/AP_NORC_Parents%20Attitudes%20on%20the%20Quality%20of%20Education%20in%20the%20US_FINAL_2.pdf).

- **Few private school parents, however, believe local public schools are doing a good job at preparing students to be good citizens, for the workforce or for college.** Not surprisingly, parents with children in public schools are more likely than parents with children in private schools to indicate local public schools are doing a good or excellent job at preparing students for college, to be good citizens or for the workforce; see figure 15.<sup>64</sup> The belief that public schools are not preparing students for the workforce, citizenship or college may factor into private school parents' decision to send their children to private schools—or it may be an outcome of that decision. Private school parents have less contact with public schools and may be less informed about them, or they may need to justify retroactively their choice to send their children to private schools.

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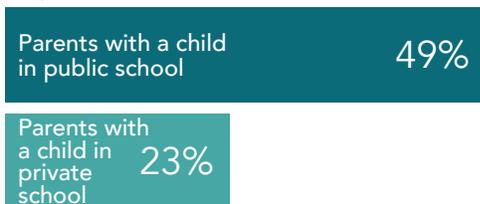
**Private school parents view public schools more negatively than public school parents do.**

Figure 15. Percent of parents who say public schools are doing a good or excellent job at each of the following, by types of school in which their children are enrolled:

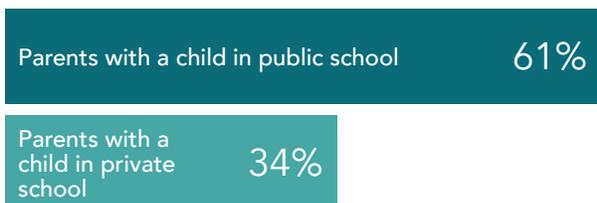
Preparing students to be good citizens



Preparing students for the workforce



Preparing students for college



Source: Tompson, Benz and Agiesta, "Parents' Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States," 2013.

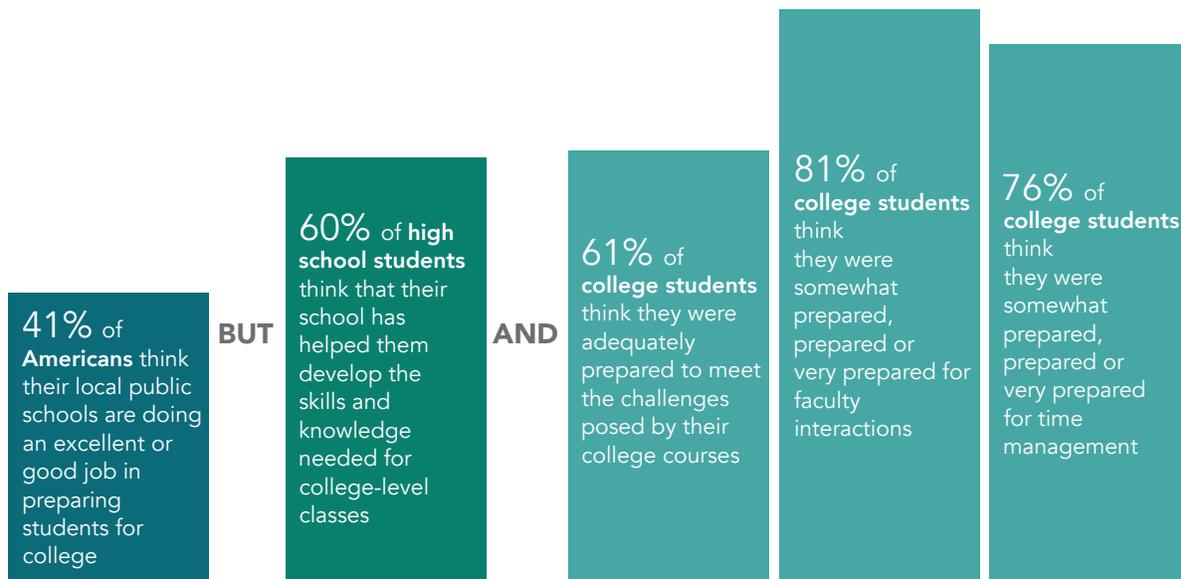
64 Ibid.

