

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONfile
NEWSFOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 13, 1994Contact: Kathryn Kahler
(202) 401-3026**THE CLINTON EDUCATION AGENDA**

With little fanfare, President Clinton over the past twenty-one months has signed into law six groundbreaking education initiatives -- a cohesive set of programs that span from kindergarten through college -- all of which passed the Congress with bipartisan support. Not since the 1960s has so much significant education legislation been enacted.

The Clinton education package promotes safer schools, better discipline, higher academic standards, improved teaching, greater family involvement, improved access to college, and community-based solutions to educational improvement.

The Washington Post recently described the "Clinton-backed education initiatives passed by Congress over the last two years" as "a major area of accomplishment that has often been ignored. . ." [Helen Dewar, Oct. 6, 1994].

The legislation, which includes the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, the Student Loan Reform Act, the Safe Schools Act, the National Service Trust Act, and the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, promises to alter the landscape of American education in important and lasting ways.

The latest bill, the Improving America's Schools Act, which President Clinton will sign next week, is a perfect example of how the administration is committed to finding the most effective ways to spend federal education dollars. The bill represents a nearly \$11

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billion effort -- the federal government's largest investment in K-12 education -- to better target special help to poor and special needs students in the nation's schools.

"While public attention has been focused on other things, we've been hard at work getting our legislation through the 103rd Congress," said U.S. Education Secretary Richard W. Riley, "but the work we've done over the past year and a half will significantly raise the quality of education for millions of students of all ages.

"Just about everybody agrees that the federal government must be a supportive partner with the states and communities to improve schools," Riley said. "Our first order of business in this new partnership is to bring high academic standards to all students in every classroom in the country."

The foundation of the Clinton education agenda is the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, signed into law March 31. The bill supports meaningful state and community school improvement efforts based on high academic and occupational standards, improving teaching, expanding the use of technology, and cutting red tape. Forty states and territories have already applied for first-year planning funds.

Goals 2000 also includes assistance to help schools reduce violence, and a section that strengthens federal education research to bring the latest and most reliable information about good teaching and effective learning to the nation's teachers, parents, administrators and policymakers.

A companion bill, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, is providing assistance to

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states and communities to give more young people who do not plan to go on immediately to a four-year college access to high-wage, high-skill jobs by focusing on high quality academic and work experiences in the critical years before and after high school graduation.

In the area of higher education, the Student Loan Reform Act created the direct loan program, now available at more than 100 schools and increasing to more than 1,000 next year. Borrowers can secure a student loan on campus and, through more flexible repayment options, tailor their monthly payments to match their ability to repay. The new program reduces paperwork and is expected to save taxpayers billions of dollars in fewer loan defaults.

In addition, thousands of volunteers are now earning their way to college or paying back loans through public service under the new National Service Trust Act.

While legislation has been a key component of the Clinton education agenda, the administration also has focused on getting parents and families more involved in the education process by launching a national initiative, *Strong Families; Strong Schools*, to attract greater public attention on the critical role adults can play in improving student achievement. The Education Department has joined a national coalition of more than 70 organizations to promote family involvement.

"There's one bill I can't pass," Riley said. "The federal government can't require every family in this country to get involved in their children's education -- to turn off the TV, to read and discuss homework with them. But I know that family involvement is a key to the successful implementation of every one of our initiatives. For that reason, I can't talk about it enough."

THE CLINTON LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE FOR EDUCATION:
Bills enacted by the 103rd Congress

THE GOALS 2000: EDUCATE AMERICA ACT is based on the premise that all students must be held to higher academic standards. The Goals 2000 Act assists communities and states with funds to develop and implement their own school improvements based on local, "bottom-up" initiatives. Improvement plans will include ways to strengthen academic achievement, improve discipline, increase parent involvement, better utilize technology, and ensure that teachers have access to better professional development. The Act also provides schools, school districts, and states a way to cut through red tape by allowing for extensive waivers. The new law formally commits the nation to pursuing eight national education goals and establishes a National Education Goals Panel to report progress. Forty states and territories have already applied for first-year planning funds.

Also included in Goals 2000:

THE SAFE SCHOOLS ACT recognizes that learning is almost impossible if classrooms and playgrounds are under siege. The act provides funds to schools plagued with serious crime to develop violence prevention initiatives. Schools receiving funds will be expected to teach students ways to resolve conflicts peacefully, and they also may use some funds for increasing security personnel and acquiring metal detectors. The act also authorizes the Secretary of Education to conduct various national activities, including research and evaluation, data collection, and training and technical assistance in support of safe and drug-free schools.

THE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT, DISSEMINATION AND IMPROVEMENT ACT strengthens the federal effort to support research and to collect and disseminate information about successful teaching and learning practices. The new law establishes priorities for research: basic and applied research on student achievement; education of at-risk students; policy making and management; early childhood development and education; and postsecondary education, libraries, and lifelong learning. A new Office of Reform Assistance and Dissemination will provide teachers, parents, administrators and policymakers with information on promising and exemplary programs.

THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK OPPORTUNITIES ACT is built on the knowledge that tomorrow's high-wage jobs will require high academic and workplace skills developed in secondary and postsecondary school. Under the act, states and communities form partnerships with schools, postsecondary institutions and employers to design systems in which students learn both in the classroom and at the worksite. School-to-work is jointly administered by the Departments of Education and Labor. Initial state and community grants have already been awarded.

THE IMPROVING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS ACT, which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, targets funds to areas of greatest poverty and provides schools with greater flexibility to use federal aid to ensure that students with special needs, especially economically disadvantaged, migrant, and limited English proficient students, are taught to high standards. The nearly \$11 billion bill also expands professional development opportunities for teachers; promotes safe and drug-free schools and supports desegregation efforts through magnet schools. New provisions provide resources for improved use of technology for teaching and learning and federal seed money for local charter schools initiatives.

THE NATIONAL SERVICE TRUST ACT creates opportunities to earn or pay back college tuition through some kind of public service. Under Americorps grants to various agencies and organizations, thousands of volunteers are already at work in neighborhoods and schools across the country.

THE STUDENT LOAN REFORM ACT broadens access to higher education by making it easier for borrowers to obtain and repay loans for higher education. A new direct loan program permits students to receive a loan from a campus student aid office, eliminating various "middlemen" from the transaction. In addition to the ease in borrowing, the new loan system will permit student borrowers to tailor their monthly payments to their income level. Taxpayers are expected to save billions of dollars in coming years through lower loan default rates. The loans are now available at more than 100 schools. More than 1,000 schools will offer direct loans next year.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

THE SECRETARY

Remarks of
Richard W. Riley¹
U.S. Secretary of Education

Education Issues Before The American Public - 1994
George Washington University, Washington, DC
Thursday, October 13, 1994

Good afternoon and thank you, President Trachtenberg. I have come here today to speak to you about the choices that the American people must make in the upcoming election regarding the improvement of American education.

The election cycle is now upon us and voters who are looking for answers are beginning the arduous task of sifting through the many campaign ads to find common sense and good solutions.

This isn't very easy. So many of the ads seem to be drumming on the negative. It's a sorry way to look at the world and then we wonder why the American people get to feeling low, like they just ought to go out and kick the dog for no good reason at all.

You look at the political ads and all you see are attack ads, cell doors slamming and sirens wailing. You listen to the radio talk shows and America -- a nation with real problems but so much goodness to it -- is just about always written off as a nation near a sudden state of collapse.

Now, our country has its problems and I won't make light of them. But if the only way to get a rise out of the American people is to get caught up in this cynical, negative, political dog-eat-dog attitude -- well, in my opinion, we aren't going to get where we need to go as a country. There isn't going to be much left to our ideals.

I believe that we need to challenge the American people instead of beating them down. Let's quit drumming the negative. We Americans can lose our focus and get hoodwinked by the slick commercial, but by and large we are a thinking people with a good nose for what is important and what is not.

So I want to urge all the candidates to be a little more high minded -- to stop packaging people's fears and frustrations into 30-second sound bites. And I urge all of us who are in the business of education, public service, and politics to go out and challenge the American people with practical, positive solutions.

Let's also remember that our children and young people are not learning as Democrats or Republicans. They are learning as the Americans who are the future of the Country. Parents are desperately worried about their

¹The Secretary may depart from prepared remarks.

children's safety, about academic standards, and about how to pay for their children's college education.

So the vital issues that concern you, your parents and the faculty of this university are very close to home -- even if they seem far, far away from the campaign agenda of campaign consultants.

Now, education is not a hot issue when it comes to 30-second attack commercials. And that may be a blessing. Education is complicated, progress takes time, and there are no simple solutions.

If a candidate, Democrat or Republican, tells you that the solution to our education problems is simply more money for teachers or that the only way to get anything done is to support private school vouchers using taxpayer dollars -- I will be the first to tell you that they are both wrong.

There is no panacea when it comes to improving American education. Improving American education is hard, steady work, something that is done day by day, student by student, teacher by teacher, family by family, community by community.

There is no one silver bullet solution -- be it throwing more money at the problem or chipping away at our unique heritage of free public education ... a heritage that has done so much good for generation after generation in this Country.

Public education has always been, and remains to this day, the open door to American success and good citizenship -- the American way to achievement and freedom for all people ... and I mean all the people.

Many of you here are graduates of public schools, and while there may have been days when you thought you would never survive the experience, you all seem to be turning out all right to me. As I have said many times before -- some of our public schools are excellent, some need to get better, and some schools should not be schools at all. Private and parochial schools are also a very important part of our American fabric of education.

But public education is always on the front line. Public schools all over America are dealing with violence and drug use, family breakup, racial tension, the continuing need for AIDS awareness, and the influx of new immigrants. They are also producing hundreds of thousands of graduates who are making the grade at some of the finest colleges and universities in America, including this one.

So perhaps the first and most fundamental question that the American public should be asking this fall is whether or not each and every candidate for public office -- Republican, Democrat or Independent -- will reaffirm his or her commitment to the basic American tradition of free quality public education.

Will they roll up their sleeves and work with us to make public education better across the board? Our critics say public education is hopelessly broken. They are wrong. I believe that they have simply been swept away by the latest magic bullet of the moment.

Now, I believe American education cannot stand still. Our schools need to teach the skills for the 21st century using the best technology. They need to show flexibility and be open to good ideas like public school choice, and

support parents who believe that character education is important to their children's future.

They may also test new concepts such as charter schools and privatization of some services so long as they are focused on high standards and public accountability, and don't keep out students who may need the most help of all.

Above all, our schools need to recognize that there is a longing for the restoration of standards, a return to excellence at every level of American education. I am, for example, one of the strongest proponents of more time in the school day for the basic core academic curriculum. The national average is now just over 40 percent of the day, and that just isn't good enough. And then we wonder why sales clerks can't make change and why colleges spend millions of dollars every year teaching remedial classes.

So we need to be a lot more tough-minded about how the school day is used -- we need to think creatively about using new technology -- and we need to end the practice -- once and for all -- of permitting young people to just drift through school just to move them through the system.

At the same time, every child and young person in this country is going to have to learn skills that we didn't even anticipate 10 or 15 years ago. They must be computer-literate, understand how to use the Internet, and -- with skill and confidence -- be able to get on line to the Information Highway.

When I was appointed Secretary of Education by President Clinton, I told people that we needed to stop studying every problem to death and move from being "A Nation at Risk" to "A Nation on the Move."

I said then that we needed to get beyond the status quo of accepting mediocrity for some students -- be they gifted and talented or behind in reading -- and, at the same time, we needed to avoid getting caught up with every new fad of the moment -- like new math in the 1960's and 1970's. For too many years, education has been driven by the latest quick fix and it has never done us any good. We need to recognize that making our schools better has to be done in a meaningful and consistent way. Kids need to learn how to read and write well to reach the high standards, and they need to be safe. First things first.

So I believe it is so important to lay out for the American people a clear summation of what has been achieved to date and to define what I think are the essential questions that we need to ask ourselves as we approach Election Day.

So what has been accomplished?

I can tell you that in the past 20 months, nine education-related bills were sent to the Congress by President Clinton and eight have been signed into law. And next week, President Clinton will sign number nine -- the \$12.7-billion Elementary and Secondary Education Act -- making it nine for nine.

The list is impressive, but it is much more than just a list. It is a coherent package that fits all the pieces together -- that tells the parents of a four-year-old just starting school or the non-traditional student going back to school at 38 that we have an educational system that can help people learn what they need to learn at each stage

of their life. This is what we mean when we talk about creating a way for Americans to be lifelong learners. Let me describe very quickly these nine initiatives:

- (1) New funding for and the strengthening of Head Start.
- (2) The first real funding for taking technology into schools and reshaping the classroom of the future.
- (3) A national service program for 20,000 young Americans that can help you pay for college, which is already larger than a Peace Corps at its peak.
- (4) A redirection of our research arm based on a National Academy of Sciences Report.
- (5) A new commitment to high standards and excellence with passage of the GOALS 2000 Act. This extraordinary act is centered on state academic standards of excellence, which gives all communities the support to help them reach their standards.
- (6) The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act, and new money in the crime bill to support safe after-school programs. We want the guns out of our schools. We simply aren't going to tolerate a 14-year-old out to prove his manhood by putting other students in harm's way.
- (7) The seventh bill is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which I already mentioned -- an act that places a great deal of new emphasis on giving teachers better training -- and opportunities for real professional development.
- (8) One of the most exciting things we have done is to pass a School-to-Work initiative that connects what young people are learning to the world of work. We want to jump start young people into thinking about their careers, into entering very demanding apprenticeships, into getting a focus on real life.
- (9) Finally, we recognize that the burden of paying for a good college education can be overwhelming. College tuition has been on the rise and, at the same time, people need to get their education. But how do we pay for it? We have created a new direct-lending program that will give many more of you the opportunity to pay back what you can afford when you first get out of college.

You won't get socked with a very large payment schedule the minute you take off your cap and gown. Now, being responsible to yourselves and your grandchildren means you shouldn't take 30 years to pay it off, either. But the direct-lending program is now operating in 100 colleges -- and next year will be operating in over 1,000. I will also tell you that we will continue to support raising the level of the Pell Grant program, even as we remain tough on defaulters.

Our legislative success has been unusual. The President led this effort from the start. He is a President who seems to have education in his blood. But what is unique is that in the midst of so much political gridlock, a strong, bipartisan center for progress and improvement in education has emerged in the Congress. And it has held firm.

This Congress repeatedly dealt with some of the most important but contentious social issues -- sex education, rights of privacy, student testing, and voluntary school prayer -- and in each and every case this "solid center" of Republicans and Democrats kept its focus on the essentials -- teaching and learning.

All this is to the good. And I believe it is so important to consider what is at stake in passing this broad legislative package and how it will sit with the American people. We hear a lot of talk, unfortunately negative, about the political agenda of this country. So this is a good time to talk about education in the broader public context.

For I believe that passing all this good legislation won't amount to a hill of beans unless we get people thinking differently about how we educate the young people of this Nation and how we share that responsibility. So, I want to raise three essential points.

First, the issue of basic civility and setting an example. I believe there is an enormous desire on the part of the American people to have new rules of public engagement when it comes to how we relate to each other. But we seem, at the moment, to be increasingly stuck in the old politics of fear and narrowness.

What troubles me the most about the current sour mood of American politics is that in its essence -- this dog-eat-dog attitude -- tells us that there are no rules of civic rightness -- no rules of civic discourse. The values that are increasingly defining the "public estate" are just about the direct opposite of the values we want our children to learn. We adults have lowered our own standards. Listen, in contrast, to these words from a pledge that young people take every day at school in Independence, Missouri.

I heard this pledge recited for the first time last Friday at the White House Blue Ribbon School ceremony by Pat Henley, the wonderful principal of Clermont Community School.

I am the one and only person who has the power to decide what I will be and do. I will accept the consequences for my decisions. I am in charge of my learning and behavior. I will respect the rights of others and will be a credit to myself, my family, my school, and my community.

I believe that the rising demand for character education in our schools -- a desire which crosses the entire political spectrum -- reflects the American people's sure awareness that we need to reaffirm some basic American values and create some new rules of public engagement. And I agree with them.

So what does this mean for those of us who are part of the public dialogue about the future of American education? It seems to me essentially this: we really do need to get beyond the idea that everything in America is the politics of special interests. We need to lower our voices and make sure our schools, as I have said before, do not become an ideological or political battleground.

I know, for example, that there are many conservative-minded Americans who have legitimate questions about the Goals 2000 Act. They are concerned that Goals 2000 will federalize American education.

I may strongly disagree with their belief, but I respect the sincerity of those who hold it. To date, 40 states and territories have already submitted their applications to participate in the Goals 2000 Act. We are off to a strong

start. Next year, Goals 2000 will commit 90 percent of all of its funding directly to the local level. We don't need the federal government sending you a FedEx telling you how to manage your schools.

But I want these skeptical parents, these concerned Americans -- many of them religious-minded -- to know that I will always extend myself to hear their point of view. As I travel around the country, I am meeting with parents, religious leaders, educators, business leaders, and others trying to build bridges. I may not be able to persuade them of the rightness of my side, but I will always go more than half way to meet them. They need to be at the table.

I urge these skeptical parents, by the same token, to pull back from making public schools a political football and give the process a fair chance. And I encourage them to actively participate in the school improvement process. Only by participating in the process will they come to understand that high standards are designed to make sure that parents, teachers, and principals stay in control of the process.

Second, violence. Our society is being crippled by violence. When people ask me why I am passionate about education, I tell them that a vast majority of the people in America's prisons are high school dropouts -- minds and lives that are wasted. I believe that education has been and remains the way out of this lifestyle.

I am particularly troubled by the idea that so many young boys in fourth and fifth grades are giving up on life. The American historian, John Hope Franklin, has written extensively about this searing problem. It is "no small wonder" he writes, "that the number of black males in penal institutions is greater than the number of black males in higher education." What a sad and tragic statement. Dr. Franklin was speaking about the specific problem of young African-American males, but this is not just their problem alone.

This is why the President did not give up on the crime bill which includes support for safe after-school programs, and why this Administration is committed to high academic standards for all students. About the fastest way I know to create an unthinking, angry 19-year-old dropout who is spiritually numb and heading down the road to violence is to give that young person a watered-down curriculum from first grade on.

This is why we have just announced a major new initiative in conjunction with Howard University here in the District and Johns Hopkins University to begin a five-year, \$27.7-million effort to determine just how we can help to put an end to the cycle of student failure among at-risk youth. So for me, improving education is not just an exercise in how we raise test scores. The issue is how do we create, in our time, a positive moral climate that ends the violence, which leads me to my third point.

Young people -- and not just at-risk young people -- are searching for authentic adult connections. Just recently, a very thoughtful college president, Richard Hersh, wrote an article in the "My Turn" column of Newsweek.

He didn't mince words. He said that more and more young people -- his students and mostly middle-class students -- are growing up without direction or any sense of personal sense of responsibility. Why? Because they have "experienced few authentic connections with adults in their lifetime."

It is a rather stunning statement -- "few authentic connections with adults in their lifetime." He went on to write

that we have created a "culture of neglect" rather than a "culture of responsibility" for our young people and in doing so we have absolved our young people of "any notion of obligation or responsibility." I suspect that there is a great deal of truth to his assertion.

Too many adults are becoming disconnected from our children and we need to recognize that the responsibility of parenthood is being taken too lightly by too many people, and young people are suffering.

To my mind, it is important to say up front that our schools can't fix what parents won't do. And, our schools can't solve problems that a community ignores or allows to fester. Our schools can and often are at the center of the solution, and I have seen many of them first hand, but they cannot be left alone to handle community crisis after community crisis.

We have to stay connected to our children and give up the notion that the television is the good babysitter. Our children shouldn't be growing up in a vacuum without values. This is why I am making such a strong effort to reconnect families to the learning process and encouraging all of us to think through how we find new ways to help parents and other adults to get back into the lives of their children.

For it is my very strong belief that the family is where expectations and attitudes about learning are formed, nurtured and set. To create a "culture of responsibility," we have to start with the family, be it the traditional family, the single parent, the caring grandparent or the stepparent who willingly steps in.

And, if we are going to give the coming generation the best education possible, we need to set our sights high. We need to commit ourselves to high standards, make our schools havens of order and discipline, recognize that teachers are at the heart of our effort to reach for excellence, reconnect the family to learning, and find new, concrete ways to help all of you finance your college and other postsecondary education. That, in a nutshell, has been and remains our education agenda.

As the election comes closer, I urge Americans not to get caught up in the steady drumbeat of the negative. Recognize that easy solutions are often false solutions and don't solve anything. So if we want to get beyond the sound bites and the negatives we need to start asking political leaders the questions that are on the mind of the American people.

They just aren't talking about the real issues in education. As a parent, grandparent, and U.S. Secretary of Education, I have 10 critical questions that you should demand answers to. This is the essence of our democracy and I urge you to take your citizenship seriously.

Many of you will be the teachers that will have the responsibility of teaching the coming generation of children. I urge you to stay committed to your ideal of teaching. That's the type of service that is so necessary if we want to have a real chance to educate America.

Thank you.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE SECRETARY

**Critical Questions for the American People
to Ask Their Future Leaders**

1. What can we do to stop the violence in our schools and bring discipline back into our classrooms?
2. What can we do to provide all children with a quality education that prepares them for responsible citizenship, further learning and productive employment?
3. What can we do to help parents and teachers become true partners in children's learning -- not adversaries -- and make family involvement in education a basic community value?
4. What can we do to end the tyranny of low expectations? We know that high standards, tough courses, and hard work lead to real achievement and better discipline for almost all students.
5. What can we do to prepare and keep good teachers, good principals and quality higher education faculty when there will be six million more students to educate in the next decade?
6. What can we do to bring people together -- parents, business people, educators and every citizen -- to build the quality public education system that will keep America great?
7. What can we do to ensure that every student--rich and poor--enjoys the educational benefits that computers and other new technologies offer?
8. What can we do to prepare the 75 percent of all students who won't get a four-year college degree for high-skill, high-wage careers?
9. What can we do to deal honestly with the issue of race and income and their relationship to education? After progress was made in the 1970s and 1980s in closing the gap, we now have a sharp decline in the number of African-Americans attending college.
10. What can we do to avoid educational fads and quick fix solutions and keep focused on what we need to do to achieve serious and sustained improvement in our schools?

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Our mission is to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the Nation.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

July 1, 1994

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Education
Agenda*

MEMORANDUM FOR: MELANNE VERVEER
DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE FIRST LADY

FROM : Kathryn S. Kahler *Kay*
Communications Director

Thank you very much for meeting with us this morning to discuss the best ways to communicate our message. Attached are several studies by the Public Agenda Foundation and summaries of them. If you have any questions, be sure to give me a call. Thank you.

Education agenda



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

June 16, 1994

MEMORANDUM TO SENIOR OFFICERS

FROM: Kathryn S. Kahler *K. Kahler*
Communications Director

SUBJECT: Communications gap between education leaders and the American people

On June 2, Jean Johnson of the Public Agenda gave a presentation to the National Education Improvement Coalition at the offices of the Business Roundtable. Jean reported on the results of focus groups her organization has been conducting this spring in several cities to determine public attitudes about education.

Jean's presentation can pretty much be summed up this way: There is a serious disconnect between education leaders and the American people. Our vocabulary is pitched way too high for the public to understand, and as a result, the reform message is not getting through.

The Public Agenda has been issuing this warning for several years. Focus group work and polling conducted by the organization in 1991 led it to arrive at the same conclusion.

The news isn't all bad, though. The Public Agenda found that people believe that kids can learn more and that lifting standards can help. And when it comes to assessments, the public understands the problems with multiple-choice testing and is receptive to new ideas, like portfolios.

However, Jean sounded these alarms:

- The public's chief concerns about education are not being addressed by the reform movement. The public's main concerns are "discipline, order, and the basics."
- While the public believes all kids can learn more, people generally do not believe that all kids can learn to high standards.
- People are generally skeptical about the very notion of reform. They believe that past reforms (e. g., "the new math") did not work.

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- Parents fear a sudden, "draconian" implementation of high standards. They have real concerns about their children's ability to make the grade.

- People believe that "heterogeneous" (differences in skills) groupings in the classroom don't make sense. They believe that similarly skilled students should stay together.

- People generally believe that social ills are the real cause of poor education performance.

Many of the Public Agenda's findings are detailed in the attached report, "Effective Public Engagement," prepared for the New Standards Project. Some of you may have already seen it; if you haven't, I urge you to make it priority reading.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS: While it may appear that the reform movement and the public are far apart on key issues, I believe that developing the right message can help bridge the gap and bring the two groups closer together.

For example, our focus on high standards and expectations can be reconciled with the public's desire for more order and discipline. We can make a compelling case that challenging curriculum which engages the mind provides a genuine alternative to violence and "acting up." Don't be shy about quoting Prof. Harold Hill in "The Music Man"--"The idle brain's the devil's playground." It may be corny, but it makes the point.

We can also point to several Administration initiatives designed to reduce the social turmoil and hopelessness that spill over into the classroom. Let's not be afraid to talk about the crime bill--"it will put 100,000 more cops on the beat"--welfare reform, and health care reform in addition to Safe Schools, School-to-Work, and the expansion of Head Start.

Additionally, even when it comes to basics the right choice of words can help. We can talk about being in favor of "the basics--and much more" or "the basics--plus." That will help us to communicate with the American people without compromising the integrity of our policy.

Goals 2000 puts us at the beginning of a long national dialogue with the American people. Some of the people are already high on the learning curve of school reform; most aren't. It is up to us to inform them. Other work by the Public Agenda demonstrates that when a real effort is made to provide the people with the facts about school reform, most respond positively.

The Public Agenda will conduct a national poll this summer to follow up on its focus group work. It will test not only general attitudes about education, but also opinions about standards, outcomes, curriculum, textbooks, and the influence of special interest groups on school policy.

cc: Senior Staff

COPY FOR YOUR
INFORMATION

EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

**NEW
STANDARDS
PROJECT**

Section A

Specific Findings

This section reviews focus group reactions, both positive and negative, to the New Standards Project and suggests responses to those reactions. Public Agenda found that some elements of the New Standards Project are inherently attractive to the public, so emphasizing them enhances the effectiveness of communication. Other points provoke concerns, but by preparing and listening sympathetically one can anticipate and alleviate many of these. Public Agenda makes many suggestions throughout the handbook on how to respond to people's concerns and how to clarify those parts of the program that are difficult for people to understand.

The Finding:

People Believe in Higher National Standards and that Higher Expectations Get Results

"It's better to set standards high and have students try to achieve and have there be some frustration. At least you're still striving for what you consider to be an appropriate goal. So I think: always shoot higher."

A parent

There is broad and spontaneous support for the notion that higher expectations will motivate improved performance and for the notion that schools ought to set higher standards. Throughout the study Public Agenda noticed that most teachers, parents and members of the general public share a bed-rock belief that if you expect more from people, you will get more. Communicators should capitalize on these fundamental elements of the New Standards Project proposal that clearly resonate with the public's preexisting attitudes. Emphasizing the common ground between the New Standards Project's assumptions and those of the community should improve communication. It is much easier for people to support elements of a reform effort if these reflect people's own experiences and intuitions about how the world works.

Suggested Responses:

Point out that students can achieve much higher levels of learning than they currently achieve. Students themselves admit they are coasting through their years of public schooling and doing only a minimum amount of work at a relatively low level that corresponds to the low expectations placed upon them. Simply stated, schools' low expectations may create a self-fulfilling prophecy of mediocre student performance.

Remind people that the vast majority of today's jobs require workers with higher skills. Tomorrow's jobs will require even higher skills. The old factory jobs with high pay for minimal skills and education are gone. As a primarily manufacturing-based economy gives way to one dominated by high-skill service jobs, schools must fundamentally change the way they prepare students to enter the work force. Therefore, the challenge for schools is to bring their standards up to meet those high standards already in place in the job market. By not expecting more now, we are setting kids up for failure in the future.

The Finding:

People Worry About Students Who Might Be Left Behind by the Higher Standards

Expressions of deep concern about kids who can't achieve higher expectations follow closely on the heels of calls for higher national standards. Parents who embrace the idea of higher standards in a general sense voice anxiety about the results of their implementation. Many teachers feared that more ambitious standards would compound the difficulty they already have reaching underachieving students. Students were concerned that the higher standards would embarrass or be too much for those who had a harder time in school. There was a recurring assumption that there were some students who could not achieve higher standards.

People wanted to make sure that higher standards would not be used to close off opportunity for some students. Such worries came up spontaneously during the general discussion of higher standards and during discussion of the Certificate of Initial Mastery. People were afraid that students attaining the Certificate would head for better jobs and colleges while those who did not would be tracked into lower jobs and out of college.

"What happens if you can't do it?
Are you going to be labeled an ignorant fool? What's going to happen to you? If you have to do all this stuff to get a nice, decent job, what's going to happen to people who can't do it?"

A student

Suggested Responses:

Emphasize that the New Standards Project's program will be implemented gradually. Higher expectations will begin in early grades and follow kids throughout their schooling. Students and teachers will have a chance to adjust to the higher standards. Assure people that kids who need extra help will get it. The New Standards Project was developed with underachieving students in mind. The Project is designed to boost the performance of all students, not to weed out weaker kids.