- **Although most Americans do not believe local public schools are doing a good job at preparing students for college, most college students indicate they felt at least somewhat prepared for college.** Although only 41 percent of Americans say their local public schools are doing an excellent or good job at preparing students for college, 60 percent of high school students believe their school has helped them develop the skills and knowledge they will need for college-level classes, and 61 percent of college students say they were prepared to meet the challenges posed by their college courses. Moreover, 81 percent of college students say they were prepared to interact with faculty, and 76 percent say they were prepared for time management in college; see figure 16.<sup>65</sup>

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**Most Americans do not believe local public schools are doing a good job at preparing students for college, but high school and college students may feel differently.**

Figure 16. Percent of Americans, high school students and college students who say the following:



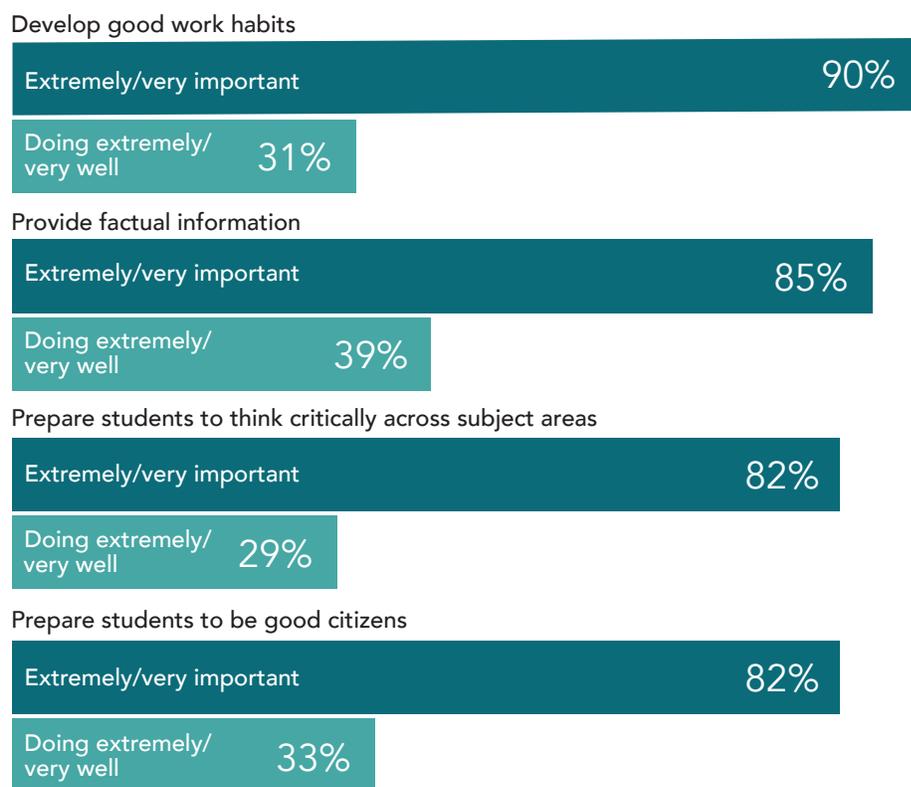
Source: AP–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Education in the United States: Choice, Control, and Quality,” 2017; YouthTruth, “Learning from Student Voice: College and Career Readiness,” 2016; McGraw-Hill Education, “2017 Future Workforce Survey,” 2017.

65 Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Education in the United States,” 2017, [http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC\\_Education%20in%20US.pdf](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Education/APNORC_Education%20in%20US.pdf); YouthTruth, “Learning from Student Voice,” 2016, <http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/YouthTruth-Learning-From-Student-Voice-College-and-Career-Readiness-2016.pdf>; McGraw-Hill Education, “2017 Future Workforce Survey: Key Findings and Data” (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, May 2017), <https://www.mheducation.com/future-workforce.html#mkto>.