Emphasize the elements of the proposal that will give students as much opportunity as possible to attain the Certificate: assessment at early grades will forewarn students, parents and the schools of potential problems and the need for extra effort; students will be able to retake the examinations without prejudice — it's not a one-time opportunity. Remind people in the community of what they already know: kids will give you more when you expect them to give you more.

The Finding:

People Resist the Assertion that *All* Children Can Achieve Higher Standards

"I don't think you can set a standard that will work for every child. My two boys are so very different. I have one that would love to go way beyond the standards that he's getting right now. And then I have another one that would be totally defeated by higher standards."

A parent

One fairly common New Standards Project theme has been that *all* students would be expected to achieve higher national standards. Although people think most students can achieve more, they resist the generalization that *every single student* will be able to achieve the new standards. Their experience and intuition tell them otherwise. Exceptions automatically come to people's minds: children with disabilities, children whose first language is not English, etc. Many teachers feel that they are already struggling with overcoming differences of ability, aptitude and motivation among students. Parents referred to different patterns of achievement between their own children, as did students of their fellow classmates. Some of the general public sensed an inherent contradiction between the phrases "all students" and "high standards," envisioning that either all students would not meet the standards or that the standards would not be that high after all. In general, people emphasized that all students were good at something, but that not all students could be good at everything.

Suggested Responses:

Stress the theme of expectations — setting higher standards for all students is necessary for raising expectations and improving the overall performance of students. Point out that students will respond to raised expectations; they often surprise teachers and themselves by doing well in a subject that had previously seemed beyond their capacity. However, acknowledge that students are different and will have to put forth different degrees of effort to reach the standards and educators will vary the amount of attention they give to students according to need.

The Finding:

People Are Concerned That Age 16 Is Too Old for Tests that Assess Mastery

One commonly voiced concern was that the exams assessing students' mastery of the critical subjects would take place too late, at about age 16. In a larger sense, people's single-minded focus on age 16 as the critical test time, despite early assurance that kids would be tested throughout their schooling, was an expression of their fear that the project would be a "surprise attack" on students. The fear was that kids who had been taught under one system would suddenly be assessed against the standards of a new system. People wanted to make sure schools would tell students who are not doing well before age 16, while there is still time to do something about it.

"I think 16 is too late. If you don't find out until age 16 that you didn't learn your multiplication tables, then you're really way behind for your age group."

A parent

Suggested Responses:

Emphasize that assessment will take place at regular intervals throughout a child's education and in fact will begin in elementary school. Stress that this will help serve as an early-warning system that diagnoses problems at early grades. Teachers, students and their parents will be able to take measures to boost students' skills well in advance. Everyone will have a chance to adjust to the new system.

Emphasize that it is necessary for students, particularly in the earlier grades, to know that the test is as inevitable as their own growth. The goal of a high standard of achievement for every student must be concrete so that students can respond to the challenge. Downplay the significance of the age itself: the tests for a Certificate of Initial Mastery could be taken a couple of years earlier or later depending on the student; and the tests can be taken repeatedly without prejudice.

Point out that the tests for the Certificate of Initial Mastery will not be markedly different from the kind of problem-solving activities and learning that the students will be doing in the classroom for several years before they take the tests.

"I like having a goal at the end of the road as far as a test. But I think there should be mile markers so you know how close you're getting to the goal."

A parent

The Finding:

People Are Very Attracted to Portfolios

"[The portfolio] is more important than testing. You keep a portfolio of a child and you can see how they progress. When they take a test there are outside forces that contribute to whether he passes that test or fails it."

*A member of the
general public*

Portfolios are a genuinely well-received feature of the Project. They are seen as a good way to show and measure student progress and development. Parents were especially drawn to the idea that students and educators would be able to appreciate student progress over time. Even students showed some enthusiasm for the chance to collect their own work and see it progress.

Teachers liked the idea that they could find out about a new student in their class on the first day, but were concerned about how much class time would be devoted to the production of portfolios. Although portfolios are a particularly attractive element of the proposal, most people assumed they would serve as an add-on to regular grading and not as a replacement. People had many questions about the mechanics of the portfolio — who would decide what goes in, where the portfolio would be kept and who could see it.

Suggested Responses:

Let people see examples of good — and bad — portfolios. Make portfolios real through use of workshops and testimony from parents, teachers, students and even employers. Describe how the process of building a portfolio will work — who will decide what goes in the portfolio and who will have access to it.

Focus on portfolios as a way of assessing achievement and progress that not only complements current evaluation practices but also serves to motivate students.

The Finding:

People Recoil When American Children Are Compared to Those of Other Industrialized Countries

Comparisons with other industrialized countries are highly distracting and divert people's attention from the issue at hand. Referring to how America's international competition is educating its young and making comparisons with other nations' standards provoke the anxiety that the New Standards Project will be trying to mimic other nations' educational systems. Students and parents are afraid that other nations' educational systems succeed by excessive pressure and rigidity. (Nearly every focus group spontaneously brought up the image of Japanese students committing suicide after failing a test.)

Public Agenda replaced initial references to Japan and Germany with references to France and Sweden because of these negative associations, only to get the same reactions (and the same stories about Japanese suicides). Public Agenda finally replaced France and Sweden with a generic reference to "other industrialized nations," but the same recoil effect was triggered. Although experts, business leaders and top educators are roused by arguments connecting America's global economic position to the education of its work force, parents, teachers and students are repelled by such comparisons. People accept and acknowledge the need for higher standards in America, but the comparisons to other industrialized countries are simply counterproductive.

Suggested Response:

Explain the New Standards Project as something we need to do for ourselves as a nation, not as a response to what other countries are doing. Reassure people that the New Standards Project was started at the grassroots level in response to concerns that children are not getting the education they need for today's high-skills job market.

"The standards are really high in Japan. There's so much pressure on these students, like, they have five-year-olds committing suicide because they don't get into the right kindergarten."

A student

"I think that's getting global. A little bit new world order. I don't want to be similar to Sweden and France. Why should I set my standards for them? They should be looking at mine."

A member of the general public

The Finding:

People Have Questions and Concerns About Who Will Set the Standards

"When you say national to me, there is a fear that comes into my mind. I associate the word 'national' with the federal government, and I associate the federal government with bureaucrats and politicians who are not educators."

A member of the general public

One of the first questions asked was, "Who will set the standards?" People wanted to make sure that the standards would be realistic and relevant to their communities. Such concerns should be expected, given that American education has historically been locally controlled.

Teachers are quickest to voice this question because it will affect what they do in the classroom most directly. They needed reassurance that the standards will not be a product of academics and educational administrators who have not been in a "real" classroom for years. Some members of the general public were most suspicious because they understood the phrase "national standards" to mean the program would be run by yet another federal bureaucracy based in Washington, D.C., inefficient and disconnected from local communities. A related concern was that national standards threatened to stifle local variety and interests.

Suggested Responses:

Emphasize that teachers from communities across the country, along with individuals from business and academia, will identify what they want high school graduates to know and be able to do: the standards. Emphasize that the New Standards Project was not developed and will not be enforced by a federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C.

Stress that communities are voluntarily joining the movement. It may be helpful to give a community examples of similar districts or states close in geography or makeup that have joined the New Standards Project.

Stress that in an age of mobility, as families and students move from one community to another, there will be continuity in the substance and quality of the education students will receive. People will be able to compare student and district achievement across the country because of national standards.

The Finding:

People Are Unclear About the Purpose of the Certificate of Initial Mastery

People do not spontaneously perceive the added value the Certificate of Initial Mastery will bring to a student completing school. The purpose the Certificate serves was not immediately apparent. In almost every group a participant asked, "What is the difference between a high school diploma and the Certificate?" Parents and students wonder why students should be expected to jump through what they see as one more hoop. Similarly, many teachers view it as another add-on obligation.

"What's the incentive? What's going to make some of these low achievers want to retake it and retake it?"

Suggested Responses:

The role the Certificate is expected to play should be clearly and repeatedly emphasized, i.e., it will show that the student has mastered skills and knowledge and attained a capacity to solve problems. The Certificate will give students reason to take tough courses and study hard. Contrast this with the devalued meaning the typical high school diploma has come to represent: people know that most students get their high school diplomas by muddling through the system and doing only as little work as they have to do.

Explain that colleges and prospective employers will be looking for students who have earned the Certificate. Adding this layer of credibility to the Certificate is a great help to the parents and teachers who must constantly justify the importance and relevance of schooling to skeptical students.

*A member of the
general public*

The Finding:

Students Need Immediate Incentives for Getting the Certificate; Abstract Arguments Fail To Move Them

"If getting the Certificate means you get a job, and if you didn't then you couldn't, then I guess I would do it. 'Cause life isn't always fair and you got to do stuff that you don't want to do."

A student

Most students have learned to navigate through the school system with the minimum required effort, with friends, sports and dating competing heavily with their school responsibilities. To break the pattern of mediocre effort they must connect the Certificate with short-term and direct benefits. Although working adults quickly engage the argument that a changed economy demands higher-level worker skills, students are hardly moved by consideration of such economic trends. There is certainly a minority of students who, because of ingrained work habits or love of learning, will work harder. Most students, however, will work harder to attain the Certificate only when given the most immediate and clear-cut incentives. To put it bluntly, they will pursue the Certificate only if they sense that having the Certificate will be important to getting a job or getting into college.

Suggested Responses:

Emphasize clear consequences for not getting the Certificate of Initial Mastery. Kids will need to hear that local businesses and colleges are looking for the Certificate. The more local and better known the involved college or business is, the greater the impact.

Point out to students that businesses and colleges will have a key role in developing the Certificate so that it conforms to what businesses say they need from students entering the work force and what colleges say they need from students for academic success.

The Finding:

People Liked the Use of Open-Ended Test Questions

There is widespread and spontaneous support for open-ended tests that force students to think and apply skills, and most people are dissatisfied with the current system of testing. Parents, teachers and the general public believe that the use of open-ended questions is a better way to assess what students know, and they also believe that multiple choice is basically "multiple guess." Even students admitted that, although they preferred taking multiple-choice exams because they were easier, open-ended exams would encourage and more accurately measure actual learning.

Open-ended exams are a strength of the New Standards Project that ought to be highlighted, although people voiced some concerns about the details. All groups needed reassurance that open-ended questions can be graded fairly and consistently. In one community, several students complained they were expected to answer irrelevant open-ended questions out of the blue, without preparation.

"If I was an employer and I was going to hire a student, I'd give him problem-solving questions before multiple-choice questions. I don't want to know if he could do well on *Jeopardy*; I want to know if he can do well on problems."

A teacher

Suggested Responses:

Highlight open-ended testing as an important feature of the New Standards Project; people have an intuitive and strong liking for it. It is important to reassure people that there will be a system of quality control for both the writing and the grading of open-ended questions. Be specific and outline the procedures and time line of implementation that will be followed so that students and teachers are not caught offguard.

Showing people specific examples of open-ended questions works particularly well. Making the idea concrete through example often dispels qualms and encourages support.

Section B

The Process

Managing the Dynamics of Change and Communication

The issues discussed in this section are driven more by the politics of education in districts and states and less by the programmatic specifics of the New Standards Project. Many of these "process" problems have to do with communication among stakeholders at the site. These problems are a function of historical relationships and experiences that stakeholders will bring to any new reform effort. Although not of the New Standards Project's making, they are real and must be dealt with. The fact that they may not emerge at the early stages of reform, when the spirit of cooperation is at its peak, should not be of comfort. Patterns of negative interactions that have thwarted reforms in the past will reassert themselves unless new ways of doing business are found early on.

The Finding:

People Need to Know Upfront that the Program Will Evolve Over Time

Leaders must prepare stakeholders in their district or state for a reform effort that will be a process unfolding over time, not a one-shot cure-all. We found substantial bitterness and resentment, especially on the part of teachers and parents, over changes and adjustments implemented over the life cycle of a reform. This resentment may seem unfair, after all, as leaders know full well, unexpected problems arise and adjustments to the programs, time lines and procedures are inevitable and even good. But teachers and parents are typically "sold" on a reform program presented as having anticipated and solved all problems from the start. Resentment is inevitable when, promised that a complete solution has arrived and having adjusted to changes, people are told still more changes are needed. The credibility and goodwill reform leaders enjoy will suffer if they set themselves up as having all the answers at the outset, only to seek modifications and corrections as unanticipated problems inevitably emerge.

Suggested Response:

Start out the reform process by explicitly stating at critical junctures that adjustments to the program will be inevitable and a natural part of the process. Ask for and commit to flexibility. The foundations of the program will remain secure, but details and procedures will evolve.

"I don't mind building the plane, I just wish that we had a pilot that knew what he was doing."

A teacher

"The edicts, the mandates, the requirements are coming down so fast and furious that we rarely get this one done when we have to redo the one done yesterday. We are building the airplane while we are flying it."

A teacher

The Finding:

People Often Have a "Reform du Jour" Mentality; Teachers Are Especially Reluctant To Support "Yet Another Fad"

"Things are started and then they are dropped in mid-air. And that's very frustrating and it's also counter-productive, because then if you are a veteran teacher you think: 'I don't think I'll bother with this; I think I'll wait till May and see if they're still thinking along the same lines.'"

A teacher

"I have seen in 30 years of teaching so many changes go by the wayside. Are we teachers going to survive all of this?"

A teacher

One of the toughest barriers to reform is the "reform du jour" perspective with which so many teachers approach prospective change. Veteran teachers have seen many previous reform efforts come and go. Some had even bought into these efforts, only to see support disappear when key personnel left or when the money ran out. Their reluctance to commit themselves to yet another reform is, therefore, understandable.

Teachers have the incentive to adopt a wait-and-see attitude and to postpone engaging the reform. Teachers who are potential supporters may wait to see if the proposal is serious and lasting before coming aboard, and potential opponents may not openly resist change in the hope that the proposal will go the way of other reforms. Public silence may, therefore, be a signal that the New Standards Project faces ambivalence among the corps of teachers. Further complicating matters is that it is often difficult to get teachers (as opposed to their union leadership) to air their reservations and complaints openly. Special attention must be paid to the circumstances that induce teachers to communicate with frankness.

Suggested Response:

Make this a community-wide effort that has the support of key institutions outside the schools, instead of another new reform that has captured the imagination of a select few. The involvement of local business, colleges and others will give the program credibility with teachers, students and parents. The proposal will be grounded in the real world as opposed to springing only from someone's latest dissertation research. Teachers will be less likely to feel they are the object of an experiment destined to be short-lived.

The Finding:

Set Up Face-to-Face Meetings Where People Can Talk, Not Just Listen

Teachers, parents and students need to hear proposed reforms explained, and they also need a chance to voice their reactions, reservations and fears. Change by decree "from downtown" will be greeted with skepticism and resistance by the teachers and parents on the front lines of education. Many feel that central office administrators or state level bureaucrats are disconnected from what actually goes on in the classroom. Even students voice resentment at changes that are heaped upon them with little warning or explanation. Changes communicated through impersonal memoranda are greeted with disdain and are often disregarded.

People are also wary of public relations stunts that simulate real dialogue but whose true intent is to allow venting without serious consideration of concerns. To change well-established patterns of behavior in inherently voluntary relationships is difficult enough. To attempt to mandate such change may be impossible.

Suggested Responses:

Make time and create the space to talk directly with people. Encourage administrators to explain the reasons for change to teachers, parents and students in forums that encourage open dialogue. A critical part of this communication must involve listening to criticism and concerns with a sympathetic ear and responding to them seriously on an ongoing basis.

Expect teachers to approach the prospect of frank dialogue warily. They are not used to two-way communication and are often fearful of retribution. Try to foster such communication by meeting with teachers in physical spaces where they are comfortable and by letting them define some of the parameters of the discussion. Assume that silence or passive acceptance is a signal of faulty communication.

"The one thing that I keep hearing with all these proposals is the shiny notebook. When people write these proposals, they say, 'This is it, this is what it's going to be,' rather than having the ring-binder and saying, 'O.K. this is what we think should go in there, you put what you think might go in there.'"

A teacher

"I don't think they got enough student input on this. I think this is a bunch of experts out there trying to tell us what we should know."

A student

The Finding:

There Is a Lack of Confidence in the System's Ability To Carry Through With Change

"I think they just speak dribble. It just pours out. Could the City of Rochester School Board implement this? No."

*A member of the
general public*

Over the past 25 years the public's confidence in most American institutions has declined steadily, and its skepticism over the capacity of the political process to make real change has grown. The educational system has not been exempt from such negative trends: many people do not trust the school boards, the teacher associations, the administrators or the state bureaucracies to follow through with promised reform and improvement. Their suspicions will intensify if a reform launched with great fanfare is never heard from again, if promised improvements in performance are not realized, and when media coverage focuses on the bad news.

Suggested Responses:

Don't check the need for communication off the list after an initial effort that launches the program. Companies that have developed successful products and politicians who have won election do not stop communicating with their public or fighting for coverage of their efforts. To help keep faith with its audience, the New Standards Project must maintain open lines of communication and use them often.

Plan to make repeated updates on progress and development over many years. This is not a task that can be abandoned; persistent communication is necessary.

The Finding:

People Are Unlikely to Support Higher Taxes To Support the Program

The public adheres to the "black hole" theory of taxation and spending in government, including education. People are unwilling to part with more of their money to get more of the same from seemingly unproductive government expenditures. There is an overriding sense that the schools are wasteful and top-heavy with administrators and that the public is not getting its money's worth.

Although the New Standards Project stands for doing things in a substantially different way, the public is skeptical enough to adopt a "show-me" attitude, without regard to the Project's intrinsic appeal. To ask the public to endorse additional tax support of the schools in the context of such perceptions would be a questionable enterprise. It is certainly possible to increase taxes when the public has not been alerted to the issue, but a backlash often results.

Suggested Response:

Don't ask the public for money until progress on cost-cutting has been made and shown and until the effectiveness of the program has been demonstrated.

"I love the proposal, but we have the country's highest paid teachers and the kids are falling flat on their faces. I don't think I'm willing to pay more. I think they should work with what they have now."

A member of the general public

"I don't have any more money to give. I think that we are already paying them an awful lot of money and we've got a lot of administrators that we don't need. Overhaul the system — there's a lot of money out there that's not being well spent."

A member of the general public

Section C

Special Problem Areas

These are issues that engender concerns that are particularly difficult to counteract because they are so intensely held. One of the aspects, heterogeneous groupings, is not part of the New Standards Project but is being considered by many of the Project's partners.

The Finding:

People Often See Social Problems as the Real Problem in Education

Most of the groups that Public Agenda interviewed spontaneously centered on social issues as a primary cause of low performance at school. The attitude prevails, particularly among the general public, that broken homes and latchkey families cannot produce successful students. Although parents tended to be far more critical of the school system and teachers' roles in declining performance standards, they agreed that students' success pivots on parental responsibility and the home life. Teachers felt that many of their students are not showing up at school ready to learn, and complained that they must spend much of their classtime simply supplying basic social skills and maintaining discipline.

While this issue is obviously real and serious, bringing it up may have the effect of suspending any further discussion of the need for reform of the schools. That is, the conversation can easily take this turn: "Since the pathology of poverty and social decay are the root causes of the failure of schools, we need to deal with those issues before we discuss higher national standards."

"What do you mean by 'higher national standards'? What about all children starting school with a full stomach and a drug-free home? Are those part of your national standards?"

A teacher

Suggested Responses:

Acknowledge upfront that no one proposal can be a panacea, solving the problems of poverty, drugs and a declining family structure, and that this proposal is not designed to solve those problems. Present this proposal as a major, positive, and doable step each district and the nation can take toward helping students achieve more in school.

Point out to teachers cases in their own at-risk communities where the students are doing much better than students from the same backgrounds at another school. Most teachers know that the quality of the teaching accounts for the difference. Point out that this proposal was designed to improve the performance of underachieving students. While many of them do grapple with difficult social conditions, they can achieve much more given the right system, and given higher expectations. Even kids from the poorest communities have achieved at high levels when expectations and standards have been set at high levels and the kids have been supported in school.

The Finding:

People Are Fearful that Heterogeneous Groupings Will Be Unfair to Both High and Low Achievers

"We are choosing to do more work. So why shouldn't you let us? Plus, I think it's easier for them [the slower students] to pull us down than for us to pull them up."

A student

"We have no problem with the idea that we collect people together that are good at something in every other endeavor except for academics. We assign sport levels that way. We have no problem with it in music or art. But when we might have some kids who are really bright or some kids who are going to have a lid to their achievement, somehow it violates our egalitarian instincts."

A parent

Heterogeneous grouping is not a component of the New Standards Project, but Public Agenda tested the concept because of the interest by many of the Project's partners. Public Agenda found powerful resistance to the idea. It ran strongly counter to the intuition and experience of most people. Parents were deeply concerned that their kids would be held back or subjected to ridicule. Students feared the same result. The general public was concerned that students would spend all their time teaching each other rather than learning. Teachers had a mixed reaction: those teachers who had direct experience with heterogeneous groupings tended to feel that it works; teachers who had not had this exposure feared its effects, particularly on students who are having trouble in the first place.

Heterogeneous grouping was an extremely controversial and unpopular idea to many people, engendering opposition and intense disagreement. It would present a substantial hurdle and drain of energy to attempt to overcome it.

Suggested Responses:

Resorting to arguments that academic research has shown that students learn better in mixed ability groups does little to persuade people of the merits of the idea.

Providing firsthand accounts of the success of the heterogeneous approach may work better, since people in general believe their own experiences and the experiences of people like them. For example, having students or parents endorse the merits of heterogeneous groupings makes a more credible argument than simply reporting research findings does. Pointing out the logic of heterogeneous groupings — that high achievers learn by teaching, and low achievers learn best from their peers — might improve the response as well.

Section D

Eleven Rules of Thumb To Guide Communication

Strategic Rules

1. **Take the initiative.** Define for the public what the New Standards Project stands for rather than letting others do it. Stakeholders are especially concerned about education and will anxiously absorb any information about the Project. If uninformed or hostile sources provide them with information first, your work will be harder to accomplish.
2. **Build a reservoir of support that will help carry you over the tougher times.** The luster and enthusiasm greeting a newly launched reform effort often fades when well-organized groups attack the effort or when reform leaders essential to the effort move on. A reservoir of community-wide support will be a great asset in overcoming such roadblocks.
3. **Set up processes that encourage ongoing, direct communication among stakeholders.** Prepare people in the schools, and yourself, for the long haul. Reforms are often thwarted because faulty or nonexistent communication fails to alert reformers of problems until it is too late.
4. **Deal with concerns by addressing them head-on, not by tailoring words to paper over differences.** People are usually concerned or supportive because of underlying ideas and assumptions. It's very hard to satisfy their concerns by simply changing labels.
5. **Do not work alone.** There will be too much work for one person. More importantly, using different spokespersons, especially from other sectors in the community such as business, labor, or higher education, will enhance the credibility of the Project.

Tactical Rules

1. **Rely on examples and firsthand accounts** to make your case whenever possible. People are more likely to believe the experiences and testimony of folks like themselves. People are also more reassured when they see actual examples of what is being described.
2. **Rely on persuasive appeals that tap into people's intuition and experience of how the world works.** Appeals that correspond to people's preexisting world views and experiences have a much better chance of working than those that contradict them.
3. **Do not resort to jargon or make obscure references when talking with the public, parents, or students;** it is intimidating and shuts down communication. Instead, rely on direct and simple language.
4. **Do not preach.** Let people talk and voice their concerns, and try to listen before you speak. Sometimes people just need to voice their fears before they come aboard, and sometimes they just need to know that someone is listening to their concerns.
5. **Explain the Project's goals and components in terms of the values they appeal to.** People often care about and understand the language of values much more than they do programmatic details.
6. **Respond to hard or "unfriendly" questions with positive messages, not by attacking the question or the questioner.** Remember that your audience is not only the questioner but everyone watching your response.

Section E

Questions and Answers

Questions about the Standards

Question: What about kids who can't meet the standards?

Answer: The New Standards Project was developed with precisely those kids in mind. While the present system essentially gives up on underachieving students by holding lower expectations for them and then holding them to lower standards, the New Standards Project will establish high expectations and standards for all students and will provide help to teachers in creating a curriculum that will enable disadvantaged students to meet the standards.

Question: If these are national standards, then does that mean they will be run by some federal bureaucracy in Washington?

Answer: This is not a proposal created and enforced by a federal bureaucracy; it is a voluntary movement that communities from across the nation are joining and helping to create. The standards will be national in the sense that they will be high everywhere. The creation of the standards will be the product of input from many different communities and groups, for example, teachers, businesspeople and colleges.

Question: I like the idea of higher standards, but I think that other people (parents, teachers, students or the general public) will resist them.

Answer: Most people, regardless of whether they are a parent, teacher or student, already believe in the basic principle of the New Standards Project: If you expect more from people, you will get more. People know the education system is in trouble and they are willing to try a new approach.

Question: Who is going to set these standards? What are they going to base them on?

Answer: Business leaders, education officials and college educators from communities throughout the country will meet and decide in open meetings and workshops what the critical skills and the essential knowledge for high school graduates should be, and how to grade them. This is happening already in the case of mathematics.

Question: Isn't this going to put a lot of extra pressure on the kids?

Answer: Right now most students don't really have to try very hard in school they are just getting through the system doing the minimum that is expected of them. By not expecting more of them now we are setting them up for failure later on when they face the real pressure of today's job market. Jobs today require many more skills than those of 20 or 30 years ago. Tomorrow's jobs will require still higher skills.

Questions about the Certificate and Testing

Question: What is a Certificate of Initial Mastery and how is it different from a high school diploma?

Answer: The Certificate of Initial Mastery is a signal that a student has successfully learned problem-solving skills and essential knowledge. It indicates to businesses and colleges that a student is ready to enter the work force or to continue his or her education at a higher level. By contrast, for too many kids today the high school diploma shows little more than attendance.

Question: If the tests for the Certificate are not given numerical grades, how will we know if a student passed or failed?

Answer: The tests will be evaluated carefully by several teachers to establish whether the student has mastered the basic skills and knowledge; they will also be used to help counsel the student on where to improve. The point of the tests, however, is to motivate the student to think about the process of solving problems, not only about how to get an "A." Once a student shows mastery of the standards, he or she will earn a Certificate that reflects that mastery.

Question: Won't this just be "teaching to the test" for a different test?

Answer: New Standards tests will rely on open-ended questions. Teaching the skills necessary to solve these problems will be more like "teaching to real life." These will be tests of real problem-solving skills, not simply memorization or test-taking strategies for multiple-choice exams.

Question: Age 16 seems a little late to me. How will we know if a kid is in trouble before then?

Answer: At regular stages throughout students' education they will be given tests that feature problem-solving questions similar to those used in the tests for the Certificate of Initial Mastery. These tests will serve as an early-warning system to identify students who need extra help.

Question: Some students just don't test well. Is it really fair to base their whole future on one test?

Answer: Students will have many opportunities to show their abilities. They'll have many opportunities to take different exams and will also build portfolios that will show their class work and projects. And if students don't pass the tests for the Certificate of Initial Mastery, they take them again without penalty.

Question: How will I (the parent, the student) know what teachers are looking for in an open-ended question test?

Answer: Lots of examples of test questions along with examples of student work that meets the standards will be available for students, teachers and parents to look at.

Question: Is there a "right" answer to an open-ended question? What does one look like?

Answer: There are often several right answers to an open-ended question. Though some answers may be better than others, it will be important for the student to be able to explain the choices that he or she makes and show the process used to get the answer. Answers will be graded by more than one teacher, to assure quality control from teacher to teacher and school to school.

Question: How can you grade open-ended questions fairly?

Answer: Several teachers will look at the same test and check each other's grading. Nationwide teams of teachers will look at tests from different communities to ensure the quality of work and consistency of grading. The New Standards Project already has succeeded at producing reliable scores across regions.

Questions about Portfolios

Question: Will the portfolios take the place of regular grades?

Answer: The portfolios will be graded. Over time, if a community finds the portfolios a useful and reliable tool, it may decide to put more emphasis on portfolios than on traditional grading systems.

Question: Who decides what goes into the portfolio?

Answer: Teachers, students and parents will have a say over what goes into the portfolio. Communities want to insure that the portfolio is a rigorous and accurate representation of a student's work. A teacher should certainly determine some of what goes into the portfolio, but parents and students should also be able to include some work that they are most proud of.

Question: Who will have access to the portfolio?

Answer: Different communities can decide how to handle the question of access. With the consent of the teacher, parents and student, the portfolio could be shown to prospective employers, teachers from other schools, and colleges.

Questions about the Process of Reform

Question: How do we know that this reform will last, that it won't be just another educational fad?

Answer: This is a community-wide effort that has the involvement of local businesses and colleges, among others. The New Standards Project has already been started, quite successfully, in many communities across the nation.

Question: Is this another top-down movement? Did anyone talk to teachers before they dreamed this up?

Answer: The New Standards Project was developed by teachers and educators with the idea that the program will evolve over many years with the input of teachers across the country. The New Standards Project is more like a three-ring binder where pages can be added and torn out rather than a report published in hardcover and cast in concrete.

Question: Where will the money for the program come from?

Answer: The seed money supporting the Project comes from contributions from private foundations and from states.