- **Even though most Americans think developing good work habits, accessing factual information and developing critical thinking skills are important, fewer believe schools are doing a good job at teaching these skills.** Americans do not think schools are doing a good job at teaching the skills they believe are extremely or very important. For example, 82 percent of Americans think it is extremely or very important for local public schools to enhance critical thinking skills, but only 29 percent think the schools are doing extremely or very well at that; see figure 17.<sup>66</sup>

**Most Americans value good work habits, factual information and critical thinking skills, but few think schools are doing a good job at teaching these skills.**

Figure 17. Percent of Americans who indicate each of the following is extremely or very important for schools to do and percent who think public schools in their community are doing each extremely or very well:



Source: PDK International, "Why School? The 48th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 2016.

- **Only about half of high school students think their schools have helped them understand their career options or how to get the career they want.** Only 46 percent of high school students indicate their schools have helped them figure out which careers match their interests and abilities. Slightly more—49 percent—say their schools have helped them understand the steps they need to take to have the career they want.<sup>67</sup> Employers in focus groups indicated schools can and should expose students to multiple careers to help them choose one that is right for them. One employer even indicated that exposure to a career helped her child save money.

66 PDK International, "48th Annual PDK Poll," 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollofpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollofpublicopinion2016.pdf).

67 YouthTruth, "Learning from Student Voice," 2016, <http://youthtruthsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/YouthTruth-Learning-From-Student-Voice-College-and-Career-Readiness-2016.pdf>.

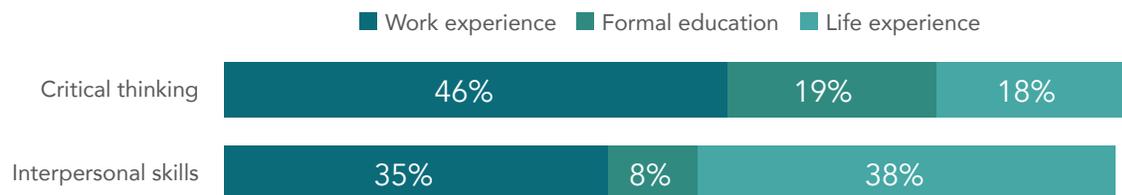
**“My son wanted to be a pharmacist, and he spent a weekend with one. Then he thought it was the most boring job in the world. So [exploring careers] gives them a chance to really see it before they make that mistake or go a year and decide to change their major. It saves either the parents or students another year of loans.”** – Employer in Greenville, South Carolina

### Interpersonal

- **Few Americans believe schools are doing a good job at preparing students to work in groups.** Although 76 percent of Americans believe it is important for schools to prepare students to work in groups, only 35 percent believe they are doing an excellent or very good job at doing so.<sup>68</sup>
- **Parents who have children in the public school system are more likely to say local public schools are doing a good job at teaching interpersonal skills than those who do not have children in public school.** Thirty-six percent of parents of a child in public school believe their local public schools are doing extremely or very well at enhancing critical thinking, and 43 percent believe they are doing extremely or very well at preparing students to work well in groups. In comparison, only 28 percent of Americans without a child in public school believe their local schools are doing extremely or very well at enhancing critical thinking, and only 33 percent believe they are doing extremely or very well at preparing students to work in groups.<sup>69</sup>
- **Few workers believe they learned their interpersonal skills through formal education.** For example, among workers who say critical thinking is an important skill for their jobs, only 19 percent indicate they learned this skill through formal education. Far more indicate they learned their skills through work experience or life experience; see figure 18.<sup>70</sup>

#### Workers learn interpersonal skills through work and life experiences.

Figure 18. Among workers who said either critical thinking or interpersonal skills are important for their jobs, percent who say they learned the skill mainly through work experience, formal education or life experience:



Source: Pew Research Center, “State of American Jobs,” 2016.