Question: How can we talk about higher standards with all of the social problems that we face?

Answer: No proposal can solve all of our social problems, but this proposal is a major, positive, and doable step each district and the nation can take toward helping students achieve more in school. Schools can give kids who come from disadvantaged backgrounds an opportunity — perhaps their most crucial opportunity — to excel.

Section F

Describing the New Standards Project

The following is a brief description of the most important features of the New Standards Project, which takes into account the research findings reported in this handbook. The description presents the key points of the Project while trying to anticipate and respond to the most salient questions and concerns that the public expressed throughout the study.

1. New Standards schools will expect all students to achieve higher national standards; no student will be written off. Many children are not learning as much, or performing as well, as they could be. The standards will be set by educators and business and college people from communities across the nation who have voluntarily joined the Project. The higher standards will be implemented gradually, so that schools, students and parents have a chance to adjust to a new system.
2. National tests in critical areas such as math, English and science will be created to assess achievement of the standards. These tests will be created and evaluated by educators and business and college people from across the country. They will be problem-solving tests, not multiple-choice exams. Students will have to work to solve problems by applying the knowledge and skills they've learned rather than guessing. These new tests will begin in elementary schools and serve as an early-warning system so that students who need extra help can get it.
3. When students pass the final series of tests they will receive a Certificate of Initial Mastery. The Certificate will be a sign to employers and colleges that students have mastered necessary skills and areas of knowledge. Like road tests for driver's licenses, these tests will measure mastery of fundamental skills and be assessed on a pass-fail basis. Students may retake the exams as often as they wish until they pass.
4. In addition to tests, throughout their schooling students' achievements will be evaluated through portfolios of their class work and projects. A portfolio will include samples of writing, mathematics problems the student has solved, and even exams.

Section G

Appendix

Selected Review of Relevant Survey Data

There is an overwhelming amount of survey data on education issues. Cited here are selected questions from various national public opinion surveys that address some of the findings in this handbook. The survey items* are grouped into categories indicating the public's support for national education standards, a more demanding curriculum in public schools, and for skills tests and involving business, labor and colleges in curriculum planning and performance evaluation. A final item shows ambivalence over international comparisons among mathematics professionals involved in reform.

Support for National Standards

Our focus group research showed widespread and spontaneous support for the notion of higher standards. Numerous national surveys have shown that higher national standards enjoy the support of overwhelming majorities of the American public.

Q: "Do you feel that the country needs common national standards of performance that all schools should be expected to live up to, or don't you feel that is necessary?"

Need national standards of performance	82%
Don't need such common standards	14%
Not sure	4%

[Louis Harris & Associates, September 1991, national telephone survey of 1,744 adults]

* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Q: "...Please tell me whether you feel it would help a lot, would help some, would not really help, or would go too far and be a step in the wrong direction [to] increase the standards for teachers and students in public schools, including higher standards for graduation."

Help a lot	76%
Help some	16%
Not really help	4%
Go too far/step in the wrong direction	1%
Not sure	3%

[Peter Hart, September 1991, national telephone survey of 1,003 registered voters]

Q: "Some people say that raising achievement standards will encourage students from low-income backgrounds to do better in school. Others say that raising the standards will put these students at such a disadvantage that they will become discouraged about school or will even drop out. Do you think that raising achievement standards will encourage students from poor backgrounds to do better in school, or will it cause them to become discouraged or to drop out?"

Yes, encourage	52%
No, discourage	30%
Don't know	18%

[Gallup, April 1987, national in-person survey of 1,571 adults]

Support for a More Demanding Curriculum

A critical component of the New Standards Project's assumptions is that current curricula and school standards are not demanding enough of students. Survey data show the public is generally concerned about the rigor of curricula and would like to see it strengthened.

Q: "Within the United States' public school system, is an insufficiently challenging curriculum a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, not a very serious problem or not a serious problem at all?"

A very serious problem	33%
A somewhat serious problem	31%
Not a very serious problem	16%
Not a serious problem at all	13%
Not sure	6%

[Louis Harris & Associates, August 1992, national telephone survey of 1,250 adults]

Q: "Do you favor or oppose each of the following proposed changes to public school curriculum?...Raising requirements for passing courses and graduating."

Favor	81%
Oppose	17%
Not sure	2%

[Louis Harris & Associates, August 1992, national telephone survey of 1,250 adults]

Support for Using Skills Tests, and Involving Business and Others

The public favors including employers and college officers in the development and implementation of higher standards and testing to measure students' performance.

Q: "President Bush's new education plan outlines a series of steps to improve the nation's public schools... Tell me whether you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose ... having business and labor develop job-related skill standards."

Strongly support	59%
Somewhat support	31%
Somewhat oppose	5%
Strongly oppose	4%
Not sure	1%

Q: "How important is that step [from President Bush's education plan]... voluntary national tests in English, math, science, history, and geography for use in college admissions and the job market?"

Very important	58%
Somewhat important	33%
Not too important	7%
Not important at all	1%
Not sure	1%

[Both items from Louis Harris & Associates, May/June 1991, national telephone survey of 1,254 adults]

Resistance to International Comparisons

A Public Agenda Foundation survey of math reformers included a few questions about international comparisons. The results complement the finding that international comparisons are contested. Even among this group of highly informed and concerned educators, nearly two-thirds think too much attention is paid to international comparisons of test scores.

Q: "Which of the following comes closest to your own view?"

"People are paying too much attention to international comparisons of test scores."	62%
---	-----

or

"We need to catch up to the rest of the industrialized world in test scores."	30%
---	-----

or

Not sure	9%
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[Public Agenda Foundation, spring 1993, survey of 775 adults]

Section H

Other Related Publications and Materials from Public Agenda

The Closing Gateway: Californians View Their Higher Education System

John Immerwahr with Steve Farkas. Prepared by the Public Agenda Foundation for the California Higher Education Policy Center. This report is based on the views expressed in eight California focus groups, and phone surveys of both Californians and the entire nation. The study documents Californians' perceptions of the cost, accessibility, value, and opportunity in their higher education system and compares these attitudes with broader national attitudes others expressed about their own state higher education systems. 1993. (To order this publication, please contact the California Higher Education Policy Center.)

Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts

Steve Farkas. Prepared by the Public Agenda Foundation for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. The result of two years of education reform research, this report details gaps in communication among educators, between parents and educators, and between business leaders and educators. It concludes with several recommendations for improving dialogue. 1993. 32pp. Price: \$10.00

Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics

Steve Farkas. This report is based on mail surveys conducted by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation between January and March 1992. Diverse groups with a stake in education were surveyed using systematic random sampling: teachers, principals, superintendents, and, in the public sector, business executives from major corporations. 1992. 21pp. Price: \$8.50.

Crosstalk: The Public, the Experts, and Competitiveness

A Research Report from the Business-Higher Education Forum and the Public Agenda Foundation. John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson, and Adam Kernan-Schloss. This report describes a gap between the way leaders and the public view the issue of U.S. economic competitiveness and the associated crisis in education and work force training. 1991. 24pp. Price: \$17.50.

Section I

Methodology

Public Agenda began this study by conducting background research on the New Standards Project's agenda through interviews with Project leaders and a review of the Project's literature. A guide for moderating focus groups was then developed and tested with an initial focus group.

A focus group methodology was the preferred approach for this communication research project. Although focus groups do not produce quantifiable results that are generalizable with known margins of statistical error, their strengths made them especially appropriate given the goals of this study. The advantages are especially important when probing complex issues such as these, where attitudes are still formative and previous exposure to information is scant. The open-ended-question format of focus groups enables in-depth exploration of the beliefs and sentiments that drive opinions. Focus groups also elicit more detailed and spontaneous responses than surveys do. Finally, focus groups allow researchers to observe reactions to alternative arguments and messages and to test their effectiveness.

Public Agenda conducted the focus groups in two waves, across three sites and with four different types of people. The first wave of focus groups uncovered elements of the Project that triggered concerns or support, while the second wave confirmed initial findings and shed some light on effective ways to communicate the proposal. The three sites were New Standards Project partners (Kentucky, Seattle, and Rochester, NY). The four different groups interviewed were teachers, parents with students in elementary, middle and high school, high school students, and members of the general public who did not have children in school. A total of 24 focus groups were conducted (four types of groups x three sites x two waves), with over 250 people interviewed in all. Although the groups were conducted in New Standards Project sites, only a few of the 250 or so participants were well aware of the Project. Overall, the groups were demographically representative in terms of education, race, gender, and income for the nation as well as for the specific sites. The groups were conducted from March to June, 1993.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

June 30, 1994

MEMORANDUM

TO : The Secretary
The Deputy Secretary
The Under Secretary
Senior Officers

FROM : Kathryn S. Kahler *KS/K*
Communications Director

SUBJECT: Public Agenda update

To follow up on Deborah Wadsworth's appearance at the Senior Staff meeting on Monday, I am attaching several Public Agenda reports which you may find of interest.

The material includes research findings that I found to be genuinely eye-opening. For example:

- "When the public thinks about the problems in the work force...they focus almost exclusively on 'moral' aspects of the issue. They believe attitudes and motivation, not skills or training, are the cause of the problem--and the cure." ("The Public, the Experts, and Competitiveness," p. 11).
- "Educators seem to be only minimally interested in increasing the role of parents and the community in substantive policy issues." ("Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics," p. 17).
- "...the public is light years behind the country's leaders in understanding the necessity of the United States maintaining world-class preeminence in science, math, and technology." ("They Should Learn What I Learned in School," p. 5).

The research studies that produced these results are 1-3 years old. They may or may not be valid today; but at any rate, they challenge our deepest assumptions, provide food for thought, and may form the basis for future research.

On a happier note, the Public Agenda gives the forces of school reform plenty of reason to be optimistic. "Crisis in the Work Force: Help Wanted" describes, among other things, the results of campaigns the Public Agenda launched in four states to educate people

MEMORANDUM TO SENIOR STAFF

June 30, 1994

Page 2

about reform. The section entitled "Help Wanted Works," which appears toward the back of the report, describes the results of these campaigns and delivers a very encouraging message. It says:

"The campaigns demonstrated that, after being exposed to intensive, quality discussions about education and training, Americans are better prepared to discuss these issues, to understand their personal stake in reform and to grapple with the tough choices that need to be made...

"Results such as these offer two very encouraging messages. First, voters in communities across the country are ready for a serious discussion about school reform... And second, if experts take the time to talk straight to the American people about (reform)...the public will respond."

P.S. Please feel free to share these materials with your staff.

Attachments

cc: Senior Staff

DIVIDED WITHIN, BESIEGED WITHOUT:

The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts



**A Report from the Public Agenda Foundation
Prepared for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation**

Divided Within, Besieged Without:

The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts

Principal Researcher and Author
Steve Farkas

With
Jean Johnson

Editors
Deborah Wadsworth
Kathleen Cahill and
Adam Kernan-Schloss of
Kernan-Schloss Associates



**Interviews and
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The Public Agenda Foundation

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

Please feel free to write or call:

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Acknowledgments

Public Agenda would like to acknowledge the participation of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in this study. In particular, we would like to recognize the role David Mathews played in laying the intellectual groundwork of this research. At Kettering, Bob Kingston, Gina Paget, Estus Smith and Alison Chubb provided valuable support and advice.

At Public Agenda, Deborah Wadsworth and Jean Johnson made invaluable contributions to the conception and interpretation of the research. John Immerwahr's guidance and interviewing at critical phases of the study were an education in and of themselves. Stephen Immerwahr's partnership and support were indispensable. Ethan Gutmann's assistance was essential.

Adam Kernan-Schloss of Kernan-Schloss Associates provided skillful and critical assistance. Dr. Sophie Sa of the Panasonic Foundation generously shared with us her knowledge and insight.

Whatever worthwhile and illuminating findings this report contains would not have been possible without the individuals named above. Above all, however, nothing could have been learned — and little done — about education in the schools without the cooperation of the many people struggling to educate who shared their stories with us while remaining anonymous.

Introduction

During the past year, the Public Agenda Foundation has taken an in-depth look at four school districts as each struggles to reform its schools and improve the education it offers to its children. In the process, Public Agenda researchers conducted more than 200 face-to-face interviews — most lasting an hour or more — with teachers, principals, administrators and school board members as well as with parents, business executives and other local citizens who have been active in the schools.

Commissioned by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, this study focuses on the concerns and perspectives of professionals working in the schools on a day-to-day basis, and of citizens who have made a special effort to familiarize themselves with the schools.

By looking closely at the attitudes and relationships of respondents in four school districts, we hoped to shed light on the inner workings of education reform — the clarity of communication, the nature of conflict, the potential for consensus and the likelihood of change.

We are discouraged by what we found. In each district, what started as a good-faith effort to work together on school reform became a tug-of-war over turf. We observed poor communication, widespread suspicion and outright anger among the factions. Parochialism prevailed.

Because this pattern of behavior was so consistent in all four of these diverse school

districts, we can only conclude that it was not the individuals but something about the system itself that encouraged conflict, not cooperation.

The most harmful effect of these turf battles was that well-meaning professionals ended up being distracted from the primary challenge that brought them together in the first place: improving educational opportunities for the students.

Most attempts at reform focus on the particulars of education: teaching, curriculum, standards, assessment and so forth. Based on our research in these four communities, however, it is important not to lose sight of what might be an equally significant overarching challenge: overcoming the “politics as usual” behavior that seemed to inevitably emerge.

Reforms often begin with an optimistic, cooperative spirit. All parties — superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, parents and outside advocates for reform — are united by the shared challenge of improving their school systems. They agree up front that change will take a long time to achieve and will require continued dialogue, discussion, compromise and explanation.

But somewhere during the process, reforms often bog down and lose their luster as traditional, narrowly partisan modes of interaction within districts reassert themselves. Positions harden and distrust sets in.

The Four Communities

In order to protect the confidentiality of individuals who shared their views with us, Public Agenda will not identify the four school districts examined in this study. They are geographically diverse. One is in the New York City suburbs. The others are in the Midwest, the South and the West.

Among educators, the four school districts would most likely be judged as average to good. One district is in a state highly regarded among education reformers for its innovation and experimentation. Another is in a state where education reform has been a priority for a decade. A top official from another district was recently tapped by the Clinton administration to join the U.S. Department of Education. The fourth district, while not recognized as an educational innovator, has been praised for its efforts to integrate its schools.

The four communities studied here are not "communities in trouble." Nor are they communities without resources or strong middle-class participation in the schools. Yet, in each of the communities studied, education reform has fallen victim to division, factionalism and political gridlock.

Implications

The scope of this study is limited, but its focus and detail provide an especially revealing portrait of school reform as it is happening "on the ground." This kind of case-study examination offers a depth of understanding that is not communicated through surveys or other quantitative studies. By capturing detailed, first-hand accounts, by recounting anecdotes and war stories, and by documenting the human emotions involved, we believe our research in these four communities sheds an important new light on what is happening in the nation's schools — and why school reform is so difficult to achieve.

We are not sure whether every American school system is affected in the same way or to the same degree as these four communities are. But other studies we have done indicate that this might be so.

For instance, in *Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts and Competitiveness*, a report we published in 1991 in cooperation with the Business-Higher Education Forum, we described the serious gaps between the public and American leaders — both in how they understand the problems in the schools and what they propose as solutions.

In *Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics*, a 1992 survey conducted for the Kettering Foundation, we found notable differences in opinion between outsiders (business executives) and insiders (superintendents, school board, principals). Teachers tend to fall somewhere in the middle, sometimes siding with executives, sometimes with fellow educators.

In those two reports, we concluded that these gaps — both between insiders and outsiders and among insiders go a long way toward explaining why so few schools have fully responded to the alarm first sounded over a decade ago, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*.

For the most part, we have let the participants in our study speak for themselves in these pages. Their voices speak all too eloquently about how far from consensus these four communities are — and about how much work remains before they can re-create the cooperative climate that will allow the best of the reform proposals to take root and flourish.

With this report and our ongoing research, Public Agenda hopes to do its part: both by bringing some much-needed national and local attention to this significant barrier to school reform and by offering a few suggestions for advancing the discussion.



A Closer Look:

Parochialism and the Politics of Gridlock

1

The highly political nature of education debate and reform was the most conspicuous characteristic observed in each of the districts examined for this study. In each, the various factions — school boards, parent groups, teachers unions, principals and administrators — were organized around narrow interests, competing to influence policy and trying to deflect initiatives adverse to their own special interests. The widespread fragmentation meant, in many cases, that the groups were in a perpetual tug-of-war over the issues.

Although most individuals within the groups seemed genuinely concerned with the well-being of students, the primary goal of the schools — quality education for students — had become peripheral to their day-to-day activity.

“A Giant Dysfunctional Family”

One Southern superintendent compared his school district to “a giant dysfunctional family.” An official from a public interest group in the Midwest was equally critical. “When I go into meetings with teachers, I seldom hear teachers talking about what’s good for the kids. I hear teachers talking about what is good for teachers. I think we have far too

many people involved in the education system who are concerned about what’s good for adults, as opposed to what’s good for kids. And I’m even including parent groups who come in and talk about what’s convenient for parents.”

One former superintendent complained that school board members “adopted” one or two schools as their own, then pushed to make sure these institutions received services. “They said, ‘I represent my community, somebody else represents (another) community. Let those folks take care of their folks, and I’ll take care of mine.’”

In some cases, individuals who tried to promote the common good over constituents’ wishes paid a heavy toll. One school board member, for example, voted to close a superfluous school located in her ward. She thought her vote to reapportion resources was in the best interest of the district: the school-age population in her ward had shrunk considerably while enrollment in other areas of the district had grown. But the school’s active parents, teachers and community members attached to their alma mater rallied against the school closing. They let the board member know what they thought of her “common-interest” approach to representing their community:

She lost in the next election, and the school remained open.

The tone of divisiveness reached an extreme pitch in one of the districts. With a derisive tone, teachers reported that the superintendent wanted his school board to vote on a resolution mandating friendliness and civil relations among school board members who were hardly on speaking terms. The board unanimously approved the resolution.

Encouraging Conflict

In each of the communities Public Agenda examined, many of the participants acknowledged that no one seemed to be looking out for the common good. Some expressed a desire for political action driven by

general interests rather than parochialism. But the logic of the system seemed to compel each group to act on partisan interest for fear they would end up shouldering disproportionate burdens and sacrifices if they did not.

In all four communities, the great majority of stakeholders seemed to conclude that the best way to achieve their goals was to band together with like-minded individuals and press their special issue of concern. In each district, Public Agenda heard stories of organized

groups intervening on behalf of their own interests, and succeeding. A school would have a teaching position restored because of parental outcry; a suspended student would be reinstated because an interest group threatened suit; a proposed cut in teacher pay would be deferred because of the union's power. All the players seemed to draw the same conclusion — that organization and activism on behalf of their own specific interests works and that it is a necessary reaction to the partisanship of the other players.

"We've got so much power in special interests that it's very difficult for anyone to be responsible for the big picture," said a Western superintendent. "Each special interest is more concerned about the outcome for its particular group than for the common good."

A business executive from the South said, "There is so little trust between the teachers' union and the administration — and there are faults in both courts — and there's such uncertainty... that these people become almost reactionary. It's not in the interest of either power group to merge."

Parents Play, Too

One might expect parental involvement in the schools to contribute to the protection of students' interests and advance the quality of education overall. To explore this point, Public Agenda talked to parents active in parent-teacher groups in each community about their perspectives and experiences. These "active parents" knew when, how and with whom to intervene to solve a specific problem. Yet in each case, their primary focus and accomplishment was to navigate their own children through the system, agitating and pressuring until a specific problem affecting their kids was resolved.

"Administrators are not sure they're going to have jobs next year and they're saying: 'Please, I'll take care of it. Let's just not have any more problems right now. I can't deal with any more problems like that,'" one Southern parent explained. "So the children are suffering. And if you come in and throw a tantrum and yell and scream, they're going to put that brushfire out."

One Northeastern parent recalled that 25 parents had gone to the principal and said, "'We are going to harass that teacher unless you get rid of him.'" Nothing would have changed, he said, "unless the parents had come in raging." Several parents in other communities told similar stories. "The people who go in and keep at it, and [keep] at it, will get what they want. And it's

But the logic of the system seemed to compel each group to act on partisan interest for fear they would end up shouldering disproportionate burdens and sacrifices if they did not.

the only way you get anything," said one Southern parent.

In all four communities, the system responded to the most persistent parents — the squeaky wheels that made the most noise. They had learned how to get results.

Interests of Some Children Ignored

The active parents acknowledged, however, that the fundamental problem remained after their intervention. One active parent may succeed in removing her child from the class of an ineffective teacher, but the rest of the class is stuck. "What makes me so sad is the children who don't have any advocates, who don't have a parent or guardian or someone who can go in and help them with their problems. They are just left flat," said one Southern parent.

Ironically, the school systems' responsiveness to active parents in all four communities served to maintain the status quo. When parents' immediate concerns for their own children were placated, these potential agents of change were pacified. Their anger and dissatisfaction dissipated; their motivation waned. The system allowed individual-level efficacy, but prevented system-wide impact. Consequently, the system endures; the problems remain.

Assumed Motives, Overriding Fears

Stakeholders in every group — teachers, principals, administrators, board members, active parents and citizens — frequently interpreted and described events in their district in Machiavellian terms. In every community, respondents used the vocabulary and imagery of "hard ball" politics to describe the recent history of the district, suspecting that "hidden hands" were setting forces in motion, that actions were "power plays," that motives were "camouflaged," and that decisions were made in "back rooms."

One superintendent said teachers were behind parental pressure on the administration.

He spoke of "heavy resistance" to budget cuts, and said, "Of course, with budget cuts, parents are driven by teachers. Budget cuts always affect teachers' assignments, and to protect themselves from having to argue their own case, they get parents riled up about how this will hurt the children and let them argue their case."

Some teachers complained that administrators often tried to make decisions by fiat to head off predictable resistance from teachers. Asked to explain why administrators pursued this track, one teacher responded: "Why? To see how much they can get away with, how much they can force upon the teacher before backing up and saying, 'I wanted to see how far I could push you, so I could back up a few steps and make you think you gained something when, after all, I've still won.'" Two colleagues simultaneously voiced agreement: "Yeah, it's a power game."

Operating Under a Veil of Politics

The veil of politics overshadowing relationships within the school districts left some respondents feeling afraid and intimidated. Public Agenda researchers, who have conducted countless interviews and successfully established rapport with respondents in business, politics, the criminal justice system and many other arenas, were surprised by the caution and fearfulness exhibited by many respondents in this study. Teachers in particular seemed fearful that any criticism of the school system might leak out and affect them adversely. In one instance, teachers were so concerned about confidentiality that they insisted the interviewer turn off the tape recorder to insure that they would have deniability.

The political overlay on some occasions produced surprisingly strong reactions to events that might seem relatively benign to outsiders. At the end of an interview, the superintendent of one district was concerned that the release of this report would have an adverse impact on his relations with the school

board, and that it would be "all over the papers." In another district, two individuals handing out leaflets to students at the entrance to the high school absorbed the attention of administrators and school board members, becoming the focus of anxiety and suspicion. When district officials could not discover the affiliation and purpose of the leaflet campaign,

they asked to meet with the unidentified individuals. Negotiations over the agenda of the meeting and who would participate ensued, and the unidentified individuals were able to exact concessions even though their affiliation and importance were not known.

Peace Talks and the Politics of Manipulation

To survive in the politics of hyper-pluralism, some superintendents tried to stitch together patchwork alliances of partisan groups and reach compromises over management and policy issues. Others resorted to the

politics of manipulation, trying to co-opt, neutralize and deflect the power and energy of competing groups.

One Southern business executive compared a superintendent's task of reconciling competing interests to convening peace talks. "It's almost like someone standing up and saying, 'Look, let's bring all the parties of the Middle East together and I can be the peace-maker.' The situation is of that magnitude."

One superintendent reflected on the political nature of his job this way: "Everybody will agree that they want the schools to improve, but when you talk about how, you're in a terrible argument. I'm like a shuttle diplomat. I go back and forth until we can put something together that everyone will pretty much accept, and then we go public with it." It is interesting

to note that in this description of the politics of compromise, the general public is brought in only at the end of the process.

In some cases, the politics of manipulation seemed to drive the activity within the district. A superintendent in one of the districts confidently mapped out his strategy for winning work-rule concessions from the teachers union. To strengthen his bargaining power, his battle plan included brandishing the school board's support of his policies and focusing media attention on teachers' productivity. When we asked him if he had any doubts about his strategy, he said, "If you get into trouble, you change your tactics."

A superintendent in another district managed to limit dissension for more than a decade by isolating and co-opting competing centers of power. Frontline teachers were unhappy with the superintendent, but their union leadership had nominated him for an award. When his contract was expiring, his principals began to meet for the first time — in secret — to discuss issues that concerned them. Much of this superintendent's approach seemed manipulative: he co-opted potential critics, and divided and isolated personnel. But he had experienced a long and fractious teachers' strike in a previous district, and he had learned his lesson: A calm district that was easy to control was his first priority.

Reform du Jour: The Legacy of Past Reforms

The lack of communication and the mutual suspicion, isolation and intense partisanship among the stakeholders were not the only obstacles to reform. The impact of past reform efforts has become an issue in and of itself, leaving a legacy of skepticism in its trail and strengthening the system's propensity for inertia. As past reform efforts are abandoned in favor of still newer reforms, as key personnel leave and are replaced with new players unwedded to the previous reform agenda, teachers and active parents often adopt a

Reform efforts must also deal with the legacy of previous attempts to change the schools. Each time a reform effort is launched and abandoned, each time change-oriented personnel are fired or move on, the reservoir of support for change is diminished.

"wait-and-see" attitude at best, a cynical "this too shall pass" stance at worse.

A teacher from our Northeastern district reflected on the burden that change had come to mean: "One problem is the continually changing concepts in education. Every three to five years the think tanks are trying to change the traditional concepts of education. It requires a lot more work on the part of teachers, and some of them are scared." One Southern teacher described her strategy for surviving the cycle of reforms by saying, "When you've been in the district 20 years or so, you just learn to go with the flow. It doesn't really matter who's doing what down there. You just kind of go on with it."

Active parents were also upset with the constant turnover in personnel and policies. One Southern parent said, "If we're ever gonna move forward, we have to stop wasting money implementing programs and within two to three years yanking the programs out, starting all over again. You know, we're talking about \$5 million to \$15 million programs over a five-year period that never get fully implemented."

One superintendent acknowledged that his district had been caught up in a reform overload and then had to deal with the skepticism that greeted newer initiatives. "In the mid-to-late 1980s, we were trying to do the latest, newest, most innovative thing that came along. Now, with the restructuring effort, we're really trying to talk about the long-term, not constantly shifting gears. . . . Some schools are caught up in it, some are still in the process stages or feel like they're fighting a rearguard action and saying 'This too shall pass,'" he said.

While frontline teachers may hunker down and try to wait out reforms, administrators trying to move up the educational hierarchy respond quickly to a new superintendent's reform agenda.

But one principal saw problems with this as well, saying, "We're promoting people who are so 'with the program' that the program isn't the answer. Restructuring is going to fail

because it has become, at least in this school district, bureaucratized."

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

Advocates of reform have focused much of their efforts on recommending changes in curriculum, setting higher standards, strengthening professional training, enriching early childhood education, promoting parental involvement and so on. Their recommendations are often the result of years of research and meticulous planning for "how things should be."

Yet education reformers often assume that stakeholders in communities across the country will cooperate among themselves to implement worthwhile suggestions. They often assume that their "good idea" will overcome years of political wrangling and gridlock; that habits of thinking based on suspicion and fear, and keenly looking out for narrow interest; will automatically be replaced with enthusiasm for reform.

But education reform efforts that bank on the spontaneous goodwill and easy acceptance of stakeholders may face a less-than-promising future. Internal divisions within the district, the dominance of narrow interests, the tradition of conflict and competition for power — all of these are powerful patterns of behavior which, goodwill or no, can be expected to reassert themselves unless their existence is acknowledged and direct measures to address them are put into place. Reform efforts must also deal with the legacy of previous attempts to change the schools. Each time a reform effort is launched and abandoned, each time change-oriented personnel are fired or move on, the reservoir of support for change is diminished and a tendency toward inertia strengthened.

"When you've been in the district 20 years or so, you just learn to go with the flow. It doesn't really matter who's doing what down there. You just kind of go on with it."

Southern Teacher

2

A Closer Look: The Gaps Among The Insiders

Anyone who has spent time in any school district in any part of the country is well aware of tensions between "central administration" and school personnel, between teachers and the principal, between teachers and department heads, between grammar school teachers and teachers at the secondary level, and so on. Interpreting complex relationships as "us" vs. "them" is probably part of the human condition, and certainly not restricted to education.

That educators disagree among themselves is not news. Public Agenda's 1992 national survey of educators revealed important and potentially troublesome differences between various groups of educators on what should be done to improve the schools. For example, 64 percent of teachers supported common national standards. In contrast, superintendents and principals were divided about this approach, with slight majorities opposed to national standards. Sixty percent of teachers said needless waste in administration and bureaucracy was a very serious problem, compared to only 28 percent or less of administrators. And while majorities of teachers said classes were overcrowded and teachers' salaries were too low, only small proportions of principals and superintendents agreed.

What is striking from these four case studies is not that differences of opinion and perspective exist. What is striking is the depth of division and frustration, and the stunning lack of communication among the various school "insiders." In all four school districts, teachers virtually unanimously said that they felt isolated from central administration and from each other.

The Mystery Administrators

Teachers had little contact with central administration. Many didn't know who the key administrators were or what their functions were. They knew administrators got higher salaries than teachers, but they knew little about what administrators do to earn that money. The anonymity of administrators and the pervasive skepticism over the value of their roles led teachers to speak about them in a disdainful and contemptuous tone. Teachers saw themselves as fighting in the trenches while their commanders were far away from the battle, collecting fat salaries and doing little that was productive to help.

"I don't have a lot of contact with all these mystery administrators with strange titles

who make \$90,000 a year. They don't come to our building," said a Northeastern teacher. A Southern teacher echoed those sentiments: "I don't even know who they are, what they do, or where they're stationed. I know they make more money than I do."

A Midwestern teacher thought administrators tried hard, but added, "I wish I got more of a feeling that we were on the same team. I often feel like we are at cross-purposes."

"I know the superintendent's name and that's about it," said a Southern teacher. "I don't think [administrators] listen to what teachers have to say. As far as knowing what they do, I really don't know."

Out of the Loop

The coldness and lack of trust between administrators and teachers, and even the lack of contact between the two groups, was a recurring theme. A teacher in our Southern district said: "I've been here 17 years and I've often thought that it would just be wonderful if our board members or our supervisors would come sometime in a friendly way to see what we are doing. I would love it."

Teachers felt they were not part of the decision-making process, and that their needs were not considered when decisions were made. Teachers often felt that central administration worked in a vacuum and made uninformed decisions on whim.

A teacher in the Southern group said, "I can't imagine that [central office administrators] make any decision whatsoever with teachers in mind. They are so isolated, it's such a satellite down there, that when they make decisions they probably sit around tables and say: 'Hey, that's a great idea. We'll do that.' And somebody says, 'Wait a minute. Did you think about so and so?' and they say, 'Oh, all right, maybe not.' I just can't imagine that they ever make decisions with the students' ability to learn in mind."

Administrators Respond

Some superintendents were aware of the skepticism with which "downtown" administrators were regarded and tried to address such attitudes. A Western superintendent said, "Even though we've downsized the central office by 31 percent, a lot of people ask, 'Well, what do those folks do?' I try to point out that this isn't just a fun-and-games operation. It's a \$600 million a year business with 12,000 employees, with lots of federal and state mandates to meet." But suspicion and distrust ran deep and were difficult to counter. Attempting to lead by example, this same superintendent sacrificed due compensation, but this gesture was greeted with skepticism. "I was giving back money that was guaranteed to me in my contract because I would have been the only one to get a raise last year, and it was well publicized, but people still don't believe it. They say, I've got a separate deal and I'm getting bonuses and the whole bit."

"I don't have a lot of contact with all these mystery administrators with strange titles who make \$90,000 a year. They don't come to our building."

Northeastern Teacher

Lack of Communication

In all four districts, communication across the educational hierarchy was judged to be so bad that teachers said they learned more from the press and each other about policy changes than from the administrative leadership. As a result, teachers' conversations about personnel and policy issues were often dominated by rumor and speculation rather than real information.

For example, one Southern teacher said, "When something is going on, I generally read about it in the newspaper that morning. Then I come to school and ask other teachers what they know about it. [Our district] was going to cut some teachers and counselors. I didn't know anything until I read about it in the paper."

A teacher from the Northeastern district, while acknowledging the "distance between central administration and teachers," seemed resigned to it. "They should make sure there is toilet paper and crayons and just leave me alone."

The Silent Treatment

"When we have
lunch together, we're just
sort of stress-stunned and
suctioning food for 25
minutes and then back to
the front line."

Southern Teacher

Even when given opportunities for dialogue, individual teachers admitted they (but not their union leadership) often lapse into silence and abstain from discussion. Some feared that open criticism of administration would lead to reprisals; others didn't seem to have the confidence to speak publicly; still others were simply tired of fighting old battles that are seldom resolved.

"Sometimes I sit in the back of the room and think 'I don't agree with that,' but I don't say anything. Some people do, and sometimes I do, but you have to be careful. They can send you to Timbuktu," said one Northeastern teacher.

A teacher from the Southern group admitted to calling the central office anonymously to disagree with policy. "Often, if I don't agree with a policy, I feel that I'm running a risk to come out against it too strongly." A Northeastern teacher agreed. "Even though we have tenure and all, if you say something, you could be teaching in the basement. It's like anywhere, you have to be careful of what you say and who you say it to."

Some superintendents were not aware of a communication problem at all. Said one, "I don't do anything in a vacuum. Everything is done with the whole administrative staff, then it goes beyond to teachers. I meet with teachers every month to talk about ideas." Most teachers we had spoken with in his district had hardly seen this superintendent, much less heard his ideas.

Just a Charade

Teachers quite consciously distrusted what they perceive as administrators' public relations maneuvers. When administrators do try to communicate, their efforts may be greeted with skepticism. Dialogue initiated by administration was seen as politically inspired — a public relations stunt rather than a sincere attempt to engage in real dialogue.

One teacher from the Southern site said administrators engage in a charade of seeking teachers' opinions. "But that's all it is. It's just show, and most decisions are made without even that charade." Another teacher from the same site was more bitter. "I think somebody took a course on how to deal with people and learned that you're supposed to give people a chance to express their opinions. So they listen, but they don't do anything about it."

Still another Southern teacher said, "I think what happens is they make cynics out of teachers and we become so cynical and so critical. I'm sure administration hates for us to be critical, but we're not treated professionally. We're not listened to. I'm convinced of that now."

Isolated from Each Other

Teachers feel isolated not only from the central administration, but from each other. They are isolated from colleagues at other schools, and even from colleagues in their own schools. Consequently, isolation and the lack of communication in these four districts was more than the result of the normal distance one finds between managers and front-line workers.

In all four districts, teachers seemed to work in a pressure-cooker environment with little time to share resources, information and experience among themselves. Teachers, as they described it, were locked into a stressful situation for many hours and then released to go home. There was little opportunity to reflect on the day and to draw on the experiences of colleagues. It was, therefore, difficult for them

to develop a sense of context about their activity. One sensed they were simply trying to survive the day.

A Southern teacher-counselor said, "We are so agenda-packed. . . . We really don't get any chance to visit. We're so busy, and we're all just trying to react to situations." A Western teacher summed up his stress this way: "There is no career as isolated as mine. I can go all day without talking to anyone over 21 years old. We don't see other teachers at work."

Not unexpectedly, teachers from different schools had even less contact than those at the same school. And the few events that allow for such contact seem to have strict (administrator-defined) agendas. A Southern teacher said, "About four times a year we meet, but it's not a time for socializing. It's strictly dissemination of information." His colleague agreed, and said she knew of no opportunity for contact other than meetings with "highly organized" agendas. "That doesn't leave time for any other thing."

Even teachers from the same buildings and from the same departments seemed to have little time to talk among themselves to compare notes and to learn from each other. A teacher at the Southern site said his day was "agenda heavy" and that he and his colleagues "rarely have the time or the atmosphere for exchanging any sort of creative ideas or even having creative ideas. And when we have lunch together, we're just sort of stress-stunned and suctioning food for 25 minutes and then back to the front line."

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

For a reform effort to succeed, it is essential that those who must make the change — at the district, in the school, in the classroom — be convinced of the plan's merit. Reform, therefore, depends on good communication.

Stakeholders thus need to understand the rationale for change as well as the specifics of how it is to be accomplished.

But the quality of ordinary communication in public education seems so limited and so constrained that it raises serious doubts about whether it is possible to build consensus for reform.

Since major stakeholders — teachers, active parents and administrators — in school districts rarely speak with each other, they can also be suspicious of honest dialogue when it does take place. In carefully planned, well-thought-out reform initiatives, communication problems may not emerge immediately because those who initiate change make extraordinary efforts to explain their ideas and address concerns. But communication problems almost inevitably resurface as the reforms become real and their implications and demands become more apparent. Reformers relax their initial efforts, and old patterns of not talking — or not talking frankly — reassert themselves.

But the quality of ordinary communication in public education seems so limited and so constrained, that it raises serious doubts about whether it is possible to build consensus for reform.

3

A Closer Look: The Gap Between Parents and Educators

Parents sensed an air of mystery about how and why decisions were made, and many suspected the dearth of information was not accidental — that educators preferred to keep them in the dark.

Many of those concerned about the state of education in the United States today have placed enormous hope in increasing parental involvement in the schools. Parents naturally want the best for their children, and many observers believe that parents, acting as informed and more demanding consumers, can be an important force for change in education. But the evidence from these four case studies suggest that active parents face an uphill battle in stimulating change and that their impact may be limited in an environment that is fiercely guarded.

What's more, the evidence from these four communities suggests that while active parents may be effective in improving the education their own children receive — lobbying to get their children into better classes with better teachers, for example — their impact on the overall quality of education offered in the school district has been minimal.

Struggling to Be Heard

In all four communities, active parents who made a special effort to inform themselves and participate in school decisions felt they had to struggle to be heard. They said the potential for communication with the schools was limited, and they often said they did not even know who was accountable for policy decisions in their districts. "I think parents aren't exactly sure who makes the decisions. You are never quite sure where to direct your suggestions," said one Northeastern parent. They sensed an air of mystery about how and why decisions were made, and many suspected the dearth of information was not accidental — that educators preferred to keep them in the dark.

Schools, they said, were merely paying lip service to parental involvement in education. Active parents felt that to be heard, drastic tactics were in order. Trying to get information over the telephone, for example, was just not good enough. Said one Midwestern parent, "I think most parents don't have the foggiest idea of what's going on in the schools." A Southern parent waved a piece of paper and said, "Here's our level of communi-

cation right here. This is all you get." Another Southern parent agreed. "I think as working parents we ought to be able to pick up the phone and get information that we need. But we can't."

Taking It into Their Own Hands

Active parents learned that if they wanted a tangible response to their concerns, they needed to take matters into their own hands. They believed that layers of bureaucracy insulated the top policymakers from hearing about problems. One Southern parent suggested skipping phone calls in favor of meeting with school officials in person. "I have sat in that administrator's office for many, many hours and I've found them very interested in hearing about the problems. But I'm not sure how much one gets from a phone call to the big chief."

Some parents suspected that educators were less than honest with them, perhaps intentionally withholding information about how decisions were made. "The teacher might say one thing to your face and write something entirely different in the records," said one Northeastern parent.

A teacher at a Southern magnet school acknowledged that some parents became very frustrated in dealing with administrators, particularly because of the school's "mysterious selection process" by which students are accepted into particular programs. "I've heard parents practically tearing their hair out trying to break through the bureaucratic system downtown," he said.

Educators: Parents Not Motivated Enough

For their part, some educators felt that some parents were not motivated enough to find effective communication channels. Instead, teachers said that parents expected teachers to do all the work. One teacher from the Midwest related a complaint she had just heard from a parent. "The parent said, 'Well,

last year no teachers contacted me.' We sent home progress reports, we sent home year-end grades, we had an open house, we had conferences. I never saw this woman. So I'm supposed to go to her? What about her coming to me?"

There was also a perception that high schoolers were least interested in parental involvement in their education, and sometimes were embarrassed by it, and that this explained parents' lack of involvement at that level. A Southern teacher observed, "By the time they get to the secondary level, I think quite often the students discourage communication."

Many teachers had a specific, perhaps narrow definition of parental involvement. Often, when teachers talked about the lack of parental involvement in education, what they meant was that parents do not prepare their children for school or reinforce learning at home. For some, the problem was that some parents did not teach their children basic social skills or help them with homework.

"We don't need the parents involved with the schools, we need them involved with their kids," said one Western teacher. "We can do the job with the kids whose parents are parenting them. We don't need the parents in school, we need the parents at home."

A Southern teacher was more critical: "Everybody's an expert on how children should be educated, except the people who are educating our children. And sometimes...the people who make decisions listen to [parents] as opposed to listening to the teacher."

Message Received

A number of active parents interviewed for this study had concluded that their participation was unwelcome. "The majority of

"We can do the job with the kids whose parents are parenting them. We don't need the parents in school, we need the parents at home."

Western Teacher

educators are fearful of the parent who is actually involved," said one Southern parent. A parent from the Northeast agreed: "The administration is looking to have less involvement by the parents, not more." They say they want shared decision-making, "but the administration doesn't want the parents to know everything."

Communities also need active parents whose concerns extend beyond their own children and whose capacity to influence the school goes beyond having their own child's problem solved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

Most reform efforts reflexively call for increasing the scope of parental involvement in the schools. But this case study suggests that there are striking differences in how parental involvement is defined, and that this is not being frankly discussed. For some teachers in particular, "more parental involvement" means better parenting and more reinforcement of learning in the home.

Teachers see parents as valuable potential allies in motivating students and in helping youngsters understand how important their education will be to them in the future.

With real allies in this quarter, many teachers feel, half the battle would be won.

But others define "parental involvement" as a means to change the governance of the schools, a way to insure that the interests of students do not fall victim to a static educational bureaucracy, and to shake up the status quo. They see parents as active "consumers" who can and should demand a better product.

Both of these definitions are legitimate, and for many observers, both should be implemented as part of successful school reform. But for this to happen, communities will have to overcome the reluctance of educators to endorse parental involvement that reaches beyond the home or the bake sale. Communities will also need active parents whose concerns extend beyond their own children and whose capacity to influence the school goes beyond having their own child's problem solved. Yet another challenge is how to involve parents who are not currently active in the schools — parents who are intimidated, too pressured or disorganized in their own personal lives to take real responsibility for their children's education.

A Closer Look:

The Gap Between Business Executives and Educators

4

The involvement of business and business leaders in the school system varied considerably in all four districts studied. At one end, there was informed, often critical, detachment: individuals and businesses who thought about education and were interested in the schools, but who rarely got involved.

At the mid-point of involvement, there were businesses that supported education at the building level through such programs as school partnerships and mentor programs.

At the activist level, there were businesses that focused on the macro and political level, working to influence the appointment of superintendents, the composition and support of school boards, and the wider political environment — state and local statutes and tax propositions involving the schools. At this level, efforts were **not** always coordinated with or approved by the educational community.

Public Agenda's interviews with business leaders — and with educators about the role of business in education — suggested that there were important differences in perspective, even in cultural outlook, that affect all levels of business-education involvement. There were significant differences in perspective regarding the function of education in society, the most

important problems facing the schools, and the role business should play in improving education. Ironically, each group charged the other with being "out of touch" with the "real world" in important and fundamental ways. And although contact and involvement increased business people's sympathy for education personnel and the difficulties they face, it did little to allay their concerns about school performance.

Numerous studies, including Public Agenda's national survey of educators and business leaders in 1992, have revealed widespread dissatisfaction among business people with the skills and education of recent high school graduates. For example, 66 percent of business executives said the nation's public schools were doing a "poor job" of teaching students "a basic understanding of science and math" but only 15 percent or less of teachers, principals and superintendents agreed. While 56 percent of business executives said the schools were doing a "poor job" of teaching students "to write and speak grammatically

Ironically, each group charged the other with being "out of touch" with the "real world" in important and fundamental ways.

correct English" only 14 percent or less of teachers, principals and superintendents agreed.

Indeed, there is a prevailing judgment among business leaders that American schools in general are not adequately performing one of the most important tasks society assigns to them — giving young people the skills and knowledge that today's economy requires. And while opinion research routinely shows that educators and citizens are more critical of schools in general than they are of schools in

their own communities, business leaders in Public Agenda's 1992 survey expressed, perhaps uniquely, strong dissatisfaction with their own local schools.

The business leaders interviewed for this study reflected many of these prevailing business attitudes. A Northeastern businessman complained, "I don't think the schools are doing as good a job as they did, say, five years ago. When young people come to me looking for employment, they are not as

prepared to work as they were. Something is missing." A Midwestern business executive pointed to the high costs of what she saw as the schools' failings: "I see too many people who can't cope when they graduate because they don't have salable skills, and must remediate at the post secondary level. That adds almost a year to the educational process and a lot of money. The cost of remediation at the post secondary level is absolutely enormous."

But while most educators we spoke to readily acknowledged the need to strengthen the skills and knowledge of graduating students, few characterized the issue — as many business leaders do — as an urgent problem that could severely damage the country's chances for economic growth and prosperity.

Some educators entirely rejected the idea that a primary function of education is to prepare youngsters for the work force. Some resented

what they saw as the business view that schools exist only to provide employees. "I do not see my job primarily as being there to provide jobs or to provide kids for businesses. That is way down on the list," said one Midwestern teacher. "I have a lot more important things to teach kids than how to get a job?"

Another teacher suggested that, on the contrary, it was the obligation of business to provide jobs that match students' education. "Why is it our obligation to provide them with employees, as opposed to their responsibility to provide us with jobs for our students?"

These sharply contrasting views about the purpose of education were the most jarring indicators of what seem to be two separate and largely segregated cultures. Each had different priorities for education, different values, different assessments of how the schools are working, and different prescriptions for how they should be changed.

In some instances, these different cultural outlooks — and the resentments and misunderstandings arising from them — have undermined potential partnerships between business and education. But in many other cases, the cross-fertilization seemed to hold promise.

Business Executives on the Schools: Isolated and Unwilling to Be Held Accountable

Many of the business executives interviewed for this study said educators were out of touch with the economic realities of the times and that schools were virtually untouched by business demands such as high productivity, top-notch quality, and a clear headed focus on goals and performance. Business people frequently said schools and teachers were isolated, teachers did not work full time and schools were run with bureaucratic inefficiency and bungling that would not be tolerated in the business world.

A Western business executive said, "Schools have basically isolated themselves. Other than the PTA, they really don't want you on the school campus.... If you're a grown

"Why is it our obligation to provide them with employees, as opposed to their responsibility to provide us with jobs for our students?"

Midwestern Teacher

man and walk on a school campus, somebody's going to check you out and see who you are. It's not a place where you're expected."

Some superintendents agreed that teachers were isolated and that they lacked understanding of business and economic concerns. "They go into a room and they become kings of their territory, and it's isolating. They have limited interaction with the outside world."

The business community sometimes saw schools as being out of touch with the larger economic issues facing the community. A Northeastern executive criticized the leadership of his school district for not understanding important tax issues and how they affected the schools. "For example, there's a state statute that allows condominiums to be assessed at roughly a third less than single-family houses. If schools could get involved at the state level to amend the statute, they wouldn't be losing this money. Well, this came as a revelation to them," he said.

Business leaders repeatedly mentioned educators' calls for higher salaries and more money — at a time when all institutions are being forced to make do with less — as indicative of an "out-of-touch" approach and an unwillingness to be held accountable. For example, one Midwestern executive dismissed educators' calls for higher salaries. "The educator's job is a difficult, stressful job, but I think they're a little off base in what they say about pay. They need to understand that the work world works 12 months a year, not 10 or 9."

Another executive commented, "What we hear in the business world is [educators'] focus on pay. Business people would like to get off the dime and say: 'We have to set goals. Can we look at goals with you people?' But the educators keep coming back to pay. I think there's some tension on that issue."

The comments of business leaders in this study about what they saw as educators' preoccupation with money reflected a widespread national business perspective. In the

Public Agenda survey, for example, one of the most striking differences between business people and administrators was on whether schools need more money. A near-unanimous 95 percent of business executives thought that "unless our nation's public schools are substantially reorganized, spending more money would be a waste of valuable resources." Only 53 percent of superintendents agreed, while 47 percent said, "More money would solve most of the problems our nation's public schools face."

Too Much Bureaucracy, Too Much Politics

Many business leaders interviewed also expressed frustration with the bureaucracy of the public schools and the political mandates under which they operate. Business people often saw schools as top-heavy (a perception that has some resonance with teachers) and intensely bureaucratic.

One Western business executive, criticizing what he saw as top-heavy education administration, complained that local officials even tried to disguise the problem. "The layers upon layers of administration in the school district are exacerbated by the fact that many 'administrators' are not identified as administrators, but as 'teachers.'"

Public Agenda researchers heard many stories — often from business people themselves — about executives who had entered the educational system with a "can-do" spirit only to end up retreating, chastened when they confronted intractable obstacles to change.

Many education decisions, for example, are "purely political and have nothing to do with efficiency," explained one Western business executive. "That's very hard for

If you're a grown man and walk on a school campus, somebody's going to check you out and see who you are. It's not a place where you're expected."

Business Executive

"They think we have it easy because we get the summers off. They think we get paid too much. They have no idea of what we're going through. . . . It's incredibly stressful, and business people just take potshots. I don't think they value us, and I resent that."

Northeastern Teacher

business people who have authority and control to work in a democratic setup; they're not used to that."

Another Midwestern business executive put it this way: "One thing that frustrates business people once they get involved is something that's not at all in the hands of educators and administrators. They find out about the parameters, rules and regulations

placed on the schools to provide certain things. When business people see that, they just throw up their hands."

Often the problem went beyond differing perspectives and expectations to a severe lack of candor and communication. In at least one case, business and educator judgments about school performance were diametrically opposed. In a series of interviews in one community, Public Agenda researchers began their day talking with a local business leader, a senior executive from one of the community's largest employers. He was concerned, he said, about the lack of skills among graduates and quickly moved on to indicting the schools for not focusing on

critical academic subjects. A particular sore point was a radio station operated from one of the local high schools. "I've always been opposed to the radio station because very few people listen to it and I think it costs \$50,000 a year and benefits only 10 students. I wonder if this \$50,000 couldn't be better spent somewhere else, or not at all."

But just hours later, interviewers spoke with the local superintendent of schools asking him, among other questions, how his local schools were regarded by area businesses. The superintendent had built a long-standing relationship with the same executive and referred to him as someone impressed with the perfor-

mance of the schools. He went on to use that same radio station as an example of the good things the schools were doing. "We have an FM radio station at the high school that's FCC licensed. Communication opens the world," he said.

Who's Out of Touch?

Some of the educators interviewed for this study understood and sympathized with the business point of view, even though they did not agree with every aspect of it. As one Midwestern teachers union official explained, the business community is at times "incredibly frustrated with the archaic nature of school accounting and financial accountability. And, on occasion, they lobby against the large chunk of money going to teachers salaries."

But others resented what they saw as business people's uninformed judgments and air of superiority. A teacher from the Northeast, for example, strongly disagreed with the sentiment that educators have it "soft." "They think we have it easy because we get the summers off. They think we get paid too much. They have no idea of what we're going through. We make thousands of decisions every day. It's incredibly stressful, and business people just take potshots. I don't think they value us, and I resent that."

Many educators seemed to feel that it was business — not education — that was out of touch. Too many business people, educators said, are just not aware of the social changes and pressures the schools must live with in the 1990s.

Many felt that business people did not understand the complexities and difficulties facing the public schools. One Midwestern teacher criticized CEOs and media alike as "educated in suburban schools, highly motivated and qualified," and having "no idea of what we, a city school, are like."

Educators often criticized businesses for assuming that problems in the schools and in business called for the same solutions. A Midwestern principal, for example, criticized

business for thinking of students as products. "You can throw away a bad product, you can't throw away a bad kid," she said.

"They're going to try to use more business techniques rather than trying to be humane — a kind of 'teach those who want to learn, get rid of the others.'"

Another educator resented business admonitions that schools should make better use of tax dollars. "There are pressures, financial and political, on the budget that [businesses] don't understand. There is a lot they could clean up if they ever had the patience to just send in some financial CEO and fix it. But I'm not sure they'd be able to fix it with the budget limitations either."

Hands Off?

Most of the educators we spoke with had some experience with business efforts — school partnerships or mentor programs — to improve and/or assist the schools. Many teachers were relieved that someone else in the community was taking an interest in the schools but many were also skeptical about just how much help was needed or welcome.

Some educators seemed worried about relinquishing power and responsibility. Said one Western teacher, "I wonder how much involvement we want from businesses, just how far we want them to step in. We're very hesitant to accept what [our business partner] says because we're the professionals, we're the experts."

According to a Midwestern teachers union official, "There are some teachers who are highly suspicious of having anybody in the school. There are those who don't want anybody involved in schools, which is an old paradigm that we are working very hard to get over. And it's a kind of funny professional paranoia, but they don't trust anybody else and don't really want to be open to that kind of scrutiny."

Others expressed uncertainty about the motives of business and the depth of their commitment. Many teachers saw business involvement as being mostly public relations.

"I think the partnership program is very superficial," said one Western teacher. Her school's business partner "wants the high visibility and the PR exposure," she said. She criticized the company for spending money on "nonacademic efforts, high-visibility things that don't have a whole lot to do with what our mission is at the school."

An education reporter interviewed in one community had this to say about business involvement in schools: "It's all PR. I'm amazed at the number of press releases that come across my desk. We just throw it all out. Let me say this: If businesses took all the money that they spend trying to promote how they're promoting education and spent it to promote education, I think the schools would be in much better shape."

Some educators and parents even had moral reservations about school partnerships with certain companies. "One group has what I call a latent sixties, hippie attitude that businesses are going to corrupt us all and [kids will be damaged] if they happen to see a little advertising on the school wall," said one Midwestern teachers union official.

Cultural Exchanges

Significant numbers of business people and educators interviewed for this study expressed grave doubts about expanded business involvement in education. Business people expressed frustration at their inability to "get things moving" and resentment that so many educators seemed to want their money, but not their ideas. Educators worried that business people did not understand, and perhaps did not really care about, the challenges they faced. They expressed their own resentments that business people did not respect them as professionals.

Despite these significant "cultural" gaps between business people and educators, and

**"You can throw away a
bad product, you can't
throw away a bad kid."**

Midwestern Principal

[A school partnership] takes more than just the passion of the moment. It takes a process that has to be organized. And like any process, it takes a long time and a lot of people."

Western Business Executive

some fair degree of skepticism about the role business should play, many of those interviewed — both in business and education — reported a growing sense of understanding and improved communication coming from increased business-education exchanges.

Educators tended to think that when business people got involved with the schools they began to appreciate the school's work. To a large extent, this perception is correct —

business executives interviewed here who had regular contact with the schools generally voiced more appreciation of educators and were more sympathetic to the complexity of public education today.

For example, one Midwestern administrator made this point: "It is definitely the case that as businesses get closer to schools, as they get inside schools, they better understand the problems that schools face, and are more positive about the job we are doing."

The nature of business involvement also has an important effect, one superintendent said. When they are "rolling up their sleeves — not just giving money — they see that learning is going on despite the problems that schools face."

Familiarity Breeds . . .

Business executives with significant experience in the schools also reported the effects of their "learning curve." Their views evolved, and they consequently become more critical of the attitudes of some of their business colleagues. One Western business executive, for example, called for business to be more subtle in applying business thinking to education. "Education is not business; business is not education. . . . One of the problems I've seen when businesses get involved is that they feel that you can apply everything they've

learned in business to education."

Another business executive said, "[Business] needs to understand how many agencies are placing expectations on the schools. [Business is] looking at the academic level only." Still another agreed that the business community "really doesn't know very much about the educational process. Many of us are the products of educations that were private and a long way from where the public schools are today."

When business executives got more involved in the schools, they recognized the many obstacles the schools face, including entrenched bureaucracy and politics. For some, recognizing the obstacles resulted in a more realistic partnership and a commitment to stay involved.

In the past, according to one Western business executive, the business community leaned toward small, "feel good" partnerships with schools, which may or may not have helped improve the educational process. Now "there is an acceptance of the fact that the process is a very lengthy one, requiring a certain level of patience, with an organizational structure that allows it to perform and follow through. It takes more than just the passion of the moment. It takes a process that has to be organized. And like any process, it takes a long time and a lot of people."

And some interviews with educators also seemed to suggest that real understanding might be possible. Recalling the early stages of a business partnership, one Midwestern teacher said, "I would have to say, people were fairly cynical. They were worried that somebody was going to come in and tell us, 'You guys are doing it all wrong, we've got the answers and here we are.' But it has turned out to be a real good thing on both sides."

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

Many education reformers — and many executives and on-the-job educators — have expressed enormous optimism about the role business might play in improving education,

both in an overall sense and through specific programs to help individual schools.

But interviews conducted in these four communities suggested that in practice this strategy is getting mixed reviews. In many cases, unspoken tensions, misunderstandings and resentments were kept politely beneath the surface. The differences in educators' and business executives' professional cultures underlay much of the conflict.

The business culture prizes productivity and accountability, and they need kids who can do today's jobs. To them, the main "product" the schools produce now is not what they, the "consumers," need and want. Therefore, a shake-up is in order. The education culture, on the other hand, places a high value on giving individuals second and third chances, and it prizes constancy, patience, self-esteem, and security for students and personnel. Education, much more than business, sees a rationale and benefit to current programs and modes of organization, and a potential danger in applying too much "business thinking" to the schools. Interestingly, central office administrators we interviewed often made use of business jargon and referenced business management techniques. Administrators seemed to keep abreast of the latest business thinking, but the extent to which their school districts could be subject to business management strategies was unclear. Principals and teachers, on the other hand, had little sympathy for applying business techniques in the schools.