68 PDK International, “48th Annual PDK Poll,” 2016, [https://www.heartland.org/\\_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf](https://www.heartland.org/_template-assets/documents/publications/PDKpollpublicopinion2016.pdf).

69 Ibid.

70 Pew Research Center, “State of American Jobs,” 2016, [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/ST\\_2016.10.06\\_Future-of-Work\\_FINAL4.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/ST_2016.10.06_Future-of-Work_FINAL4.pdf).

# 5 What are the challenges faced by public K–12 education today?

Americans consistently cite lack of funding as the biggest problem schools face. Employers in focus groups also indicated that lack of resources, insufficient support and outdated systems prevent teachers from being as effective as possible. They also criticized parents as too lenient and students as lazy.

- **Funding is the most often cited problem schools face.** When surveys have asked open-ended questions about the biggest problem facing schools in people’s communities, lack of funding has consistently been the most frequently provided answer since 2002. In 2017, the second most frequently provided answer was concerns about standards and quality of education.<sup>71</sup>
- **Support for increased government funding for public schools drops when people are informed of how much money schools spend per student.** While 54 percent of Americans think government funding for public schools in their districts should increase, many underestimate how much money is currently spent per child. Once Americans are informed of the average expense per child, only 39 percent support an increase in government funding. Parents and teachers are more likely to say government funding for public schools in their districts should increase; see figure 19.<sup>72</sup>

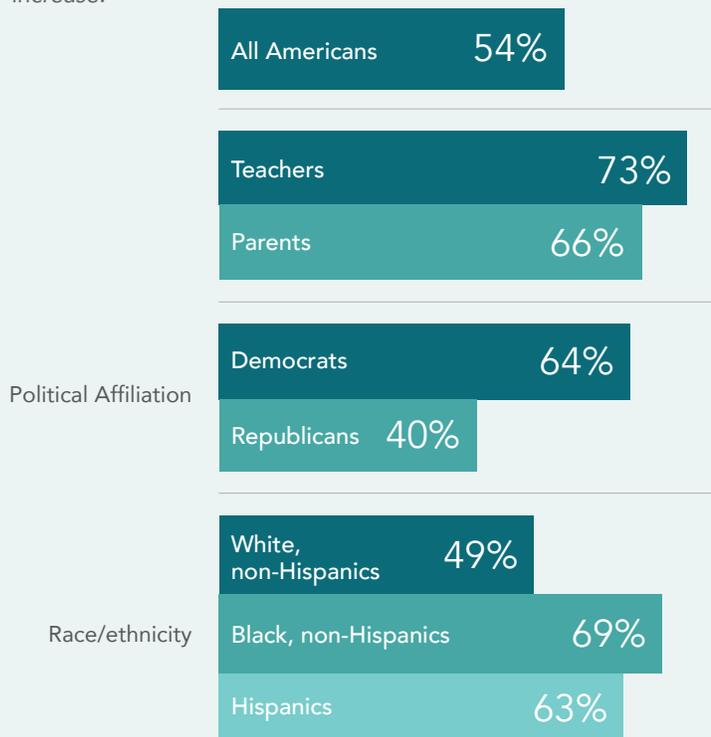
71 PDK International, “49th Annual PDK Poll,” 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

72 Henderson, “Education Next—Survey 2017,” 2017, <http://educationnext.org/files/2017ednextpoll.pdf>.

Support for increased funding varies by race/ethnicity and political affiliation, with more blacks, Hispanics and Democrats supporting additional funding than whites and Republicans; see figure 19.<sup>73</sup>

### Support for an increase in government funding for public schools varies by demographics.

Figure 19. Percent who say they think government funding for public schools in their districts should greatly increase or increase:



Source: Michael B. Henderson, "Education Next—Program on Education Policy and Governance—Survey 2017," 2017.