If it were just a question of two different cultures learning to interact with each other, that would be one problem. But what was especially disturbing about some of these conversations was that even after business executives learned how to speak with educators and began to appreciate the difficulties schools face, their concerns were hardly alleviated. Cooperation and empathy might be there, but business people were still concerned that the bottom line was not improving. Some would keep at it, some would end the relationship in frustration, others would settle for the public

relations benefit of school involvement. But some others are driven to take a more partisan approach to school reform. Said one Western business executive, "Everything used to be partnerships and 'do good' stuff and it didn't make any difference. It wasn't helping. So we're getting into the advocacy business. We're going to look at the major educational issues and figure out what we think is the best thing to do from our point of view, not from the educator's point of view."

In other cases, the cultural exchange between business and education seemed to be bearing fruit. These interviews found two important implications for business leaders interested in making a positive impact on education, neither entirely new. First, there is a long learning curve, and second, true cooperation takes time and persistence. The most effective local executives interviewed in this study took their education ventures very seriously, and they exhibited both a capacity for self-scrutiny and a surprising willingness to change their initial views.

But from our observations, there is an interesting piece missing from this picture: in all four communities studied, the cultural exchange seemed to be going in one direction only. That is, many business people talked about how they had learned more about the schools and become more subtle and open-minded in their thinking, but almost none of the educators — with the notable exception of superintendents — mentioned becoming more alert to business concerns, or thinking that some elements of business thinking might profitably be adopted in education.

Educators of course appreciated the increased sympathy and understanding they felt from business. They were grateful for help they received and appreciative of particular areas of

But almost none of the educators — with the notable exception of superintendents — mentioned becoming more alert to business concerns, or thinking that some elements of business thinking might profitably be adopted in education.

expertise —computer or accounting know-how, for example. They seemed to “like” business better, but we got no sense that they “understood” business better. Consequently, one strategy to which reformers might pay more attention is helping educators understand what is happening in business and why, and helping them consider whether some part of the “business revolution” does in fact have a place in the schools.

A Closer Look: Specific Issues

5

Not surprisingly, the various groups' views on specific issues tended to reflect their overall differences of opinion. The following sections look at several of those issues: schools and social problems; money; race; and the role of the media.

ISSUE 1: Schools and Social Problems

A recurring issue in the debate over the effectiveness of public education is the impact of negative societal trends on the schools' ability to educate. Many educators say it is no surprise that so many of today's students do poorly. They argue that myriad social trends — the breakdown both of the family structure and of organized religion, the effects of crime, drugs and poverty, and an increasingly heterogeneous population — make an educator's job all but impossible.

The schools, educators say, are not isolated from these forces, and their performance must be assessed with this context in mind. For this reason, they argue, it is not reasonable to compare the achievement of American students to that of students from other industrialized societies whose

homogeneous populations face few of these problems. This widely-held perception among educators emerged repeatedly in interviews conducted for this project.

Educator, Priest, Rabbi, and Social Worker

"Every year I find myself wearing more hats and putting out more fires. I'm a priest, I'm a rabbi, I'm a social worker, I'm a father," said one teacher in the Northeast. Another said, "We've become a dumping ground for all of society's ills." A third added, "There are more single parents, and we are just overwhelmed. It's not that [the parents] aren't concerned, they just can't do it. You have so many problems now, the alcohol problems, the drug problems; I even had a homeless child. How could I scream at him for being late when he's riding the bus from a motel for an hour to get here?"

Teachers spoke at length about the problems students brought with them to school. "Every week it's a matter of overcoming insurmountable problems," said a Midwestern teacher. "It's exhausting. What can you do for these kids living on the street — kids whose parents have thrown them out? What can you

do with kids who live with drug abuse and know nothing but drug abuse?" These problems so overwhelmed the classroom effort, she said, that it was "easy to overlook that there are other kids in similar situations who are surviving miraculously and actually doing pretty well in school."

Executives: Who Should Do the Job?

"I do believe a lot of educators think that the business community has a lot of idle cash that they should give to education."

Southern Business Executive

Many business executives also understood that teaching, at times, requires heroics. Said one, from the West Coast, "The idea of a mother at home 30 years ago, raising the family, teaching them as she raised them, does not happen today, and children are getting to school without this kind of teaching. Some of the latchkey children, all they have is a TV set."

While educators tended to believe they had no choice but to take on these additional responsibilities, many business executives were less convinced. Some executives saw educators using these problems as an excuse for their own poor performance. Others said educators should stick to the business of teaching the basics and let other community groups address problems of hunger, homelessness, poverty, inadequate medical care and the like. In this instance, corporate executives tended to apply their own "business thinking" to problems facing the schools. Institutions, they argued, functioned best when they had a clear goal, stuck to that goal, and didn't allow themselves to be pulled into other directions that they may not be equipped to handle.

For example, one Western administrator pointed out how few choices the schools have when faced with social problems. "You can't really ask if the schools should say no, because they just can't. The kid is in the classroom, and you have to get beyond their problems before you can start teaching them. That's just how it is," she said.

A Northeastern administrator agreed "The school is a reflection of what goes on in the community. If there are conflicts at home, kids bring them into the schools? Schools have to deal with them and it's critical that we do because there's no one else there who catches it."

But business executives took a different tack. Longstanding social problems "seem to be multiplying," another executive said, "and someone should be addressing them. But I'm not sure it's the educators who should be doing it. Maybe society in general should be addressing the problems."

A Western executive agreed. "It doesn't have to be that schools [deal with all the social problems]. For instance, after-school care need not be run by the schools. It could be run by the city, the county, or the YMCA, or could be contracted out."

An executive from the Midwest questioned the school's priorities. "Is our primary function to teach social skills or to make sure that we graduate people who can read?"

Schisms between business leaders and educators were also revealed in Public Agenda's 1992 survey, in which they strongly disagreed on the impact contemporary social problems have on the schools' ability to educate in the face of these problems. In that survey, 67 percent of teachers and 65 percent of principals strongly agreed that many children come to school with so many problems, it's difficult for them to be good students. Only 42 percent of businesses executives agreed.

When asked if being "overburdened with social problems" was a very serious problem facing the nation's schools, 76 percent of principals, 74 percent of teachers, and 71 percent of superintendents said yes. Only 49 percent of businesses executives held this view.

ISSUE 2: The Symbol of Money

In interviews conducted for this study, money was a recurring issue, but its invocation was often symbolic. This is not to say that money is not an important issue to schools in

the communities studied. However, what was most striking in this series of interviews was the extent to which educators and business executives often used money as a measurement of their value to the community and society in general. Teachers looked at their salary level as a measure of how the public and community value their profession. Superintendents and school boards looked at the public's voting on their budget and revenue propositions as indicating public endorsement of their policies.

Some educators viewed the business community's financial support as a sign of their commitment to education. One Southern business executive was well aware of this. "I do believe a lot of educators think that the business community has a lot of idle cash that they should give to education. I think it might be an obstacle when administrators say, 'Gee, you're willing to help but you won't open up your checkbook for me.'"

Some teachers felt that if society properly valued education, schools would not have the financial problems they do now. Others were concerned that the educational system does not financially reward excellence in education.

At least one Midwestern business executive agreed: "If you're an especially fine educator, can you make more money? If you put in extra time with the kids because you really want to help a child grow, are you rewarded in any way, or are you supposed to be self-rewarded? The measure of our society is if you work hard at excellence, there's a reward. This is true except in education, where the lowest common denominator is pretty much it."

ISSUE 3: Race

Issues involving race were of central importance across the four districts we studied, fundamentally affecting the structure and policies of the districts. To help achieve integration, one district adopted the Princeton plan, which assigns students to schools by grade level instead of geographic proximity. Two others relied on magnet schools to attract white

students to minority schools, and another annexed a bordering town after a lengthy period of litigation. One district had devoted substantial financial and human resources to legal battles involving race for more than three decades.

Despite the obvious impact and salience of racial issues, however, we found very little open discussion about them. That is, people easily and comfortably discussed specific programs and policies engendered by racial concerns, but rarely discussed race problems per se.

Southern black parents and educators were the only respondents to openly discuss racial issues, and they often voiced strong dissatisfaction with the educational system's treatment of black children.

Their white counterparts would remain silent when interviewed in the same focus groups. Even when whites were interviewed alone, they would discuss issues involving race very gingerly. Interviewers speculated that the fear of being labeled racist or of saying something inappropriate may explain the hesitancy. But if the four districts studied here are indicative of a national tendency, the American educational system may be currently incapable of open, frank dialogue and discussion about issues driven by race.

Black Parents: Dissatisfied

Many blacks voiced extreme frustration and distrust of the educational system's approach to their children. Some suspected that programs targeting underachieving kids had the effect of keeping their kids underachieving.

One parent, also a member of the Urban League, said: "I think the model that we have in public education as a whole and the way that we educate is increasingly less workable [for people of color] than it has been at any point in history. And students of color have become a much larger percentage, so it's more glaring."

"[Minority parents] think the system really doesn't care whether their kids achieve or not."

Black Southern Parent

The issues of race also made discussion of school standards and performance extremely sensitive.

One black parent from the South said that minority parents "think their kids are throw-away kids. They think the system really doesn't care whether their kids achieve or not and that, at any point, it will try and find reasons to put them into an alternative program or to push them into special education. People tend to think the education system has very low expectations, particularly for kids of color, that there is racism, that kids of color are treated differently in the system."

Another Southern black parent said, "I just don't believe that, as a whole, the bigwigs who really run this town are ready for disparities [between black and white students] to be bridged. If we get rid of all of that, then we won't have anything to have any grievance about."

Whites Cautious

The issues of race also made discussion of school standards and performance extremely sensitive. For example, a Midwestern white business executive said, "No one can talk about [these] issues with educators. And when someone does try to talk about issues, about standards, they are accused of being racist, and boom, end of discussion."

Whites tended to speak cautiously and choose their words carefully whenever the subject involved race. A white business leader's discussion of a program intended to help "at risk" youth illustrated this hesitancy at work: "We run [a program] where we work with school counselors and identify kids who are juniors in high schools who would be — minorities in particular don't like this term — 'at risk.' Particularly vulnerable populations do not like to be referred to as 'at risk.' So I try not to use the word, but it is so descriptive, it's hard not to." Other whites used the term "inner-city youth" when referring to black students.

A black PTA member in the Southern city described the dynamic that curbs discus-

sion regarding race. She said, "There's a large disparity between the black males and the other kids on the test scores. Now the administration has gotten on to the principals to get the test scores up. [Now] the principals are...standing up at open houses and telling the black parents that their kids are dumb and that they can't learn, and the kids take it on the playground. We're starting to have little incidents and fights on the playground. We need to talk about high expectations for all our students. Don't ever tell a group of parents that your kids, who are 80 percent of the school district, are keeping this school district back."

Achievement and Demography

Both whites and minorities routinely resorted to a demographic analysis of academic achievement by race to measure progress or the need for progress. Educators compared white and minority achievement levels to determine which schools and which students need more resources and to pinpoint weak spots. Black parents and activists also used demographic comparisons to demonstrate how the system is not meeting their children's needs.

Nevertheless, there was clear bitterness among some blacks over being the focus of targeted, remedial efforts. The bitterness may have resulted from how such efforts are undertaken (if an overzealous, insensitive or racist administrator insults minority parents, for example) or from disagreement over which policies should be pursued (e.g., the very act of targeting minority children who are not achieving, rather than trying to integrate them).

One Southern black parent had this to say: "When a [white] principal stands up in the auditorium, where there are black, yellow, red, brown — all kinds of kids, and says to black parents and everybody else there, 'my black boys are keeping my scores down, this is where my problems are,' that's bad. That's bad."

A business executive, also black, found racism to be pervasive. "The perception of

institutional racism in the district offices is to me overwhelming. Institutional racism is when one has the feeling that the good old boy network is intact, that it is a white male-run system and that it stays that way. Leadership comes from the top; racism comes from the top."

ISSUE 4: Media and the Schools

Across the four sites, mass media coverage of education and the schools proved to be a highly charged issue, one on which virtually all parties agreed. Parents, teachers and principals were especially bitter, distrustful and cynical about media coverage of their schools.

The Bad-News Bias

The recurring complaint voiced across all districts was the "bad-news bias" of media coverage. It seemed to parents, teachers and principals that the media relished splashing the crime, drug and academic problems of their districts on the front page. On the other hand, they complained, the media would bury good news in the back pages of the paper — if they reported good news at all. According to this view, negative media coverage accounted for much of the negative image citizens — especially those without kids or other contact with schools — had of public education.

A Midwestern principal put it simply: "If there's a positive event, you don't read or hear about it. But there was a student walkout, and the press was over there every day with cameras. Media tend to report more negative things." A Southern parent said, "Negativism just feeds and feeds and feeds. I had to call the paper for three days to find out when they were going to announce [our local] National Merit semifinalists. You almost have to do that to make sure they're going to print the good news [but] they'll be there in a flash if there's a fight." Another parent added, "And when they do print it, they print it in about five-point type. You need a magnifying lens to read it."

Teachers in the Northeast angrily related a story illustrating the media's "good-news blind spot." In the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict, with rioting across the nation, a basketball game in their district between racially diverse teams, cheered on by a racially diverse audience, went off without a hitch. Proceeds from the game were dedicated to a black student who was injured in what may have been a bias incident. What seemed to be a poignant and timely example of community solidarity went uncovered by the media. One teacher concluded that, while the media "always" report on knives being confiscated in schools and other bad news, "they never report on good stuff."

In one of the districts, many respondents said that a newspaper war between the city's two daily papers had caused both papers to escalate their disparaging and negative coverage of public education in their district. To sell more newspapers, they believed, both papers converged on a visible and vulnerable target about which the public cared. An administrator from that district said that during the newspaper war, "If we had a stabbing at a school... we would not only see one story on one day, but two days and two stories or several stories, because the newspapers would provide more versions of the story to attract more readers, and the schools suffered during that period because we were used to create readership. We noticed immediately after [one paper] folded that reporters were not nearly as aggressive in pursuing the school's issues as they had been."

Others thought the problem was with the public, rather than the newspapers or reporters themselves. Bad news — sensational and provocative — was destined to impress and stay with public perceptions, while good news was easily forgotten.

"Negativism just feeds and feeds and feeds. I had to call the paper for three days to find out when they were going to announce [our local] National Merit semi-finalists."

Southern Parent

Educators: Education Reporters Don't Measure Up

Several respondents traced the media coverage problem to the mediocrity of reporters assigned to cover education issues. Education reporters were sometimes believed to be the lowest people on the media's totem pole. According to this view, these reporters were typically new and inexperienced, struggling to learn and struggling to move to more prestigious beats.

An assistant superintendent from the Northeast said he had been through a "tremendous number" of education reporters over the years. "There are good reporters and there are reporters who are looking to win a Pulitzer with some exposé. I had also always understood that the education beat was low on the totem pole, so we got the rookies. And some of the issues we face are complex. The jargon we use may not be

understood. And when rookies attend school board meetings, they may misrepresent the sense of the meeting because they didn't understand it or because they left before it was over."

Concerns About How Outsiders View the Schools

Educators and parents were sensitive to how outsiders reacted to negative images of schools. They believed negative media coverage led to negative attitudes toward the schools among the general public.

"The farther away you get, the more critical you are of the public schools. And if you don't have any affiliation with them at all, you tend to reflect what you see on TV or read in the paper, as opposed to what you remember from when you were in school," a Western superintendent said.

Again, blame was placed at least partly with the press. But a Southern parent said negative press was a reflection of the community's negativity. "There are lots of educational options here, and I think the way a lot of people make themselves feel better is to talk very negatively and exaggerate the negativism in the school system. And the press picks up on that. They perpetuate the most sensationalized perspective of what goes on in the schools, but they never go down to the schools."

A Western teacher agreed. "When there's a gun in a high school, the average citizen starts to believe there's one in every school. They believe what they see on TV."

Superintendents Working Well with Media

Compared to teachers, principals and parents, superintendents had a more positive relationship with the media. School superintendents agreed that the media had a bad-news bias. One said, "If you don't have any affiliation with [the schools] at all, you tend to reflect what you see on TV or read in the paper The news media tend to deal more with the attention-grabbing stories, where something's wrong rather than something's right."

But the tone and approach of superintendents toward the media was analytic and dispassionate, reflecting their confidence that they could influence its content. One superintendent said, "Anything of value that happens, I make sure that gets in the papers." Another said of negative news coverage, "I'm not bitter or sad about it, because I understand how the media work. I see them as an ally, not as an opponent. If you are open and share information and provide real access for reporters, overall, they'll give you a fair shake."

Superintendents were also more likely to believe they could counteract the negative impact of ordinary coverage. Their comments on the media reflected confidence. One superintendent described his approach this

"When there's a gun in a high school, the average citizen starts to believe there's one in every school. They believe what they see on TV."

Western Teacher

way: "To overcome [negative] perceptions, you have to do several things. Some of them are common sense. Your best ambassadors are the people [in the news stories]: the students, the teachers, the administrators. We try to be proactive in that respect. . . . No one wants to put any money into public relations for the schools. My style is to do a lot of it myself. I have my own live TV show once a month where I take telephone calls. We need to do some proactive things to improve our image."

Another superintendent described a similar approach: "I am probably in the paper five days a week. A headline at least a couple of times a week. Radio interviews a couple of times a week. I've been on one talk show and I'm going on another next week. So there's an intense interest in media focus. I like it and I do it well. If you can establish a good rapport with the media, you can start answering questions the way you want them answered so that you can make great impressions for the district. I've never had trouble with the media. They have a deadline. They want a quote and if you call them back they're always grateful. I'd rather have them have my quote than someone else's."

At least one media person agreed that superintendents had better relations with the media than teachers: "That's true across the board. Any time you dissect any interest group, the leaders often have it figured out. They've figured the media can be manipulated, can be dealt with, can be helped and so forth. It's the rank and file that they represent that don't understand and want to blame the media for what's going on."

A Midwestern union official blamed both the schools and the media: "I think [schools] are as culpable as the media in that the schools are lousy communicators. They are lousy reporters of what they're doing."

PTA: Need to Balance Media Bias

Some PTA parents and others felt there was a need to counteract the media's negativity about the schools in their community. Other stakeholders agreed the schools needed to take the initiative to offset negative media coverage. A PTA parent from the South said, "In the school district, we need to change that [negative] public image. We see it coming, but we won't do anything about it. Then when it hits the paper and the switchboard and everyone starts to holler, the administration is busy trying to do a patch job on it instead of dealing with it when it first raised its ugly head."

Another Southern parent said she recognized the need to be proactive: "If you want something positive, you have to really push for it. That ultimately goes back to the public, because I think the negative is what sells papers and that is not what we want. So, as the public, we have to press for [the media] to say positive things."

A third parent seemed surprised by the need to be proactive. "I had to call the paper for three days to find out when they were going to announce [the National Merit winners]. The paper knows me; I'm always real polite. You almost have to do that to make sure they're going to print the good news. You have to invite them to the science fair because that's something good. They'll be there in a flash if there's a fight."

"I think [schools] are as culpable as the media The schools are lousy communicators. They are lousy reporters of what they're doing."

Midwestern Union Official



What Can Be Done?

If this study indicates national trends, Americans angered by gridlock in Washington may find an equally intractable gridlock much closer to home.

This Public Agenda study was designed to go beyond the wealth of survey findings on education reform, and gather, at some length

and with some specificity, the views of Americans working in the schools — and working to improve the schools — on a day-to-day basis. We found a great deal of intelligence and desire for change. But we also found divisions, fissures, resentments and misunderstandings that make education reform a precarious undertaking.

In all four communities, groups that should work together — groups that must work together if there is to be progress — seemed continually pulled apart by suspicion, by prejudice, and by fear of losing hard-won gains. In conversation after conversation, talk about long-term goals descended almost immediately into talk about local politics, local disputes, who did what to whom, and how to prevent it the next time around. If this study indicates national trends, Americans angered by gridlock in Washington may find an equally intractable gridlock much closer to home.

All four communities, all with good school systems, were bedeviled by poor communications and a tendency to lose sight of the common good in the effort to protect a

variety of special interests. Teachers resented administrators whose idea of communicating was a two-page memo. Administrators were frustrated by rivalries among schools and divisive union disputes and regulations. Superintendents tired of efforts to “make peace” among squabbling parties. Parents tried to improve the schools, but often settled for protecting their own kids. Too many business people came with quick answers, and when their answers weren’t accepted, they left just as quickly.

There are no simple fixes for any of these problems. But this study suggests that there is a formidable challenge that education reformers must take more seriously — one that is underrated, underfunded and sometimes completely ignored. The challenge is to address the political side — the “human side” — of education reform more directly, more effectively and more persistently.

Good ideas about curricula, textbooks, tests, financing and governance will founder if the parties who must implement them cannot get along. In some respects, education reformers who turn their attention away from local communications and local politics may be risking the same unhappy fate as the political candidate who has “the right stands” on the issues, but fails to rally the public to the cause.

Seriously addressing the politics of education reform is a major undertaking.

Clearly, the kinds of resentments and misunderstandings identified in this study will not disappear overnight, nor can they be ignored in the hope that a good idea will save the day. They will require sustained attention, candid communications, and a genuine willingness to listen and learn.

Three Dead-End Paths

Based on this study's findings, people who want change in the schools may be tempted to follow three unproductive paths.

First, the problems will not be solved if participants try to distance themselves from the politics of reform. In this age of soundbites and gridlock, politics has gotten a bad name. It is understandable that citizens would want to have as little as possible to do with this eight-letter word. But that also would be a fatal mistake.

After all, politics is how change occurs, how disputes are mediated, and how consensus is reached. The challenge is to keep politics from descending into pettiness and parochialism.

Second, they might invest enormous energy and resources in communications when an initiative is introduced, but then "check the job off the list" after the first burst of activity. This is precisely what many educators resent — the grand unveiling of a "reform du jour" followed by a return to business as usual.

The third no-win strategy is to assume that poor communications and local political gridlock are merely "public relations problems" that can be fixed with the right slogan or attention-grabbing press release, or by accentu-

ating the positive and pretending that the downside doesn't exist. This kind of strategy serves only to further isolate and antagonize those on the front lines, especially teachers. The fears and resentments are real, the patterns of suspicion and skepticism are well-established and deeply entrenched. They cannot be papered over with rhetoric.

Disagreement is natural and healthy.

What struck us about these four communities, however, was the level of bitterness, suspicion and hostility among the parties. At the very least, these attitudes are a major distraction to the task of building communitywide consensus around school reform.

For that to occur in the future, there must be candid and continuing conversations among educators at all levels, among educators and parents, and among the schools and the business community. The problem in getting education reform is not that malevolent individuals or groups stand in the way of progress. Rather, stakeholders seem to be locked in a hyperactive, self-centered process they do not like but are powerless to control. There is a critical need for a different kind of political process, one that allows the general interest of communities to prevail over the narrow interests that currently dominate. And more importantly, all parties must never lose sight of the underlying common purpose of their efforts: What we must do to help children learn. And how we will work together to do it.

This is precisely what many educators resent — the grand unveiling of a "reform du jour" followed by a return to business as usual.



Methodology

In addition to selecting districts that had some experience with reform, we wanted our four sites to reflect diversity in geographic location. To achieve geographic diversity, one of the four districts selected was in the South, another in the Northeast, another in the Midwest and another in the West. District size was also a factor we took into consideration — one district was small, with a student population of less than 5,000, a second had about 25,000 students, a third served nearly 50,000 students and a fourth had over 100,000 students.

From June to November 1992 over 200 interviews were conducted by Public Agenda researchers, who held to a consistent but flexible interview format. We wanted participants to tell us their stories in their way, to refer to their perceptions of critical moments in their districts' history and relationships and to address specific issues we had identified as critical. In preparation for our field research we interviewed several national reform leaders and conducted general background research on the districts.

We approached the districts by making contact with several key stakeholders in each site. Superintendents would open the door to other administrators and principals; principals or teachers union officials would open the door to teachers; leaders in the business community would open the door to other business executives; heads of PTA's would connect us with active parents. Although we had anticipated

that identifying the key players would be difficult, this proved to be a straightforward task — most are well-known to each other or were even listed as members of groups involved in education. In most of our interviews we asked for suggestions on other individuals we might interview, expanding our list until we had identified the key active personalities in the district. We very quickly developed comprehensive lists of names for each community. We approached prospective interviewees with a letter describing Public Agenda, and the purpose of the project, and guaranteeing their own confidentiality and that of their district. We would then follow up with phone calls to further explain our project and to set up appointments for interviews. We visited each site from three to five times.

Interviews with superintendents and other central office administrators, principals, business executives and school board members were conducted one-on-one and in person. Active parents and teachers were interviewed in focus groups. With the exception of one teacher focus group that refused to be recorded, all interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. Although some individuals would have been happy to "go on record" with us, for others the promise of confidentiality was critical to gaining trust and ensuring frank discussion. We therefore promised to keep all names and districts confidential.

Other Education Publications Available from the Public Agenda Foundation



Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics

Steve Farkas. This report is based on a mail survey conducted by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation between January and March 1992. Diverse groups with a stake in education were surveyed by mail using systematic random sampling: teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members and, in the private sector, business executives from major corporations. The study reports consensus among the groups over the goals of K-12 education but strong differences in their evaluations of the performance of the schools. There are also fundamental disagreements over the scope and root of the problems and how to approach their solution. 1992. 21pp. Price: \$8.50

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Educational Reform:

The Players And The Politics

A Report From The Public Agenda Foundation
Prepared For The Charles F. Kettering Foundation

by
Steve Farkas

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This study builds on research previously undertaken by Public Agenda on education and the economy. Interested readers may refer to *CrossTalk* for an overview of this work.

The Public Agenda Foundation

Founded a decade ago by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, the Public Agenda Foundation works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how average citizens think about public 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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Introduction and Overview

Currently, much of the educational reform movement's energy is spent debating the merits and flaws of different policy proposals. But these substantive arguments may be disguising a hidden debate over the process and politics of educational reform: a debate over who should be responsible for educating our youth, what and who is responsible for the current difficulties, and how severe these difficulties are. The goal of this report is to identify the attitudes which drive this last debate.

The report is based on mail surveys conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation, in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, between January 13 and March 31, 1992. Diverse groups with a stake in education were surveyed using systematic random sampling: in the public school system, K-12 teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board presidents; in the private sector, business executives from major corporations. The analysis is based on 803 returned questionnaires.¹

Throughout the report, when we refer to *educators* we mean teachers, principals and superintendents. When we refer to *administrators*, we mean only principals and superintendents. School board presidents are treated as a distinct group.²

We expected these different groups to have fundamentally disparate views toward education in our nation's schools. This expectation was substantially confirmed — there is a wide gap in attitudes about the schools between business executives and professional educators. Although there is consensus among the groups on the goals of education, there are acute disagreements about almost everything else: rating the schools' achievement on those goals, defining the problems and their severity, and supporting reforms and solutions to those problems.

Agreement On Goals — Disagreement On Performance

About four in five business executives, educators, and school board presidents said it was *essential* that schools teach students seven key elements: the fundamental values of society, sound work habits, self-esteem, grammatically correct English, science and math, to work cooperatively, and to be flexible learners.

But business executives think the schools fail to accomplish many of these key goals. Majorities of business executives think the schools are doing a *poor* job teaching three of the seven essentials (sound work habits, English, and science and math). By contrast, educators assess school performance as fair (or good or excellent) on all seven goals.

Furthermore, about 70 percent of educators are strongly convinced that outside critics of education underestimate the good things happening in the schools (only 13 percent of business executives have a similar reaction). And while overwhelming majorities of educators think the schools in *their own community* are on the right track, a majority of business executives (56%) think their *own community's* schools are on the wrong track.

¹ Response rates, sampling margins of error, and details about the conduct of the surveys are in the Methodology section at the end of the study.

² We had initially defined school board presidents as educators, but in answering the questionnaire the vast majority skipped questions explicitly reserved for educators, and their responses often differ from those of educators. They are therefore treated as a separate group throughout the report.

Money Is/Is Not The Problem

Business executives and educators often diverge in their diagnosis of the schools' problems. Educators are much more likely than executives to say that the schools are overburdened and that money is an important problem. For example, educators are two to three times more likely than executives to say that students from other nations do better than American students because other countries spend more money on education. At least two-thirds of educators (but only 19 percent of executives) say other nations' students fare better because the U.S. tries to educate everyone while other nations channel weaker students into vocational programs. And while over 71 percent of educators say the schools are overburdened with societal problems, only 49 percent of executives think this is a very serious problem.

Although educators think parents are not involved enough in their children's education, only business executives want to increase parental say over substantive school policies. About half of executives want parents to have more say over the allocation of school funds, the curriculum, and the selection of administrators. Only small percentages of educators agree.

Teachers And Executives Support National Standards, Fault Administrative Waste

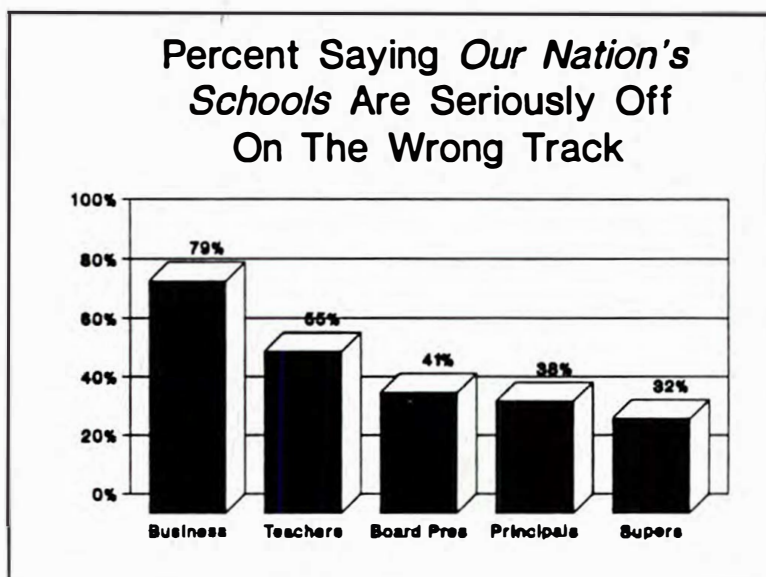
Our findings indicate that it would be a mistake to treat teachers, principals, and superintendents as part of a monolithic group of "professional educators" because they often differ in their views. There are areas where teachers are more likely to take the position of executives. For example, 64 percent of teachers joined the 82 percent of executives calling for common national standards, a measure opposed by other educators. Strong majorities of both executives and teachers (66 percent and 60 percent respectively) think needless waste in administration and bureaucracy is a very serious problem, (compared to 28 percent or less of administrators). But while majorities of teachers think classes are overcrowded and teachers' salaries are too low, only small proportions of principals and superintendents agree (executives join administrators in downplaying these problems).

Thus, there are differences between the views of professional educators and the business community — between those who teach students and those who end up employing them. There are also isolated areas of consensus, and areas where different groups ally. Any attempt to invigorate dialogue and build cooperation between these unique groups must acknowledge and work with those differences.

I. Acknowledging the Problem

Finding

Business executives are much more pessimistic than educators about the direction our nation's schools are headed. Fully 79 percent of business executives say the nation's public schools are pretty seriously off on the wrong track while only 32 percent of superintendents, 38 percent of principals, and 41 percent of school board presidents express such concern. Teachers are somewhat pessimistic, with 55 percent saying we are on the wrong track and 45 percent saying we are headed in the right direction.

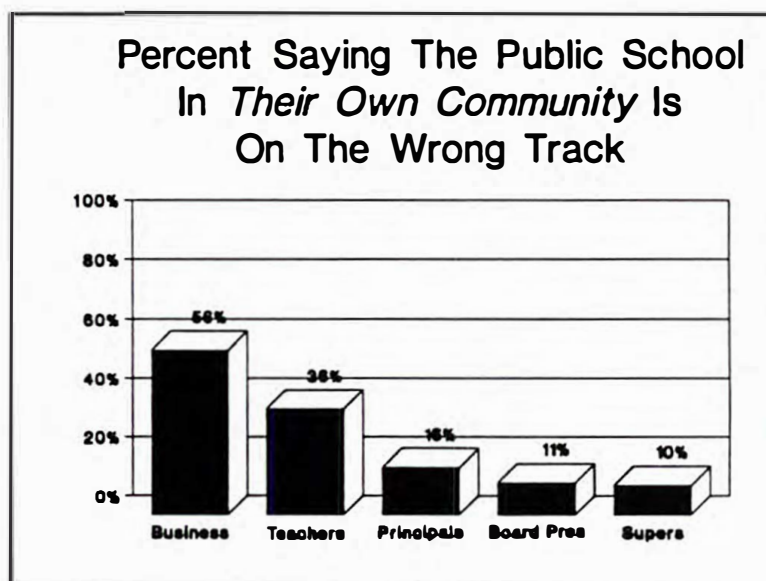


Observation

The increasingly active approach business has been taking toward education seems to reflect the widely-held view among executives that the schools are failing. By contrast, the substantial proportions — and even majorities — of educators who think the schools are moving in the right direction is surprising, given the extensive criticisms leveled at the nation's school system in recent years.

Finding

Educators express even less concern about the direction *their own communities'* schools are headed. Only minimal percentages of administrators (10 percent of superintendents, 16 percent of principals) and school board presidents (11 percent) think their own schools are on the wrong track. Overwhelming majorities (90 percent of superintendents, 89 percent of school board presidents and 84 percent of principals) say their own communities' schools are headed in the right direction. Teachers are



optimistic as well, but to a lesser degree (64 percent said their schools were headed in the right direction, 36 percent thought in the wrong direction). However, a *majority* of business executives (56 percent) say *their own communities'* schools are headed in the wrong direction. This despite the fact that

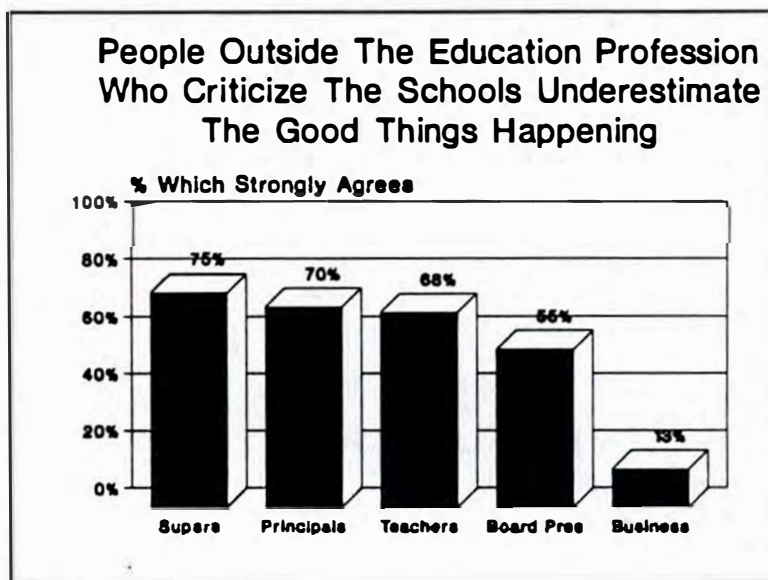
with annual salaries typically exceeding \$100,000, they probably live in affluent communities whose public schools reflect a better tax base.

Observation

These fundamentally disparate evaluations may be borne of the different experiences the groups have with the schools. Only a minority of business executives (27 percent) have children under 18 years old. Their evaluations are probably based on reactions to the quality of their work force. In any case, the level of their dissatisfaction seems to reflect a profound rejection of the status quo. On the other hand, the optimism educators display toward their own communities' schools may reflect different criteria they use to evaluate school performance. They may be comparing their schools to "horror story" schools they hear about. They might also be reluctant to confront the uncomfortable notion that the nation's education problems may be found in their own backyard. Other studies often show that people think more highly of their own doctors or congressmen than they do of doctors or congressmen in general.

Finding

Overwhelming majorities of educators *strongly agreed* with the statement, "People outside the education profession who criticize the schools often underestimate the good things that are happening in schools today." But business executives were less convinced. Sixty-eight percent of teachers, 70 percent of principals and 75 percent of superintendents *strongly agreed*; by contrast, only 13 percent of executives strongly agreed with the statement (an additional 59 percent said they somewhat agreed with the statement).



Observation

The considerable majorities of educators who strongly agreed with the statement indicates they hold this opinion intensely. Educators may be feeling somewhat besieged, believing that the progress they achieve goes unappreciated by critics with little real experience in the schools.

In Sum

Support for changing the nation's education system may be predicated upon the belief that the system is off on the wrong track. If this is true, these findings indicate that a substantial barrier to reform may exist among the many educators who think the system is headed in the right direction. Furthermore, simply criticizing the performance of the schools may not be enough to bring educators to support reform, if they perceive that such criticism is coming from outsiders who tend to focus on bad news.

II. Defining Expectations and Evaluating the Performance of Our Nation's Public Schools

Finding

There was strong consensus among respondents — business executives, educators and board presidents — that no child should graduate from public schools without certain essentials. In each group surveyed, about 80 percent — and often over 90 percent — thought it was *essential* for the schools to teach students to:

- believe in the fundamental values of our society (e.g. democracy)
- have sound work habits
- speak and write grammatically correct English
- work cooperatively with others
- have self-esteem and self-confidence
- have a basic understanding of science and math
- be flexible learners who can learn new skills and concepts

Clearly, educators and business executives expect our nation's schools to accomplish a lot (of the 17 possible goals, seven were rated to be essential by 80 percent or more in each group). Many of the goals respondents deemed essential for schools to pursue go beyond "traditional" goals (such as verbal, writing, science and math skills) and concern students' personality development and social skills. (See Table 1.)

And although educators often complain that society expects schools to accomplish too much, they *add* two essential missions to the above list of expectations: understanding human sexuality and acquiring basic life skills (health, nutrition etc.). About 85 percent of educators (compared to 63 percent of business executives) said it was essential for schools to teach human sexuality. Almost 90 percent of educators (compared to 66 percent of business executives) thought it essential for students to acquire basic life skills in school.

It is also interesting to note some of the goals which were *not* seen as essential. Only about one-third of each group thought it was essential for schools to prepare students for college. Between 40 and 60 percent thought it was essential for schools to teach computer literacy, to understand the contributions made by other cultures, and to understand the Western cultural tradition. Fifteen percent or less thought it was essential for the schools to teach students a foreign language.

Table 1
Defining Expectations of Our Public Schools

"People sometimes expect the nation's public schools to teach students different things. Please indicate whether in your opinion each of the following should be considered essential, something no child should graduate without; important for some children but not for every single child; or less important, a much lower priority."

Essential for the nation's schools to teach:

	Teachers	Principals	Supers	School Brd Presidents	Business Execs
	%	%	%	%	%
To believe in the fundamental values of our society such as freedom, democracy and tolerance	92	99	98	92	94
To develop sound work habits such as self-discipline, timeliness, and dedication to work	95	96	97	89	95
To know how to work cooperatively with others	95	98	95	89	89
To have self-esteem and self-confidence	96	96	93	95	84
To write and speak grammatically correct English	87	85	87	91	97
To be flexible learners who can learn new skills and concepts	80	89	89	80	78
To have a basic understanding of science and math	79	83	84	85	82
To acquire basic life skills such as taking care of one's own health, nutrition, child care, etc.	88	90	87	77	66
To have a basic understanding of human sexuality, reproduction, birth control, and sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS	86	87	84	72	63

Finding

In a striking indication of the intensity of their dissatisfaction, majorities of executives thought the nation's schools were doing a *poor* job of achieving three of the seven essential goals listed above, and only a *fair* job on the four remaining essential goals (Table 2). An astounding 66 percent thought the schools were doing a poor job on teaching science and math, 62 percent thought the schools were doing a poor job of giving students sound work habits, and 56 percent thought they were doing a poor job teaching English. By comparison, only 9 percent of principals, 10 percent of superintendents, and 14 percent of teachers, said the schools were doing a poor job teaching English; only 9 percent of superintendents and 15 percent of teachers and principals said the schools were doing a poor job teaching science and math; and only 27 percent of superintendents, 29 percent of principals, and 36 percent of teachers said the schools were doing a poor job teaching sound work habits. In addition, a substantial minority of executives — 43 percent — thought the schools were doing a poor job of creating flexible learners (compared to only 16 percent or less of educators and school board presidents).

To be sure, educators and school board presidents are not enthusiastic about the performance of the nation's schools either — only small percentages rate their performance as good or excellent on any of the essential goals. For educators, the more common rating in evaluating school performance is "fair." In fact, of the 17 education goals respondents were asked to rate, only one — teaching students the Western cultural tradition — was rated as good or excellent by a majority of each group.

These findings are supported by a Harris survey of employers conducted in September of 1991: on 15 attributes, employers' average positive (good or excellent) rating of public school graduates was not better than 30 percent, while the average negative (fair or poor) rating was 66 percent.

Observation

To a certain extent, the groups stand on common ground. There is substantial consensus between executives, educators and school board presidents over what goals the schools should try to accomplish. But the magnitude of executives' discontent with the performance of the schools is profound. In observing the differences between executives and educators, it may be tempting to say, "executives are overreacting" or "educators are denying the problem." But the two groups may be evaluating school performance by different standards. Executives may be looking at their workforce requirements and the pressures of international competition. Educators may be thinking of the difficulties and limitations which constrain what they can accomplish.

Table 2
Evaluating the Job Done By The Nation's Public Schools

"We would like to know how good a job you feel the nation's public school system is doing in teaching high school graduates different things. For each area below, please tell us whether you feel the nation's public schools are doing an excellent, good, only fair or poor job."

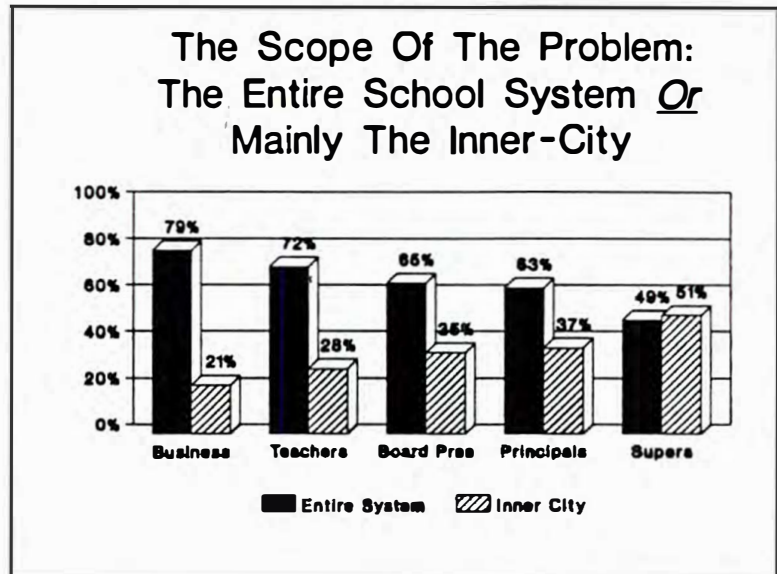
Percent Fair/Poor Job on Essential Goals:

	Teachers		Principals		Supers		School Brd Presidents		Business Execs	
	Fair %	Poor %	Fair %	Poor %	Fair %	Poor %	Fair %	Poor %	Fair %	Poor %
To believe in the fundamental values of our society such as freedom, democracy and tolerance	38	9	36	9	35	6	49	11	62	13
To develop sound work habits such as self-discipline, timeliness, and dedication to work	48	36	51	29	49	27	43	40	36	62
To know how to work cooperatively with others	54	17	58	16	50	18	58	20	64	27
To have self-esteem and self-confidence	51	17	47	15	53	9	43	25	60	31
To write and speak grammatically correct English	57	14	50	9	51	10	58	23	40	56
To be flexible learners who can learn new skills and concepts	52	16	54	11	51	14	68	11	52	43
To have a basic understanding of science and math	47	15	53	15	48	9	43	29	26	66
To acquire basic life skills such as taking care of one's own health, nutrition, child care, etc.	45	11	39	12	40	8	46	14	54	24
To have a basic understanding of human sexuality, reproduction, birth control, and sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS	37	24	40	19	44	15	43	15	59	21

Finding

Business executives are highly likely to see the nation's school problems as pervasive rather than limited to the inner-city, while superintendents are divided. When asked, "Do you think our serious problems mainly involve inner city schools or do they involve our entire school system, including suburban schools?" fully 79 percent of business executives said our nation's serious problems involved the entire school system, and only 21 percent thought they mainly involved inner city schools.

Superintendents were most likely to see the problem as isolated, with 51 percent pointing to inner city schools as the problem and 49 percent saying the entire school system was involved. Teachers shared with business executives the perception of general malaise (72 percent said the entire schools system suffered). Principals and school board presidents also saw the problem as national in scope, but to a significantly lesser extent (63 and 65 percent, respectively) than executives or teachers.



Observation

Defining the scope of the problem may be a crucial determinant of the extent of change one would support. If the nation's education troubles are confined to the inner-cities (as at least half of superintendents believe), this implies that schools serving poor and socially distressed communities are the problem. If the problems are pervasive (as majorities of executives and teachers indicate), then the schools are not meeting the needs of middle-class, "average" communities across the nation. Under the first perspective, limited, targeted change is in order; under the second, far-reaching, fundamental change is necessary. (In fact, educators who think that the nation's school problems are limited to the inner-cities are more likely to say that money is the solution. Educators who think the problems pervade the entire system say the schools should be reorganized before any more money is spent.)

III. Diagnosing the Problem

Finding

A. Why Don't Our Students Do As Well As Students From Other Industrialized Nations?

When asked why American students fare so poorly on standardized tests when compared to students from other industrialized democracies such as Germany and Japan, one explanation all groups emphasized was that "parents in other countries take more interest and responsibility for their children's education." Eighty-three percent of teachers, 74 percent of principals, 71 percent of school board presidents, 71 percent of superintendents, and 63 percent of business executives, say this is a very important explanation. (See Table 3.)

Educators — especially superintendents — tend to explain Americans' educational underachievement as resulting from "trying to educate everyone while other countries channel weaker students into vocational programs," while business executives are hardly convinced by this explanation. Sixty-six percent of principals, 67 percent of teachers, and 74 percent of superintendents say this is a very important reason we are not doing as well as other nations. By contrast, only 19 percent of executives say this is a very important explanation.

Educators are also much more likely than business executives to say that higher spending on education by other nations explains the disparate achievement. While 45 percent of teachers and 43 percent of school board presidents say higher per capita spending is a very important reason students from other industrialized nations out-do American students, only 13 percent of executives think this is a very important reason.

Educators — more than business executives or school board presidents — identify the failure to provide self-discipline and respect for authority in the home as inhibiting the success of American students. Sixty-six percent of teachers, 58 percent of principals, and 56 percent of superintendents say this is a very important explanation. Only 44 percent of school board presidents and 43 percent of business executives say this is a very important explanation for the under-performance of U.S. students.

Similar proportions of teachers and school board presidents feel that "in other countries, the entire community is involved in education whereas that is seldom true in the U.S." (54 and 56 percent, respectively). Only 38 percent of business executives, 40 percent of superintendents, and 45 percent of principals think this is a very important explanation.

Interestingly, superintendents are more likely than any other group to identify the U.S. population's diversity as a cause of the disparity in performance (40 percent cited it as a very important explanation). Business executives were the least likely to rely on this explanation (only 16 percent said it was very important).

Only small proportions of any group resorted to explanations critical of other societies' education efforts: in each group, 19 percent or less said that other nations' students were terrorized into learning; only 25 percent or less said other countries turn out workers for industry while we concentrate on developing citizens; and only 26 percent or less said other countries stressed rote learning and memorization. Interestingly, only 26 percent or less cited America's social ills (such as poverty, drugs, and crime).

Generally, business executives downplay explanations for why American students fare so poorly on standardized tests. In eight of the 12 items offered as explanations, executives were the least likely of any of the groups surveyed to say they were very important.

Although substantial proportions in each group thought a very important explanation was that "in other countries, the entire community is involved in education whereas that is seldom true in the U.S.," this was not an intensely held view. A 54 percent majority of teachers and a 56 percent majority of school board presidents said community involvement was a very important explanation; only 38 to 45 percent of executives, superintendents, and principals held the same opinion.

Observation

While all groups thought parents' involvement in their children's education explained disparate achievement, there was only lukewarm support for the view that the *entire community's* involvement contributed to those differences. This could mean respondents thought that in general American communities were sufficiently involved in the schools or that respondents simply did not consider this to be a prime factor determining educational success. Either way, viewing the school as an institution isolated from community involvement seems to be pervasive.

Table 3
Why U.S. Students Are Not Doing Well Compared To Other Countries

"U.S. students do not do well on standardized tests compared to students in other industrialized democracies such as Germany and Japan. Which of the following do you feel are the most important explanations for this result?"

	Very Important				
	Teachers	Principals	Supers	School Brd Presidents	Bus. Execs
	%	%	%	%	%
Parents in other countries take more interest and responsibility for their children's education	83	74	71	71	63
In the U.S. we try to educate everyone while other countries channel weaker students into vocational programs	67	66	74	46	19
Other countries simply place a higher value on education than we do in the U.S.	65	52	49	57	65
U.S. schools are so busy trying to make up for things that kids don't get at home (such as self-discipline and respect for authority) that they don't have enough time to teach	66	58	56	44	43
In other countries, the entire community is involved in education whereas that is seldom true in the U.S.	54	45	40	56	38
Other countries spend more on education per capita	45	33	27	43	13
Other countries have a much smaller percentage of single parents and working mothers	37	32	40	21	22
Other countries have homogenous populations while the U.S. has a diverse population	26	32	40	28	16
Other countries do not have the problems we have with poverty, drugs, teenage pregnancy and crime	26	18	29	17	22
Other countries stress rote learning and memorization, while U.S. schools try to treat each child as an individual	26	24	17	22	6
Other countries use schools to turn out workers for industry while we concentrate on things that don't show up on standardized tests such as citizenship, tolerance and respect for diversity	25	18	23	10	8
Other countries pressure their students so much that students are terrorized into learning	19	16	12	8	2

Finding

B. What Are The Most Important Problems Facing the Public Schools?

There were substantial disagreements among the groups surveyed in assessing the importance of the problems public schools face. For example, the issue most troubling to each group of educators is that the schools are overburdened with societal problems (about 3 in 4 teachers, principals, and superintendents say this is very serious problem). Business executives are not as convinced, with only 49 percent saying schools are overburdened with societal problems. (See Table 4.)

The number one concern for business executives is that the schools have much needless waste in administration and bureaucracy. Sixty-six percent of executives said this is a very important problem (60 percent of teachers agreed as well). Not surprisingly, administrators did not share this diagnosis — only 20 percent of superintendents and 28 percent of principals said there was waste in administration and bureaucracy.

Interestingly, teachers were willing to criticize the quality of members of their profession. Fifty-seven percent of teachers — a percentage higher than any other group surveyed — said a very serious problem schools face is that teaching does not attract the best college graduates. Substantial proportions of other educators — 49 percent of superintendents and 43 percent of principals — said this was a very serious problem as well. This was also the third most important problem identified by executives, with 53 percent saying teaching does not attract the best college graduates.

Teachers are much more concerned about class overcrowding and low teacher salaries than their supervisors (principals and superintendents) while board presidents and business executives are hardly concerned. Sixty-five percent of teachers say class overcrowding is a very serious problem, compared with 32 percent of principals and about 20 percent of superintendents, school board presidents and business executives. And while a 52 percent majority of teachers say a very serious problem is low salaries for teachers, only small minorities — 35 percent of principals, 28 percent of superintendents, 14 percent of business executives and 8 percent of board presidents — agreed.

Business executives are much less concerned with revenue disparities across districts than educators. Only 28 percent of executives said inequalities in revenue from school district to school district was a very serious problem, while 56 percent of superintendents, 55 percent of board presidents, 47 percent of teachers and 45 percent of principals thought this was a very serious problem.

There was modest support for the notion that “the community as a whole is not involved in education.” Although between 44 and 57 percent of each group felt this was a very serious problem, of the nine problems it was ranked third by business executives, school board presidents and principals, fourth by superintendents, and fifth by teachers.

Observation

Teachers see many critical problems confronting the nation’s public schools: a majority of teachers indicated seven of the nine problems offered in the survey were very serious. At the other extreme, only one of the nine problems offered in the survey was seen as very serious by a majority of principals. A majority of business executives thought four of the nine items were very serious problems.

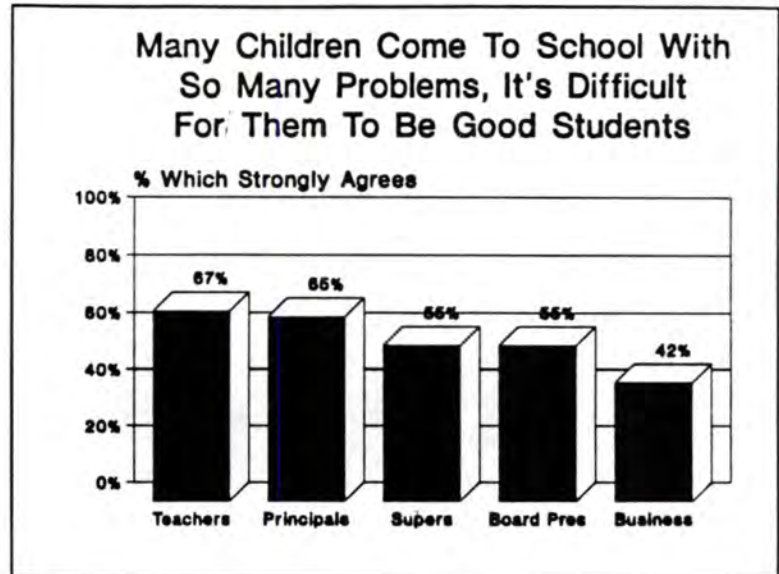
Table 4
The Most Important Problems Facing the Public Schools

"Our nation's public schools face a variety of problems. Please indicate whether you feel each of the following is a very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious or not a problem at all:"

	Very Serious				
	Teachers	Principals	Supers	School Brd Presidents	Business Execs
	%	%	%	%	%
The schools are overburdened with societal problems	74	76	71	58	49
Teaching does not attract the best college graduates	57	43	49	39	53
The community as a whole is not involved in education	57	44	46	47	53
There are inequalities in revenue from school district to school district	47	45	56	55	28
There is much needless waste in administration, paperwork and bureaucracy	60	28	20	38	66
Parents of school children are not supportive of learning	58	35	38	33	44
There is far too much crime and drugs in the schools	45	31	31	46	54
Classes are overcrowded	65	32	20	20	22
Teacher's salaries are too low	52	35	28	8	14

Finding

The closer respondents are to teaching's front line, the more disturbed they are by the problems today's students bring with them to school. Fully 67 percent of teachers, and a comparable 65 percent of principals, strongly agreed with the statement that many children come to school with so many problems that it's very difficult for them to be good students. By contrast, only 42 percent of executives strongly agreed with this statement. (55 percent of both superintendents and school board presidents strongly agreed).



IV. Attitudes Toward Reform

Finding

Business executives are least likely to fear the negative consequences of reform while teachers and superintendents are most likely to fear them. Only 53 percent of business executives agreed with the statement, "reforms often have unanticipated consequences that people outside of education underestimate," while 82 percent of teachers and 80 percent of superintendents agreed.

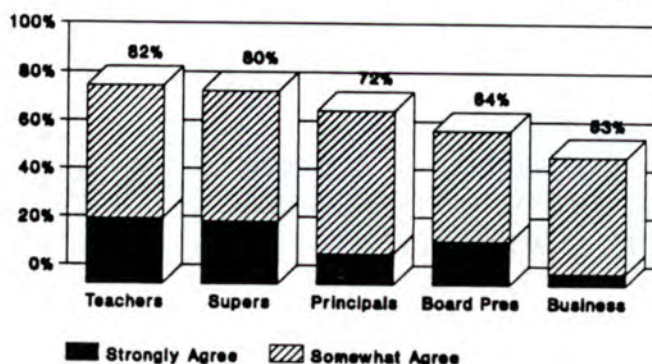
Observation

Educators may suspect that reforms will bring unintended harm. In a 1989 Metropolitan Life survey, 43 percent of teachers reported that education reforms in their schools had a positive impact on teachers, but 29 percent reported reforms had a negative impact (an additional 27 percent said they did not have much effect). The wariness with which they will approach proposed reforms indicates underlying concern and resistance which need to be acknowledged.

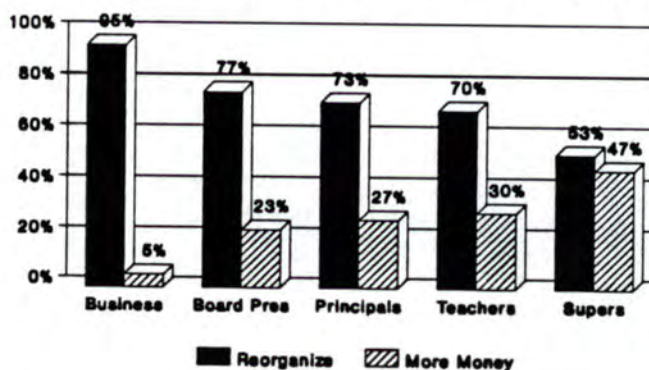
Finding

Survey respondents across all groups rejected spending more money on the nation's schools unless the schools were reorganized. Business executives are the strongest supporters of this view, with an astounding 95 percent saying that "unless our nation's public schools are substantially reorganized, spending more money would be a waste of valuable resources." By stark contrast, only 53 percent of superintendents agreed, while 47 percent said, "more money would solve most of the problems our nation's public schools face."