- **Employer focus group participants were aware of the differences in quality among schools around them and attributed them to funding.** In all three focus groups, participants spoke about how schools in affluent neighborhoods are often of better quality, offer more classes and are in better physical condition than those in less affluent neighborhoods. They attributed most of these differences to differences in funding and often spoke of how they can affect children's development and sense of equity.

*"Not all schools get equal funding. We have some rural communities which don't have a lot of resources, or a lot of kids get stuck with no money coming from the states."*

– Employer in Greenville, South Carolina

*"You know what, if we don't start out a five-year-old feeling like they are equal with every other person in their age group, how the hell are they going to feel by the time they are 12?"*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

73 Ibid.

- **Employer focus groups and separate focus groups conducted with parents pointed to class size, insufficient support, an outdated system and other factors they believe prevent teachers from being as effective as possible.** In our focus groups with employers, participants maintained that classes are bigger and teachers have to deal with more behavioral and safety issues than in years past. Employers also believed state and federal mandates force teachers to rush through material, regardless of whether students have mastered it or not.

*“In this day and age, teachers have a lot more on them. They have to worry about safety, they have to watch for everything.”*  
 – Employer in Greenville, South Carolina

*“If teachers are spending 80 percent of their day handling behavior issues because most kids have no home training, the other kids who are there for learning can’t learn. At the end of the day, teachers can’t teach because they’re classroom managing.”*  
 – Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

In separate focus groups conducted by Hattaway Communications with parents, participants believed the education system itself was outdated and not structured to help students develop the skills they need in the world today. Parents and teachers in those groups also agreed teachers do not have enough resources or time for professional development and that class sizes are too large.<sup>74</sup>

- **Focus group participants firmly believed parents are too lenient and students are lazy.** Throughout all three focus groups with employers, participants consistently expressed the opinion that young people are lazy, unmotivated and lacking a solid work ethic. They described parents as too lenient and blamed parents for failing to develop these values and skills in their children.

*“My personal belief is, I don’t think the children are as motivated and have the ambition [that I had]. They don’t seem to be as driven. That’s just my feeling, but I don’t know if that’s true.”*  
 – Employer in Oakland, California

*“When a teacher says to the parent, ‘I have a problem with Johnny because Johnny did this,’ the parent says, ‘Oh, not my Johnny.’ I think teachers just get frustrated that it’s never that kid. And that kid is every single kid.”*  
 – Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio

<sup>74</sup> Hattaway Communications, “Deeper Learning,” 2017.

# 6 What roles should government and employers play in improving K-12 education?

When considering the responsibilities of various levels of government, most 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. Most parents with children between three and six years of age believe it is solely the parents' responsibility to teach their children social skills, but most parents believe they share with schools the responsibility to teach academic skills. Employers in focus groups suggested many ways they believe employers could help schools prepare students for the workforce, including through mentorships and internships. Public views on the roles of communities, though not a focus, of this report, bear further inquiry.

- **Employers in focus groups recognized that no single entity is responsible for improving K-12 education.** Our focus group conversations with employers ranged widely, suggesting they recognized that no single entity on its own can make the changes the education system needs. Instead, participants felt that federal, state and local policymakers, schools and districts, teachers, parents, students and even employers had roles to play in creating change.

## **Governments' and schools' responsibilities**

- **Most Americans would rather see a failing school stay open than be forced to close, and nearly half favor local decision making about failing schools.** A strong majority of Americans—84 percent—would rather keep a failing school open and try to improve it than have it close, compared to 14 percent who say a failing school should be forced to close and a new school allowed to be started from scratch.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, 85 percent think the state or local government should have the largest role in deciding how to fix failing schools. Teachers and parents hold similar views; see figure 20.<sup>76</sup>

Americans across the political spectrum—52 percent of conservatives and 52 percent of liberals—agree local districts should decide what to do with schools that have consistently low test scores.<sup>77</sup>