Reforms Often Have Unanticipated Negative Consequences That People Outside Of Education Underestimate



More Money Would Solve The Problems Schools Face OR Unless Schools Are Reorganized, Money Would Be Wasted



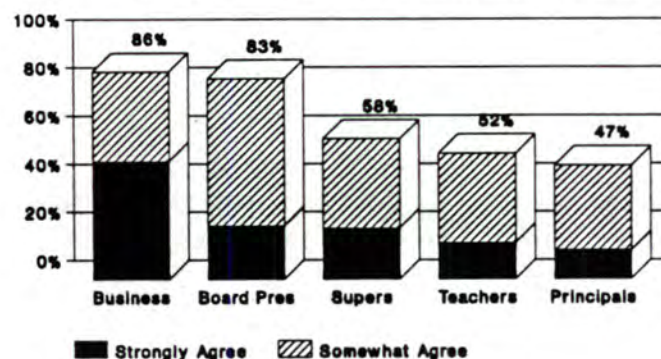
Observation

Except for superintendents, educators, business executives and school board presidents agree that before any more money is invested in the schools reorganization is necessary. The support for reorganization — despite the wariness of reform shown above — indicates substantial acceptance of the need for fundamental changes in our schools. It is also interesting to note that executives once again reject the idea that money is a root cause of the problems in America's public education system. (Recall that business executives were the least likely to think that inequalities in revenues across districts were a very important problem, and also the least likely to cite higher per capita spending by other countries as a very important explanation for the better performance of their students.)

Finding

Almost half (49 percent) of business executives *strongly agreed* with the statement that, "usually, educational reforms are resisted by unions and administrators who like keeping things the way they are" (an additional 37 percent somewhat agreed). Educators were much less likely to *strongly agree* with this view — only 15 to 22 percent of educators strongly agreed with the statement. Combining strongly agreed and somewhat agreed responses, however, small majorities or near majorities of educators agreed with the statement: 58 percent of superintendents, 52 percent of teachers, and 47 percent of principals strongly or somewhat agreed that reforms will be resisted by unions and administrators. Eighty-three percent of school board presidents agreed as well.

Educational Reforms Are Resisted By Unions And Administrators Who Like Keeping Things The Way They Are



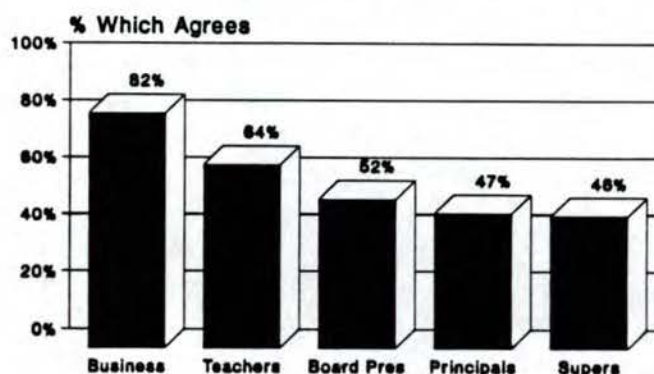
Observation

This level of agreement, equivocal though it might be, is surprising given the statement is explicitly critical of administrators (principals and superintendents) and unions (to which almost all teachers belong). That so many educators think there is institutional and professional resistance to reform in their ranks indicates that this resistance probably exists. Their willingness to acknowledge such resistance may be the first step in trying to overcome it.

Finding

Business executives are overwhelmingly in favor of national performance standards for all schools — fully 82 percent favor them, while only 18 percent are opposed. Interestingly, a strong majority of teachers join executives in supporting such standards (64 percent favor common standards, while 36 percent are opposed). Administrators are divided, with slight majorities of principals and superintendents (53 and 54 percent respectively) rejecting national standards for the schools. Only 52 percent of school board presidents support national standards.

The Country Needs Common National Standards That All Schools Should Be Expected To Live Up To



Observation

Employers who were asked the same question in a Harris 1991 survey responded in a virtually identical manner as the business executives in this study, with 81 percent saying the country needed common national standards of performance. Significantly, the same study showed that 82 percent of the public and 87 percent of parents also thought the country needed common national standards.

V. Parental and Business Involvement in the Schools

Finding

Overall, business executives are much more interested than educators in expanding the role of parents and others in the community in the schools — especially in the allocation of school funds, selection of administrators and curriculum. Educators seem to be only minimally interested in increasing the role of parents and the community in substantive policy issues. While 56 percent of executives want parents and other members of the community to have more say over the allocation of school funds, only 10 percent of superintendents, 14 percent of principals, 20 percent of board presidents and 26 percent of teachers want to increase their say. Similarly, while 48 percent of business executives favor increasing the amount of say parents and others in the community have over the selection and hiring of administrators, only 11 percent of superintendents, 15 percent of principals, 17 percent of board presidents and 28 percent of teachers want to increase parental say in this area. And while 48 percent of executives favor increasing parental say over the curriculum, only 17 percent of teachers, 25 percent of superintendents, and 27 percent of principals are so inclined. Board presidents are more supportive here, with 38 percent favoring an increase in parental say over the curriculum. Finally, 40 percent of business executives would like to increase parental say over teacher and administrators' salaries, while 17 percent or less of educators are similarly inclined. (See Table 5.)

A 1989 Gallup survey shows that the public's position on parental involvement is closest to that of business executives. Fifty-nine percent of the public (compared to 56 percent of business executives in our survey) thought parents should have more say on the allocation of school funds; 53 percent (compared to 48 percent of business executives) thought they should have more say on curriculum; and 46 percent (compared to 48 percent of business executives) thought they should have more say on the selection and hiring of administrators.

Observation

While educators decry the insufficient role parents play in their children's education — anywhere from 71 to 83 percent of educators had said other nations' children do better because their parents take more responsibility for their education — they have deep misgivings about increasing the power parents have over *specific policy areas*. Most probably, educators would like parents to better prepare their children for school, volunteer, or help raise funds and leave actual school policies to the professionals. A 1987 Metropolitan Life survey of teachers supports this: only 18 percent of teachers said it would be "very valuable" to place parents on the school's curriculum committee; and only 26 percent said it would be "very valuable" to involve parents on a school management team. By contrast, 63 percent said it would be "very valuable" to involve parents in fundraising, and 68 percent thought they should volunteer to help out at the school. The wariness of educators may also reflect bad experiences they have had with special interests.

Table 5
Role of Parents and Members of Community

"Do you feel that parents of public school students and other members of the community should have more say, less say, or do they have about the right amount of say regarding the following areas in public schools?"

	More Say					
	Teachers	Principals	Supers	School Brd Presidents	Business Execs	*Public
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Allocation of school funds	26	14	10	20	56	59
Curriculum	17	27	25	38	48	53
Selection and hiring of administrators	28	15	11	17	48	46
Teacher and administrator salaries	17	10	10	13	40	39
Books and instructional materials	16	10	12	20	19	43
Selection and hiring of teachers	12	8	8	14	27	41
Books placed in the school libraries	13	10	9	23	13	38

*Data on the public are from the 1989 Gallup survey. The question wording varied slightly.

Finding

Overall, business executives were more critical of the performance of the nation's schools, saw the problems with schools as pervasive, and were markedly more supportive of reforms than educators. But when asked what kind of say corporate leaders should have "in defining the skills, knowledge, and competencies that all students should acquire in the public schools" only 29 percent of business executives wanted to have a major say (59 percent wanted some say and 12 percent little say). Even smaller percentages of superintendents, principals, school board presidents and teachers wanted corporate executives to have a major say in setting learning objectives for students. (See Table 6.)

Observation

Business executives are more willing than educators to give corporate leaders a major say in setting student standards, but *most* are clearly not eager to take major responsibility for this important aspect of education policy. Nevertheless, a majority of each group legitimizes business involvement in public schooling by saying that corporate leaders should have at least some say over student standards. It is the specifics of that involvement that are being defined across many communities today.

Table 6
Role of Corporate Leaders in Our Public Schools

"Do you believe that corporate leaders should have major, say, some say or little say in defining the skills, knowledge and competencies that all students should acquire in the public schools?"

	Teachers	Principals	Supers	School Brd Presidents	Business Execs
	%	%	%	%	%
Major say	14	7	6	13	29
Some say	70	78	74	69	59
Little say	16	15	20	19	12

VI. Motivating Children to Learn

Finding

In choosing between two approaches to motivate children in school, educators are more likely than business executives to favor a "softer" approach — rewarding children when they make good effort — while business executives are more likely to favor a "harder" approach — setting common goals and measuring progress. Majorities of educators, school board presidents, and business executives favor rewarding good effort. But while 71 percent or more of school board presidents, principals, and teachers favor this approach, only 54 percent of business executives do so — 46 percent favor setting common goals and measuring progress as the best way of motivating children.

Table 7
How Do We Motivate Kids:
Set Common Goals or Reward Good Effort

"People have different views on how to best motivate children in school. One approach suggests that setting common goals for all children and measuring the progress they've made is the best way to motivate them. Another approach suggests that recognizing and rewarding children when they make a good effort is the best way to motivate them. Which comes closer to your view?"

	Teachers	Principals	Supers	School Brd Presidents	Business Execs
	%	%	%	%	%
Setting common goals and measuring progress is the best way to motivate children	29	29	36	21	46
Recognizing and rewarding good effort is the best way to motivate children	71	71	64	79	54

Methodology

This report is based on 803 responses to mail surveys conducted between January 13 and March 31, 1992 by the Public Agenda Foundation and sponsored by the Kettering Foundation. The following groups were surveyed using systematic random sampling: in the public school system, K-12 teachers, principals, district school superintendents, and district school board presidents; in the private sector, corporate executives. The percentages reported throughout the study exclude "not sure" and missing responses.

Educators and school board presidents were randomly selected from alphabetized, updated lists of names provided by Market Data Retrieval of Shelton, Connecticut. The business executives were randomly drawn from two lists. Three hundred business executives interested in education issues were drawn from a list compiled in-house by Public Agenda. Five hundred additional executives were drawn from a 2,000 name list of CEOs and Directors of Human Resources of Fortune 500 Industrial and Fortune 500 Service companies. This second list was purchased from Research Projects Corporation in Woodbury, Connecticut. (An analysis comparing the responses of the two samples of business executives showed no significant differences between the two.)

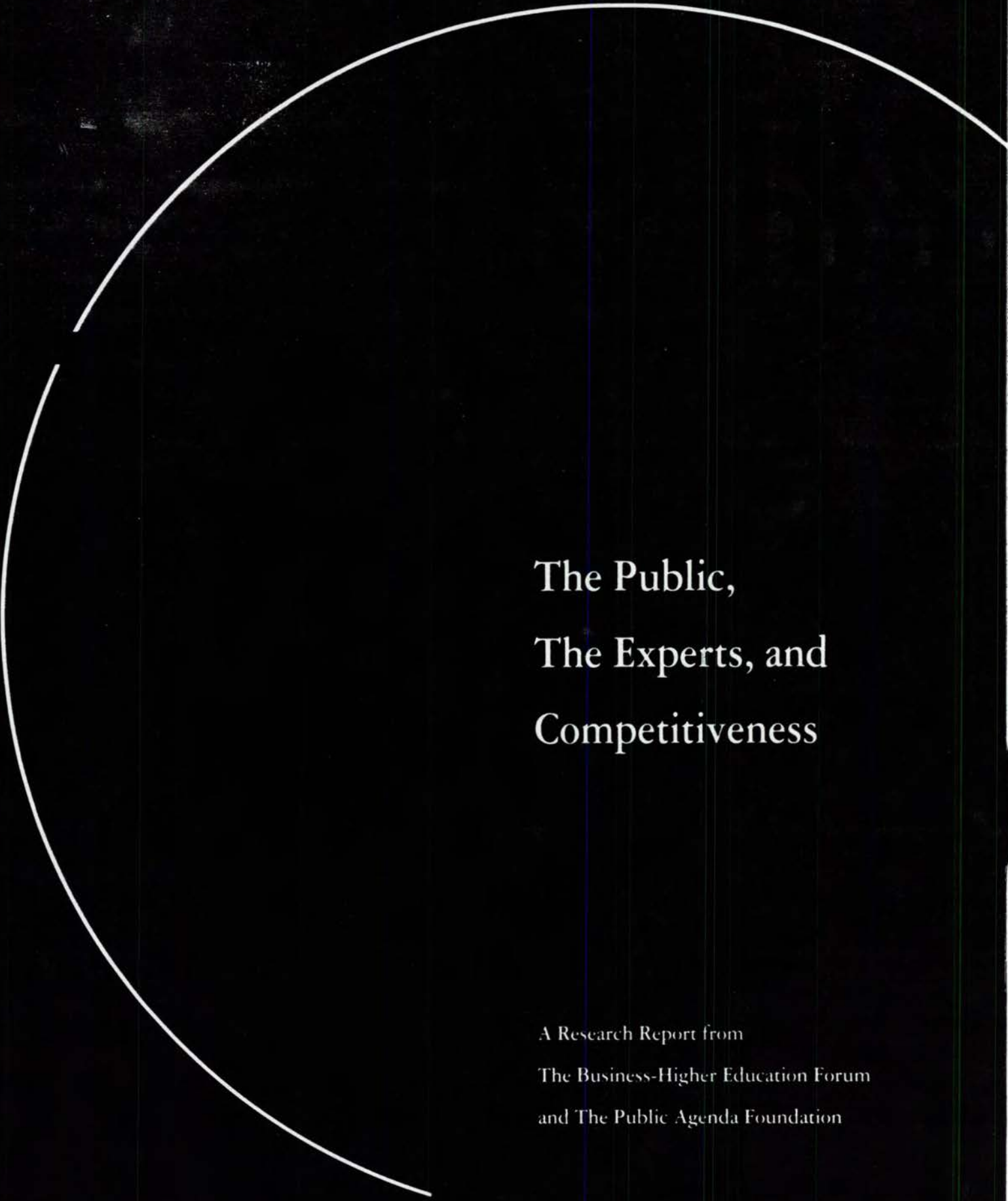
Every "nth" name was drawn from the above lists to achieve the sample sizes requested (about 500 teachers, 500 school board presidents, 250 superintendents, 250 principals, and 800 business executives). The survey instrument was first mailed to prospective respondents on January 13. A reminder postcard was then mailed on February 5, and an additional, identical questionnaire was mailed to nonrespondents on February 21.

The surveys' response rates and margins of error are as follows:

	Sample Drawn	Responses Returned	Response Rate %	Sampling Error ¹ %
Superintendents	250	184	74	± 7
Principals	250	128	51	± 9
Teachers	491	242	49	± 6
Public Agenda business sample	300	70	23	± 8 ²
Fortune 500 sample	500	88	18	
School Board Presidents	500	66	13	± 12
Other	n/a	25	n/a	n/a
TOTAL:	2,291	803	35	

¹ The calculation of the surveys' margins of error is based on actual responses.

² Sampling error is for the two business samples combined.



The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness

A Research Report from
The Business-Higher Education Forum
and The Public Agenda Foundation

CROSS TALK:

The Public,
The Experts, and
Competitiveness

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John Immerwahr

Jean Johnson

Adam Kernan-Schloss

February 1991



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Crosstalk is the result of an effort to follow up on recommendations of *American Potential: The Human Dimension*, the Business-Higher Education Forum's 1988 report that aimed to build consensus on efforts to reform America's education and training system. Funding for the American Potential project has been provided by Forum members, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Business Roundtable, International Business Machines Corporation, and the Union Carbide Corporation.

PREFACE

For the past decade, leaders in business, government, education, and labor have been concerned about the skills of the American work force and the quality of education provided by the nation's public schools. For leaders, these interrelated problems pose a significant threat to the U.S. economy, and by doing so, threaten the aspirations and livelihoods of millions of American citizens.

Finding solutions presents the United States with major social, political, and economic challenges in a variety of arenas. Among leadership, there is a consensus that the nation must:

- reduce its burgeoning rates of illiteracy;
- dramatically increase the number of young Americans successfully completing school;
- offer education that is truly competitive with that provided by other advanced industrial democracies;
- increase the number of young Americans trained in the scientific and technological skills needed for the 21st century; and
- rapidly expand the training and retraining available to the American work force.

While the public does not reject these goals for America, the public opinion research on which this report is based suggests that there are important and troublesome differences between the way leaders and the general public view the issues of education and training in America. The research shows that the preoccupations of the public and leadership are not the same, and that to date, little communication has occurred between them. The following pages describe the public's thinking and indicate the public's conditions for taking leadership recommendations seriously.

Crosstalk offers some thoughts on how to close the gap between leaders and the public so that they will no longer be talking at cross purposes with one another. As such, we believe that it is important reading for all of us concerned about the country's economic future and charged with finding real and workable solutions to the challenges facing us.



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INTRODUCTION

FOR ALMOST 10 YEARS, the issue of America's declining economic competitiveness has been high on the agenda of policymakers and leadership groups. Of particular concern has been the human resources dimension of the challenge: the knowledge and skills of American students and workers.

In that time, more than 300 reports have been published, dealing with various aspects of the education and training crisis in our schools and workplaces. Thousands of specific recommendations have been advanced. Countless seminars and Congressional hearings have been held. Many communities have chosen to address various pieces of the problem — better textbooks for some, more adult literacy courses for others, higher standards and teacher pay elsewhere, a focus on helping kids learn science, and so on.

Despite these well-meaning efforts, not much has changed. Despite pockets of excellence, too few American students are graduating from high school with the skills they will need to succeed on the job. And too many American adults are unable to take advantage of the ongoing training they will need to learn the new skills demanded for the 21st century.

Given all the discussion, given the multitude of reports, given all the speeches and leadership pronouncements, why has so little progress been made? This research report offers some answers — and suggests some next steps for bringing the debate about competitiveness, education, and training, from conference centers and boardrooms into the living rooms of American citizens.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

For the past two years, the Public Agenda Foundation, at the request of the Business-Higher Education Forum, has been conducting public opinion research to determine why Americans have been so reluctant to embrace the economic and education reforms recommended by leadership. Public Agenda examined survey data from the last decade — tracking Americans' changing views of the U.S. and global economy, the state of U.S. schools, the skills and values of the work force, the quality of American products, the competence and integrity of American business, labor, and higher education, and related issues.

With the Forum's support, Public Agenda also conducted more than a dozen focused group discussions in different cities around the country. These two-hour discussion sessions — led by a professional moderator according to a systematic research plan — helped disclose why people hold certain views and how they react to new information and unfamiliar arguments.

As the following chapters report, the research revealed major gaps between what the public understands about the interrelated issues of competitiveness, education, and training — and what experts and leaders think about these issues. The focus groups uncovered misconceptions and preoccupations that seem to “block” the general public from grasping the issue realistically. The sessions also suggested that some public misperceptions stem from flaws in the way leaders present these issues to the public.

Our findings from the focus groups, as with all observations from qualitative research, should be viewed as preliminary until they can be confirmed and quantified in national random sample surveys. Although these are preliminary findings, they are based on in-depth questioning of cross-sections of Americans from around the country. Throughout these research sessions, we heard similar concerns and questions and viewpoints voiced repeatedly. Because many of the observations in this study are at least partially corroborated by existing survey data, we include this information where available.

The state of mind people bring to this issue, as revealed in the focus groups, is startlingly different from that of experts and leaders. What people had to say in the focus group sessions was interesting. What people did not say was riveting.

In the next chapter, we describe what seems to be missing from public thinking. We outline the obstacles that seem to derail productive discussion, and we suggest what could be done to improve the prospects for reaching a broad and stable consensus on what to do.

A DOZEN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEADERS AND THE PUBLIC

1. Economics 101 (What Makes the Economy Tick)

The public and leadership have entirely different pictures of how the economy works and what steps will produce the economic prosperity both groups desire.

For most leaders, productivity and growth are the mainsprings of a vibrant economy. If companies and workers here can make good products at good prices that consumers here and abroad want to buy, the economy is judged to be basically healthy. Americans across the country reap the benefits of steady work and rising incomes.

For the public, a good economy is one in which everyone has a job — any kind of job. The public's prescription for reaching this economic goal is straightforward and direct — make sure people who have jobs keep them and steer anyone not working into any job available. Thus, in the public's mind, to have a healthy economy, the country should "do something" about businesses that eliminate jobs (by introducing technology or taking jobs overseas) and about individuals who don't take jobs currently available. In focus groups conducted for this project, respondents repeatedly castigated business for practices that reduced the number of jobs available for Americans (see pp. 8-9), and they criticized individuals who did not take work to support themselves. As one typical respondent put it, "Some people could find jobs — menial jobs — if they would. You see signs for help in all the fast-food places."

Numerous survey findings reflect the public's concern about jobs as the preeminent indicator of the nation's economic health. Seventy-two percent of Americans, for example, say the creation of new jobs is the most important goal for business.¹ Even during periods of relatively low unemployment, as in the late-1980s, Americans still named unemployment as one of their top six concerns.²

By contrast, economists point out that the United States could have a robust economy even if fewer people worked (as in the 1950s when most households were comfortably supported by a single wage-earner rather than a husband and wife team) and could have a sick economy even if everyone worked (as in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe).

Virtually none of the respondents spontaneously grasped the importance of the productive side of the economy — the imperative to produce good products at good prices that sell well the world over. Although this concept is so obvious to experts and leaders that it often goes without saying, it is not an instinctive part of the public's thinking. Few respondents initially saw the need to increase the country's productivity, and almost none readily connected the country's economic health to the skills and motivation of the work force.

2. So What's New?

The public does not see the trade gap — the most potent symbol of declining U.S. competitiveness — as anything new or especially alarming.

For many leaders, the dramatic shift in the U.S. balance of trade in the mid-1970s (from historic surpluses to ever-widening deficits) signaled a new and ominous problem for the economy. Though leaders disagreed about the causes and consequences of the trade gap, its very existence became a lightning rod for concern — a red flag that the U.S. economy was not performing as well as it used to or as well as the economies of other advanced industrial nations.

Superficially, the public seems to agree with leaders. Surveys reflect a wide recognition of the existence and importance of the trade gap, with 83 percent of Americans saying they are aware of the nation's trade deficit.³ But on closer inspection, this seeming agreement is only skin-deep. Although people are aware of the trade deficit, many see it as one of those chronic prob-

"Virtually none of the respondents spontaneously grasped the importance of the productive side of the economy — the imperative to produce good products at good prices that sell the world over."



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lems that have always been with us and always will be. As one focus group participant said, "The trade deficit has been going on forever, but you hear more about it now. It's more of the same old stuff . . . the natural evolution of the economy."

By this reasoning, nothing new needs to be done. Americans can continue to live with the problem — just as they have in the past. What is more, if the problem is an old one, it is probably an intractable one. Whatever we might do probably would not work. One focus group participant lamented, "We have all these problems, and I don't think they're going to go away." This fatalism is echoed in national surveys. Seventy-four percent of Americans say the problem of the trade deficit is either staying the same (27 percent) or that the country is losing ground (47 percent).⁴

3. Economic Competitiveness — The Also-Ran Issue

More immediate and concrete problems are always on the top of the public's agenda.

Most Americans express concern about the trade deficit when they are asked about it directly, but the issue tends to be an "also-ran." International crises such as that in the Persian Gulf or U.S. actions in Panama or Libya have a special urgency that propels them to the very top of the public's list of concerns. When no international crisis dominates the headlines, the public names drugs, homelessness, crime, the budget deficit, poverty, and the environment as the country's most urgent problems. Some small percentage eventually mention foreign trade or economic competitiveness.

Although there is widespread pessimism about the economy — particularly with the U.S. economy in recession — public concern tends to be diffuse. Fifty-one percent of Americans believe their financial situation is better than it was ten years ago, and 31 percent say it is about

the same.⁵ Although the real value of wages for most Americans has dropped by about 10 percent over the past ten years, only 16 percent of people perceive themselves as being worse off.⁶ Sixty-one percent of Americans do not believe that they have been personally hurt by the trade deficit.⁷ The fact that Americans' current level of comfort has been achieved by putting more people into the work force (husband and wife both having to work to provide for their children) and by borrowing billions of dollars (much of it from abroad) remains almost universally unrecognized.

Since the effects of lagging competitiveness have been masked for most Americans — and because its most serious consequences lie in the future if the current trends continue — the public places more importance on issues that seem to pose a more immediate threat to their security.



DAVID POLLACK

4. The Side-Shows

The public's attention is deflected by emotionally charged side issues — the symptoms and side-effects of the country's lagging economic competitiveness.

Even though the public is aware of declining U.S. competitiveness, that perception does not lead people to conclude that the country needs to increase its productivity or upgrade the skills of the work force. Instead, public attention is diverted by a series of emotionally-charged side issues such as foreign aid, the failure to "buy American," corporations exporting jobs overseas, cheap labor abroad, labor unions, and foreign ownership in the United States. In the focus groups, different people were drawn to different explanations for America's declining competitiveness, often advocating their own personal economic "pet peeve" as the primary reason for the country's woes. Chief among the distracting issues were these:

■ **Foreign Aid.** In virtually every focus group, at least one or two people thought that the country's trade problems were primarily caused by the United States "giving aid to other countries rather than helping our own right here." This reflects a widely held perception that the United States often helps other countries, which, in turn, are often ungrateful. Some more sophisticated respondents focused on the cost of providing military defense for two of our major competitors — Japan and Germany.

Most leaders, in contrast, see U.S. foreign aid as a relatively small expense (compared to the overall U.S. economy). And, although many leaders call for "burdensharing" with our NATO and SEATO allies, few offer it as a solution to the country's competitiveness problems.

■ **Buying American.** Another common complaint is that Americans do not support their own economy by "buying American." As one Baltimore woman put it, "A lot of people are losing their jobs because we are buying foreign things." A substantial number of respondents viewed consumer preference for Japanese products as the *cause* of our competitiveness problems rather than — as an economist might view it — a *symptom* of Japan's ability to make better products for less money. People's frustration with what they saw as the selfish short-sightedness of American consumers diverted their attention from the need to improve American-made products.

■ **Shipping Jobs Offshore.** The public is also angry at corporations that export jobs overseas. As one focus group participant complained, "[If we took] care of our own people instead of going over to some foreign country [to] get cheaper labor, then our country would be stronger, and our people would have an income."

Respondents often saw the practice of moving jobs offshore as clear evidence of corporate greed and selfishness. A Philadelphia woman said, "[U.S. companies] can do everything cheaper in foreign countries, and, you know, forget about the United States. Who cares? You know that big business is making their money, so they don't care." The economic rationale — that corporations export jobs because it is efficient to do so — was not part of respondents' reasoning.

The contrast between the attitudes of the general public and experts on exporting jobs is very sharp. Although 79 percent of the public think it is "very important" to protect American jobs, only 44 percent of experts do.⁸

■ **Cheap Foreign Labor.** The availability of cheap labor abroad is a related distraction. When asked to choose the one factor most responsible for America's trade deficit, 36 percent of Americans — a plurality — name cheap foreign labor.⁹ Focus group participants repeatedly

talked about how little foreign workers earn and how this gives foreign products an inherent cost advantage. Most participants were not aware that American wages are not as high as they once were relative to wages in high-productivity nations such as Japan and West Germany. In some industries, such as steel, the United States is already one of the lowest-cost producers in the world.

■ **Labor Unions.** For many respondents, concern about cheap labor abroad went hand-in-hand with anger at American labor unions. One in five Americans thinks labor unions are the factor most responsible for the country's trade difficulties.¹⁰ As one focus group participant explained, "We can't make it because our unions have jacked prices up so bad that we can't afford to buy what's made in this country."

The diagnosis that high wages are the cause of America's competitiveness problems leads people to an obvious and unacceptable solution — paying Americans less. Thus, in the view of many respondents, the only way to become competitive is to lower the American standard of living, which people obviously want to avoid. From this perspective, the situation appears hopeless. Not surprisingly, only 26 percent of Americans say we should cut the wages and salaries of workers and executives so that U.S. products can be sold at lower prices.¹¹

■ **Foreign Investment.** Foreign investment in the United States provides another source of distraction. Focus group participants frequently referred to highly visible foreign acquisitions, such as the purchase of Rockefeller Center by Japan's Mitsubishi Corporation, and saw these developments as very dangerous for the U.S. economy.

Here again, there are sharp differences of opinion between the public and leadership.

■ **"Different people were drawn to different explanations for America's declining competitiveness, often advocating their own personal economic 'pet peeve' as the primary reason for the country's woes."**

Seventy percent of Americans view foreign investment in the United States as a bad thing,¹² and 43 percent think it somehow takes good jobs away from American workers.¹³ Yet, only 26 percent of experts view foreign investment as a problem.¹⁴ Many leaders believe foreign investment is essential, given the size of the U.S. government debt and low rate of personal savings. For them, foreign investment provides needed capital that keeps Americans employed and helps the economy grow. They would argue, in contrast to public fears, that foreign investment creates jobs rather than eliminates them.

These issues are important and controversial. What they have in common is that they are the symptoms of America's disease of declining economic competitiveness. But for most leaders, they are not, by themselves, the cause of the country's economic problems.

For those wishing to engage the public in constructive debate on how to revitalize the U.S. economy, the point is not whether the experts or the public is right on these issues. Nor is it whether there should be policy changes to address any or all of these issues. Experts and leaders disagree among themselves about what should be done.

The point is that the public seems to believe that relieving the symptoms will cure the disease. Public anger and concern about these side issues is deflecting attention away from serious structural problems — such as the competence of the work force — that the country must address. Without a clearer understanding of what is causing our country's competitiveness problems, many Americans may assume that if these side issues are addressed — if we reduce foreign aid or bar foreign investment here — our problems will be solved. Almost no expert or leader thinks addressing these issues will, in and of itself, get the country's economy back on the move.