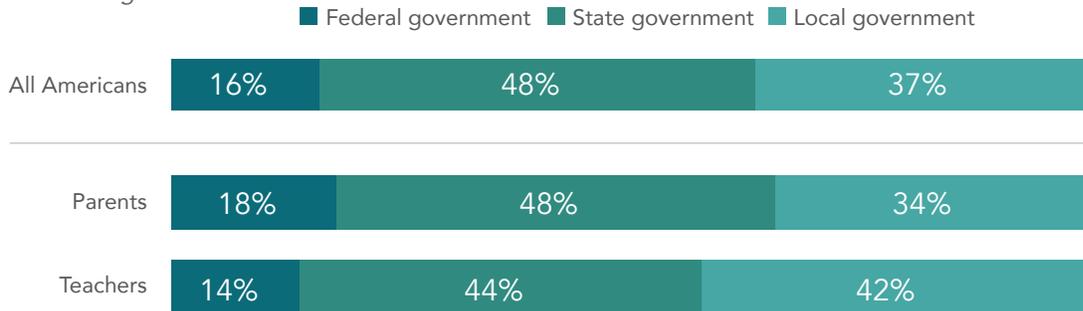
75 PDK International, "49th Annual PDK Poll," 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

76 Henderson, "Education Next—Survey 2017," 2017, <http://educationnext.org/files/2017ednextpoll.pdf>.

77 PDK International, "49th Annual PDK Poll," 2017, [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational\\_poll\\_2017.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDKnational_poll_2017.pdf).

**Americans favor local decision making about how to fix failing schools.**

Figure 20. Percent who believe the federal, state or local government should play the biggest role in deciding how to fix failing schools:

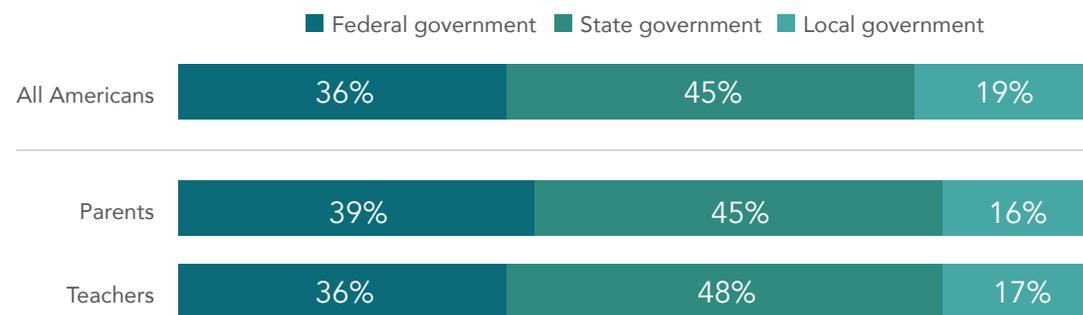


Source: Michael B. Henderson, "Education Next—Program on Education Policy and Governance—Survey 2017," 2017.

- **Most Americans believe state and local governments should have the largest role in setting educational standards.** Only 36 percent of Americans think the federal government should play the largest role in setting standards for what students should know, compared with 64 percent who think state or local government should play the largest role. Teachers and parents hold similar views; see figure 21.<sup>78</sup>

**Most Americans believe state and local governments should have a large role in setting educational standards.**

Figure 21. Percent who believe the federal, state or local government should play the biggest role in setting educational standards:



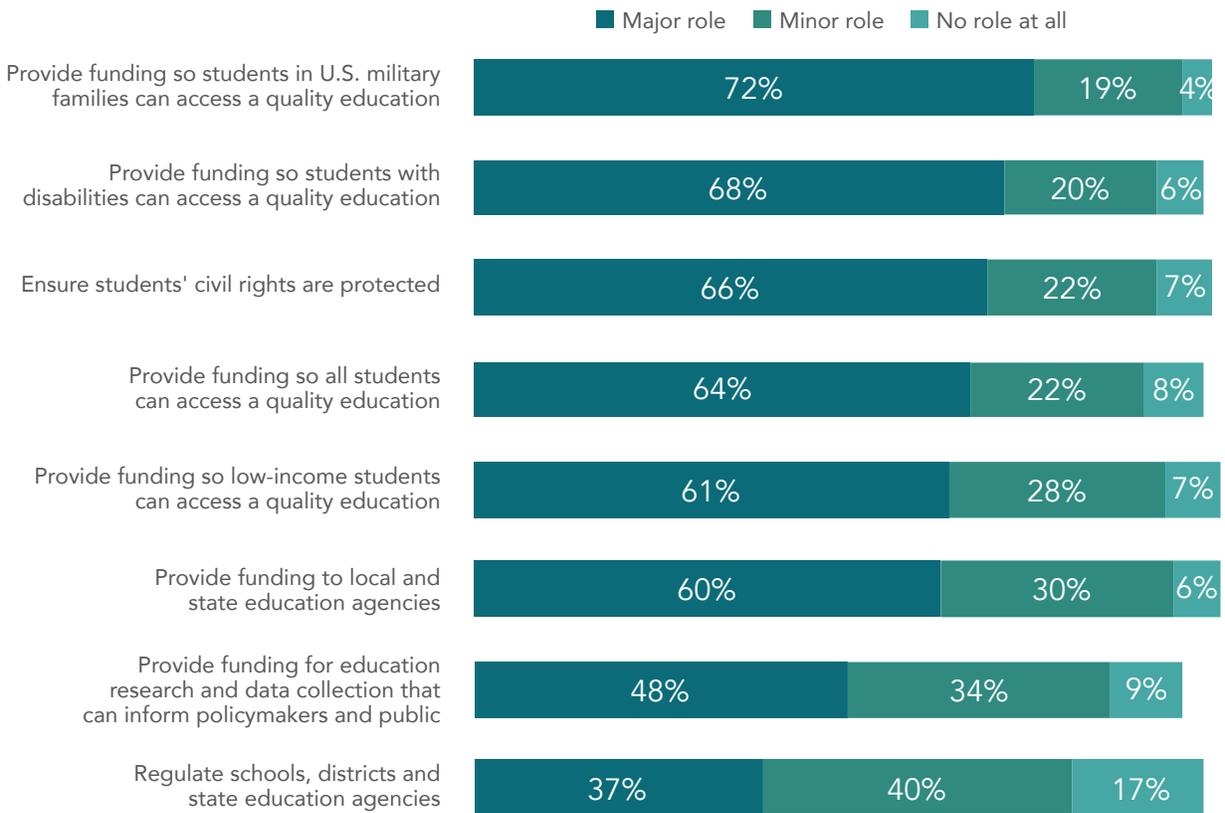
Source: Michael B. Henderson, "Education Next—Program on Education Policy and Governance—Survey 2017," 2017.

78 Henderson, "Education Next—Survey 2017," 2017, <http://educationnext.org/files/2017ednextpoll.pdf>.

- **Most Americans, however, think the federal government should play the largest role in ensuring everyone has access to a quality education.** The majority of Americans believe the federal government should ensure access to a quality education for students from military families, students with disabilities and low-income students. Sixty-four percent believe the federal government should play a major role in providing funding so all students can have access to a quality education; see figure 22.<sup>79</sup>

**Americans think the federal government should play the largest role in ensuring everyone has access to a quality education.**

Figure 22. Percent of Americans who say the federal government should play a major role, a minor role or no role at all in K–12 education with regard to each of the following:



Source: DiPerna, Shaw and Catt, "2017 Schooling in America," 2017.

79 DiPerna, Shaw and Catt, "2017 Schooling in America," 2017, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017-Schooling-In-America-by-Paul-DiPerna-Michael-Shaw-and-Andrew-D-Catt.pdf>.

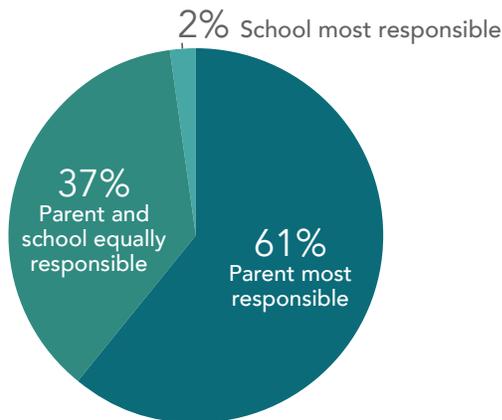
## Parents' responsibilities

- **Most parents of young children say it is mostly their responsibility to teach their children social skills. But when it comes to academic skills, they believe parents share responsibility with schools.** Among parents of three- to six-year-olds, 61 percent say parents are most responsible for teaching children social skills, such as sharing and patience. Only 9 percent, however, say the parents themselves are most responsible for teaching children academic skills; see figure 23.<sup>81</sup>

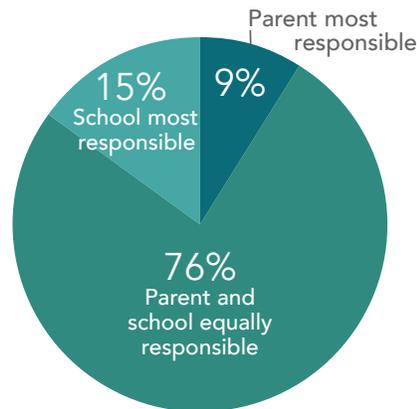
### Most parents of young children say it is mostly their responsibility to teach their children social skills.

Figure 23. Percent of parents of three- to six-year-olds who indicate that parents, schools or both are primarily responsible for helping children learn social or academic skills:

Social skills, such as sharing, patience



Academic skills, such as reading, math



Source: Megan Silander et al., "What Parents Talk About When They Talk About Learning," 2018.

Lower-income and less educated parents see a smaller role for themselves in supporting their children's learning compared with higher-income and more educated parents. Among parents of three- to six-year-olds, 32 percent of lower-income parents say their children will learn everything they need to know in school, compared with only 7 percent of higher-income parents. Similarly, 39 percent of parents who have less than a high school education say their children will learn everything they need to know in school, compared with only 6 percent of parents with college degrees.<sup>82</sup>

Just over half of black and Latino parents feel they have a lot of power to change schools. Fifty-five percent of African-American parents and family members and 56 percent of Latino parents and family members believe parents have a lot of power to bring change to schools.<sup>80</sup>

80 Leadership Conference Education Fund, "New Education Majority," 2016, <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/education/new-education-majority/New-Education-Majority-whitepaper.pdf>.

81 Megan Silander, Todd Grindal, Naomi Hupert, Elisa Garcia, Kea Anderson, Philip Vahey and Shelley Pasnik, "What Parents Talk About When They Talk About Learning: A National Survey About Young Children and Science" (New York and Menlo Park, CA: Education Development Center and SRI International, March 2018), [https://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/edc\\_sri\\_what\\_parents\\_talk\\_about.pdf](https://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/edc_sri_what_parents_talk_about.pdf).

82 Ibid.

## **Employers' responsibilities**

- **Employers in focus groups offered multiple ways they believe employers could assist schools and help prepare students for the workforce.** Ideas that emerged in the focus group discussions about how employers could engage more with their local schools included mentoring, job shadowing and internships, as well as working with students on projects. Employers believed it would be beneficial to expose students to many different careers or jobs to help them figure out what type of work they are interested in pursuing.

*"We could have a volunteer program once a month. We'll set the kids up in teams and let them pretty much see how it is to work on a daily basis. It gives them an opportunity to get hands-on experience and see what it's like to be in a workplace environment."*

– Employer in Oakland, California

*"Connecting with these corporations is an important thing, obviously—trying to get these companies to give money to these kids or vocational training. Have them sponsor trainings, classes, seminars or key notes at these schools."*

– Employer in Oakland, California

*"If the school had a student that would even think about doing something in my field, I'd be more than happy to give them the good, the bad and the ugly about it."*

– Employer in Blue Ash, Ohio