5. The Exceptional Japanese

Much of the public believes our competitiveness problems begin and end with Japan.

When Americans talk about competitiveness, the discussion immediately turns to Japan. By two to one, Americans feel that Japan, not the United States, is already the world's leading economic power. This is in contrast to the views of most opinion leaders (72 percent) who, while admiring Japan's remarkable economic recovery, still see the United States as the world's economic frontrunner.¹⁵ Virtually none of the participants in the focus groups mentioned competition from the Europeans or from other Far East "tigers" such as South Korea and Singapore. Public attitudes about Japan are colored by two somewhat distorted perceptions.

First, people attribute Japanese success to a strong work ethic, but believe that this success comes at too high a price. As focus group participants saw it, the American lifestyle is the envy of the world, but, as one man put it, "no one wants to move to Japan and work himself to death." Another man explained it this way, "The Japanese are doing real fine, but they're working 60 hours a week." Many participants referred to suicides by Japanese students or businessmen. Another woman said, "The [Japanese] individual is not a happy individual." This pattern of thinking leads people to conclude that the only way the United States can compete is to emulate what they see as an austere, pressured, and ultimately self-destructive way of life — hardly an attractive prospect.

Second, some significant segment of the public seems to believe that the Japanese have succeeded by "stealing" U.S. ideas and engaging in unfair trading practices. Many focus group participants knew that Japanese companies have been astonishingly successful making and marketing products invented by Americans, especially TVs and VCRs. But a number also asserted that the Japanese had somehow dishonestly stolen our right to produce these products. This belief

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MEL DIGIACOMO/THE IMAGE BANK

is troublesome because it leads people to believe that, rather than investing in new technology, we should just stop the Japanese from stealing ours. Only a few respondents were aware that the Japanese are technological leaders in a growing number of fields, from high-definition television to laptop computers.

6. The Moral Fix

When the public thinks about the problems in the work force — and the problems of students who will enter the work force of the future — they focus almost exclusively on “moral” aspects of the issue. They believe attitudes and motivation, not skills or training, are the cause of the problem — and the cure.

Americans believe that their fellow citizens are not working as hard as they used to. This perceived erosion of the traditional values that built this country extends to every level of society — from managers who can’t see beyond next quar-

ter’s profits . . . to factory workers who do just enough to get by, and, as a result, turn out shoddy products . . . to students who just put in their time, but do not learn much. Nine out of ten Americans believe that a decline in the American work ethic threatens the future of the American dream.¹⁶ When asked why American products are not always high in quality, the number-one response is that American workers do not care enough.¹⁷

More than three quarters believe that a stronger foreign work ethic is an important reason for U.S. competitiveness problems.¹⁸ As one Baltimore man put it, “America was made great by putting out a good day’s work for a good day’s wages. That’s not the attitude today. The attitude today is do nothing and get paid big for it.” Another commented, “For years, if America built a car, it was built to last. Today, it is a throwaway economy. You don’t make something good. Six months later we can throw it away and buy a new one.”

Permissiveness and lack of standards in the schools was a continual theme among focus group participants. One typical participant said, “In high school, they pass the kids no matter what. I think the schools are too easy today . . . they can just waltz themselves through school.” Others blamed the situation on a lack of values among young people. A Baltimore woman said, “They only work hard enough just to get by, and they don’t care what they’re going to do later. ‘Oh well, I’ll go on public assistance. I’ll go on welfare. I’ll do something. I don’t care.’” Others put the onus on the family. “The basic problem in America today,” one man said, “is the parents. They want the church to do this. They want the schools to do that. But let’s face it, if kids are gonna’ get educated, the parents have got to help the teachers.”

For the public, motivation, standards, values, and the work ethic are *the most important* elements to be addressed in rebuilding the American economy. By this reasoning, America has plenty

of technology and could upgrade its citizens' skills very quickly — if only so many of us were not lazy, self-centered, self-indulgent, soft, corrupt, and indifferent to quality.

But because this element of competitiveness — motivation and values — does not respond significantly to public policy or short-term action, the public's viewpoint does not lead to much progress. People are angry and frustrated, but they cannot envision practical steps to address the problem. Some seem content to wallow in the problem, rejecting ownership and responsibility for solutions.

Many leaders share the public's dismay with the national mood. But because they see no practical policies for improving Americans' *values*, policymakers tend to focus instead on programs, services, and funding to foster better *skills*. Thus, when leaders address the public about these issues, they often omit or downplay problems with motivation — and their message misses the mark. When leaders say "more" is needed — more pay for teachers, more scientists and engineers, more diverse curricula — the public tunes out. For the public, what is missing is the will to make use of what we already have. As one focus group participant said, "If you have the will, you can get the skills. The will comes before the skills."

7. The Sleeping Giant

Because the public believes the problem is a question of will and effort, they believe America can "bounce right back" — if and when it decides to.

Americans who recognize that the nation is falling behind its competitors often think in terms of the United States as a giant slumbering unawares while a squad of little interlopers makes off with the valuables (such as American inventions) and leaves us with our shoelaces tied together. If only America could wake up, it would sweep away its competitors in an instant



and regain its former economic vitality. As one focus group participant said, "America has to be pushed. When America gets pushed, America comes back." Another said, "We have the skills and technology. We can do it. There's no problem, 'cause we've already done it before."

To these Americans, the nation's victory in World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and its success in reaching the moon after the U.S.S.R.'s launch of Sputnik are proof that a dramatic comeback is possible. If the United States decides to tackle its current problems, the public believes it can achieve results virtually overnight. This is reflected in survey data, which show that half of the public endorses the statement, "We are slipping dangerously, but can still turn it around if we act decisively."¹⁹

By contrast, few, if any, leaders believe that such a quick fix is possible. Were it only a question of motivation, a fast turnaround might be



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one aspect of the work force skills problem that people do recognize and talk about — often heatedly — is the number of young people who cannot read, write, or do simple arithmetic. Many focus group participants volunteered anecdotes of restaurant waiters, retail clerks, or other entry-level employees who were shockingly deficient in even the most basic skills. Older participants repeatedly pointed out that in the past, a high school diploma indicated some reasonable degree of educational competence.

Although experts tend to stress the kinds of skills required for the 21st-century world of work — skills such as communications, problem-solving, a grasp of basic scientific and mathematical concepts, familiarity with computers, the ability to work as part of a team — much of the public seems to yearn for the little red schoolhouse of the 19th century, with its emphasis on basic skills and traditional values. Indeed, a number of focus group participants saw the use of computers or calculators in the classroom as counterproductive — a shortcut that makes things “too easy” on students.

Although focus group participants expressed outrage at the low level of basic skills among millions of Americans, they were often complacent about an issue that increasingly alarms leadership: that even above-average American students are falling below international norms. For example, the top 5 percent of American high school science students would be only average in the classrooms of our Far Eastern competitors. Many focus group participants were unaware that top American students are deficient in any way. Even when information on this problem was presented to them, some respondents downplayed the achievements of students from Europe or Asia by asserting that only the very best students stay in academic programs beyond their early teens in these foreign countries. The comments in the focus groups are

“A number of focus group participants saw the use of computers or calculators in the classroom as counterproductive — a shortcut that makes things ‘too easy’ on students.”

feasible. But leaders recognize that it will take years and a massive investment of human and financial resources to upgrade the skills of American students and workers: to make sure that the one in four children growing up in poverty starts school ready to learn, to reduce the 25 percent high school dropout rate, to help 30 million illiterate adults learn to read, to give students and workers the advanced skills they will need for high-tech workplaces.

8. Back to Basics

The public believes that basic skills are enough. They do not understand that the 21st-century work force will need new, advanced skills.

When most Americans think about job skills, what comes to mind are the basic skills *they* needed to earn a high school diploma. And the

confirmed in survey data. Although 70 percent of Americans say it is most important to make sure low-achieving students learn basic skills, only 13 percent say it is most important to challenge bright students to do outstanding work.²⁰

Thus, when it comes to school reform, the public and experts have quite different agendas. While the public generally seems willing to declare victory once every American has mastered basic reading, writing, and math, experts believe that such skills represent only the first step.

9. Only K-12 Counts

The public believes that the only change required to prepare a competitive American work force is to improve the learning that goes on in grade school, middle school, and high school.

The public is not very concerned about learning that occurs — or does not occur — in college, graduate school, or on the job. The public thinks that if kids graduate from high school with the “3 Rs,” they will get along fine as adults. As one focus group participant said, “It is the training from K-12 that counts. If we fall back, we won’t be able to keep up, and then we won’t have jobs.”

Thus, people are not very receptive to the experts’ calls for advanced skills training, premier science and technical education, life-long learning systems, and adult literacy efforts, none of which seem as necessary as good, basic K-12 education. Support for upgrading American colleges was almost nonexistent in the focus groups.

Leaders, on the other hand, express considerable concern about the state of the nation’s college and graduate school education. The need to train and retrain Americans already on the job is considered urgent. While leaders acknowledge the importance of K-12 reform, they recognize that the economic “payoff” will not come for ten to twenty years — when today’s school children are in the work force — and the nation cannot afford to wait.

The public’s preoccupation with basic skills only partly explains its lack of interest in adult education and work force training. In the focus groups, some people failed to see any connection between job training and the country’s economic well-being or competitiveness. For these individuals, job training is something some employers offer for their own reasons, and whether they do so or not is pretty much their own business. From this point of view, no public policies are needed or desired. As one Atlanta man summed it up, “Why would you retrain someone who already has a job?”

The public’s almost single-minded focus on jobs and motivation, described earlier, reinforces its resistance to work force training. The reasoning goes like this: For adults who have jobs, retraining seems superfluous. For adults without jobs, it is not a question of skills but of motivation. There seem to be plenty of menial jobs around, if only the unemployed adults had enough motivation to take them.

10. Legacy of the Great Depression

The public often resists policies for upgrading skills because they do not think there will be enough jobs for people who improve their skills.

The Great Depression and the Baby Boom, both of which put too many people in competition for too few jobs, have left some Americans leery of being *too* skilled. Visions of engineers working as plumbers and Ph.D.s driving cabs prompt these people to reject the experts’ calls for more and better training to raise the work force’s skills. To these people, more training is a waste because it would only result in more people chasing too few high-skill jobs. As one focus group participant said, “You can give people all the skills you want — the jobs aren’t there.”

As noted earlier, the public equates a good economy with low unemployment. Many Americans have an overriding fear of unemploy-

ment. For them, a shortage of jobs, not a shortage of skills, is the biggest danger the U.S. economy faces now and in the future. If people do not have jobs, they will not have money. Then they will not be able to consume enough to keep other people employed.

Virtually no one in the focus groups conducted for this project readily grasped the analysis that drives leadership concern about the economy: that the new "unemployment" will be characterized not by too few jobs, but by too many people without the skills to do the jobs that are available. Given the public's single-minded focus on full employment, leadership concern about retraining the work force seems, at best, to be slightly off the point.

11. Legacy of the Great Society

The public is ambivalent about policies to upgrade education or improve the skills of workers if they seem to require massive government spending on programs for the disadvantaged.

A growing number of experts and leaders believe that the most successful economic competitors in the 21st century will be those with the highest overall literacy and education levels — that is, nations (such as Japan, South Korea and Germany) with a strong "bottom third." This observation has significant implications for the American economy since demographic trends show that the future U.S. work force will increasingly be composed of groups with disproportionately high rates of illiteracy and educational underachievement, such as minorities and recent immigrants.



ROBERT PHILLIPS/THE IMAGE BANK

Given this diagnosis, one of the best things the United States could do for its economy would be to attack illiteracy, poverty, drug addiction, and other debilitating social problems hampering the educational prospects of America's "bottom third." That is, education and training reform should be viewed in a broader overall context that addresses the totality of human needs: adequate education, yes, but also adequate housing, health care, and child care, for example.

Many members of the general public agree in principle with some of these goals. But here again, the agreement is more superficial than it seems. Although the public supports these ideas on humanitarian grounds — and as a way to save money on welfare and other social services — Americans have not grasped the idea that individuals in the bottom third are essential economic players. Because people continue to believe that there are not enough jobs to go around even for people with skills, the idea that the nation needs to educate even more workers is not convincing to them.

Moreover, a significant portion of the public also remains cautious about spending scarce and precious tax dollars on programs that may not work — particularly programs that seem to be part of what many Americans see as a failed "welfare system." Fully 64 percent of the public say that current welfare programs perpetuate poverty rather than restrain it.²¹

In the focus groups, people tended to reject solutions that reminded them of the "Great Society" efforts of President Lyndon Johnson's years. They were cautious about "big government," higher taxes, and "throwing money at the problem." The comments of focus group participants reflect findings from a 1988 Public Agenda study on the public's views on social welfare. That study found that 66 percent of Americans feared that additional spending on welfare would result in the creation of "a huge bureaucracy of counselors, training staff, and new government employees."²²

Although there is substantial support (69 percent) for the Head Start program²³ — because people see it as both a worthy cause and a good investment — there may be skepticism when experts call for higher funding for less familiar programs, even though these also may have excellent track records.

12. Technology as a Bane, Not a Boon

The public has mixed feelings about technology. For some, technology is a problem, not a cure. Others just cannot imagine that we need more technology than we already have.

A significant portion of the population continues to see technology as a threat to full employment, and many people foresee computers and robots taking over jobs people used to do and should be doing still. For example, 63 percent of Americans believe that the expanded use of robots on the assembly line will cause increased unemployment even if retraining is done.²⁴ Because the public believes that unemployment is very bad for the economy, some people reason that technology must be bad for the economy, too. Hence, when leaders and experts call for more and better technology in the workplace, they appear, to at least some portion of the population, to be issuing threats instead of suggesting solutions.

A focus group participant from Denver said, "Everything's machines; everything's computers. What are these kids going to do in the future? You've got computers now that do the work of thousands of people, hundreds of people. Everybody has to be an engineer, but how many engineers can society accept?"

Added to the concern that technology could eliminate jobs is a fundamental lack of familiarity with the professions of science and technology. Many people were unfamiliar with

When leaders and experts call for more and better technology in the workplace, they appear, to at least some portion of the population, to be issuing threats instead of suggesting solutions."



JEFF ZARUBA: THE STOCK MARKET

what engineers and scientists actually do, and did not understand why they might play a key role in rebuilding a strongly competitive American economy. Although science and engineering are generally regarded as good professions, and engineers receive especially high marks for honesty and integrity, to the public, scientists and engineers are "them," not "us." Some see engineers and scientists as specially gifted elites or nerds who carried briefcases in high school. A small minority may even see them as dangerous Dr. Strangeloves. In 1988, for instance, 38 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "Because of their knowledge, scientific researchers have a power that makes them dangerous."²⁵

Most Americans also seem unaware of the role technology plays in creating more desirable, and thus more competitive products. When asked why American products are not always high in quality, out-of-date equipment and technology were cited least often.²⁶ Again, when asked what one thing — more than anything else — makes a product high in quality, the public mentioned innovation and having the latest technology least often.²⁷

In the focus groups, many people tended to see technology as a mixed blessing. Even discounting the jobs issue, some respondents were overwhelmed or disturbed by the broad array of technologically advanced products and services

they encounter daily. A Denver man said, "I think the explosion of technology is going to drown us. There isn't anything that was [around] ten years ago that is really useful today. Everything is wiped out. It's no good. It's out-dated. We're becoming too much of a throw-away society." For these individuals, it is hard to believe that more technology is needed. Others believed that technology is somewhat dehumanizing — changing life and mankind for the worse. Some expressed the view that increasing science and math in grade school and high school would give students a narrow, almost mechanical, outlook on life.

Even people who seemed to embrace and take pride in technological advances of many kinds often rejected the notion that the United States might be losing ground in this area. Typical of those holding this view was a man who said, "I don't think the rest of the world is ahead of us in technology, because all their technology is either derived from ours or outrightly stolen. A lot of the so-called Japanese advances in microcomputers are just taking our technology and feeding it back to us without the hang-ups and hassles of our manufacturing rules, what have you."

THE PROSPECTS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATE: OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

The misperceptions and miscommunications between experts and the public are serious, but, based on research conducted for this project, promising opportunities exist for including the public in an informed and thoughtful debate about the future of the American work force. Several broad and deeply held public attitudes are assets that will assist those who wish to extend the debate about education and training beyond the expert community.

The first asset in getting the public's attention to this problem is widespread nervousness about the state of the U.S. economy. Despite the misperceptions and half-truths that characterize the public's understanding of the issue, there is a widely held conviction, repeatedly voiced in the focus groups and confirmed in national survey data, that "something is wrong" with the U.S. economy. Although most Americans cannot articulate

the experts' crisp analysis of what is wrong, there is real fear that the country is skating on economic thin ice and that somehow, somewhere, we have lost something crucial to our success as a nation.

A second asset is the public's deep-seated commitment to education. Time and again, in survey after survey, and in study after study, Americans have endorsed the concept of universal education, universal literacy, and universal opportunity through education. Americans from all economic strata, in all areas of the country, share the belief that a good education should be available to every child and that education is the key to the American dream.

The third asset is the public's basic common sense. Americans may not spontaneously talk about the need to increase productivity, or the need to make the best products at the best price, or the need to have a skilled, educated and motivated work force, but these concepts



GABE PALMER/THE STOCK MARKET

make sense to people when they are presented. The public may not always volunteer the connection between educational excellence and economic prosperity, but once those links are spelled out, the public readily accepts them.

Finally, the public is ready to act. Unlike what so many observers have witnessed among the populations of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Americans do not believe that "the good life" is something to be delivered to them by government. Americans continue to believe that they are the makers of their own futures.

These are powerful assets when communicating with the public, and they provide a sound basis for helping Americans understand what has happened to their economy and what now needs to be done. These assets provide a solid foundation for presenting Americans with an array of choices about how to upgrade their schools and ensure that American workers have "world-class" skills and motivation. Research conducted for this project suggests that people can understand, and equally important, that they *want to understand* what needs to be done.

Most leaders and experts concerned about competitiveness believe that the problem will not be solved without greater public understanding and support for necessary policies. But leaders themselves sometimes contribute to the public's misunderstanding and seeming disinterest in the issue.

Leaders too often define the issue in the technical terms of their own special domain and, thus, either deliberately or unintentionally, keep ownership of the issue to themselves. The economist may focus on yen-dollar exchange rates. The business executive concerned about losing market share may concentrate on near-term strategy for upcoming trade negotiations. Experts on mergers and acquisitions, capital formation, commercial applications of technology, and industrial policy will discuss the issue

in terms of their own field of specialization and detailed knowledge. Most of these experts operate on a shared understanding of economic basics, and virtually none would argue that the country can maintain its standard of living if the skills and motivation of the work force are allowed to deteriorate.

But the public gets lost in this maze. What people hear are the technical details rather than the basic truths. What they remember are disagreements "around the edges" rather than the widely shared consensus among leaders that action to upgrade the skills of the work force is needed now.

Another pitfall for leaders is a tendency to ignore — or, for some, even denigrate — the public's real concerns. People care about declining values. They are concerned about unemployment, even about temporary "adjustments" in the labor force. They are worried about launching an array of new programs that do more for the employability of government bureaucrats, administrators, and evaluators than for the people the programs are supposed to help. Too often, leaders who want the public's attention violate the cardinal rule for getting people to listen to what you have to say: You must talk about what's on their minds as well as what's on yours.

In the focus groups conducted for this project, people showed a remarkable ability to listen carefully to leadership's agenda, in addition to voicing their own. The public's open-mindedness might be something some leaders would be well advised to emulate. A sincere attempt to *communicate with* the public — as opposed to *talking at* them — has genuine prospects for success as long as it is grounded in an understanding of the perceptions and misperceptions that have blocked real public involvement in the competitiveness issue.

"There is real fear that the country is skating on economic thin ice and that somehow, somewhere, we have lost something crucial to our success as a nation."

NEXT STEPS

Using the research discussed in this report as a starting point, the Business-Higher Education Forum and the Public Agenda Foundation have initiated a multi-year project to help close the gaps between public and expert understanding of these issues.

The project is called "Crisis in the Work Force: Help Wanted." Its goals are to help the public see the links among inadequate education and training, declining economic competitiveness, and a lower standard of living — and from there to discuss and make realistic choices about various options for upgrading the skills of all Americans.

To help citizens weigh the pros and cons of various options, the Forum and Public Agenda have developed citizen education materials that address public misperceptions and clearly frame policy choices in a balanced way. Materials include a newspaper supplement (with a ballot to allow the public to vote on the choices), a TV documentary film, public service announcements, newspaper advertisements, and op-ed articles.

The materials will be used during intensive, six-week campaigns involving the active participation of major local newspapers and TV/radio stations, community groups, and the members of the Forum and the Business Roundtable. The first campaigns will begin in spring 1991 in several pilot "flagship" cities across the United States, including Hartford, Indianapolis, Nashville, New Orleans, Phoenix, and Seattle.

Later in 1991 and continuing through 1992, the campaign will be offered nationwide through about 250 ABC television network affiliates, the Network for Public Debate (major newspapers and TV/radio stations in communities across the country), the National Issues Forums (a consortium of more than 1000 universities, libraries, and other local groups), the Business-Higher Education

Forum, and the Business Roundtable. The project will ultimately reach millions of Americans, and the results will be communicated to policymakers, the press, and other opinion leaders.

A major component of the joint venture will be a pre- and post-campaign survey of participants in selected cities; this evaluation will allow the partners to see which approaches are most effective in enhancing citizen understanding, which are ineffective, and why.

The citizen education campaigns will not advocate any specific policies or programs. Their co-sponsors, however, believe that once communities have had an opportunity to consider various choices presented in an intensive, comprehensive, and balanced way, they will be more receptive to the kinds of recommendations advocated by leadership groups for the past decade.

"Crisis in the Work Force: Help Wanted" will help the public see the links among inadequate education and training, declining economic competitiveness, and a lower standard of living."

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Focus groups for this project were conducted from August 1989 to December 1990 in Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Denver, Colorado; Kansas City, Kansas; Los Angeles, California; New York, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Phoenix, Arizona; Spokane, Washington; and Stamford, Connecticut.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

From the Business-Higher Education Forum:

Three Realities: Minority Life in the United States. A fresh look at the economic opportunities and obstacles facing American minorities, including recommendations for business and higher education leaders to implement in their own institutions. June 1990.

American Potential: The Human Dimension.

A sweeping re-evaluation of America's education and training challenge, which tries to build consensus for reform in three key areas: basic education and skills, worker training, and science and technology. To implement the report's recommendations, the Forum has established a five-year committee of its members. September 1988.

An Action Agenda for American Competitiveness.

Based on a series of roundtables with more than 100 Members of Congress, the 16 recommendations for improving America's ability to compete address four basic areas: research and development, human resources, international trade, and federal government organization and policies. September 1986.

America's Competitive Challenge: The Need for a National Response. A landmark report, prepared for President Reagan, that first called public attention to the slippage in U.S. economic competitiveness and the rapid gains made by foreign nations. May 1983.

From the Public Agenda Foundation:

Saving: Good or Bad? A Pilot Study on Public Attitudes Toward Saving, Investment, and Competitiveness. John Immerwahr. This research report on the public's views on personal savings and its relationship to economic competitiveness is based on focus groups conducted nationwide and a review of survey data from the last decade. 1989. 15pp.

Putting the Work Ethic to Work.

Daniel Yankelovich and John Immerwahr. This ground-breaking report on the state of the American work ethic and its relationship to America's economy is based on in-depth interviews with 845 working Americans. The study includes findings from comparable studies conducted in Great Britain, Israel, Japan, Sweden, and West Germany. 1983. 45pp.

THE BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM

The Business-Higher Education Forum is a membership organization of selected chief executives of major American corporations, colleges and universities. The Forum's purposes are: to identify, review and act on selected issues of mutual concern; to enhance public awareness of these concerns; and to help guide the evolution of cooperation between corporations and institutions of higher education, while preserving their separate traditional functions.

Over the years, the Forum has addressed such critical issues as international economic competitiveness, education and training, R&D partnerships, science and technology, and global interdependence. The 1990-92 Forum chairman is Colby H. Chandler, Retired Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Eastman Kodak Company. Don M. Blandin is the Forum's director.

The Forum was founded in 1978 by the American Council on Education (ACE), which represents all accredited post-secondary institutions as well as national and regional higher education associations. The current chair of ACE is Robert L. Albright, Johnson C. Smith University. Robert H. Atwell is the Council's president.

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Founded a decade ago by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the Public Agenda Foundation works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how average citizens think about public 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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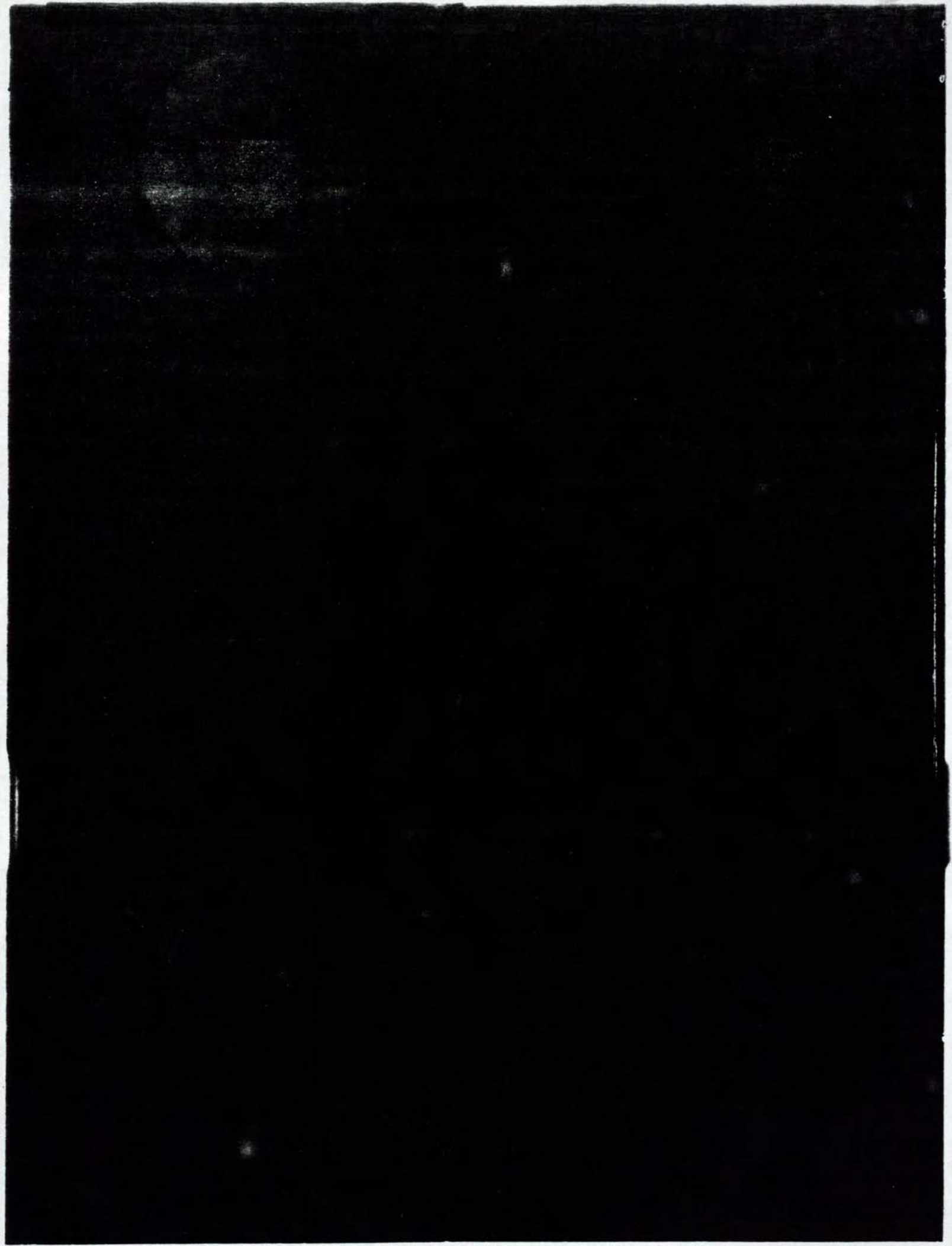
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Crisis in the Work Force: Help Wanted

Your Chance to Help Your Community

Improve America's Competitiveness

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**For more information on Help Wanted
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The Challenge

The Premise of Our Work

Why Do a Campaign on School Reform and Job Skills?

The Challenge

- ✓ For almost 10 years, the issue of America's declining economic competitiveness has been high on the agenda of policy-makers and leadership groups. Of particular concern has been the problem of undereducated students and underskilled workers.
- ✓ In that time, more than 300 reports have been published, dealing with various aspects of the education and training crisis. Thousands of specific recommendations have been advanced. Countless seminars and congressional hearings have been held. Many, many communities have addressed various parts of the problem.

Despite these well-meaning efforts, not much has changed. Aside from pockets of excellence, too few American students are graduating from high school with the skills they will need to succeed on the job. And too few American adults are getting the training they will need for 21st-century jobs.

- ✓ A key obstacle to reform has been the major differences of opinion between the American people and its leaders — both in diagnosing the problem and in prescribing solutions. All too often, the public has been left out of the debate altogether. **Help Wanted**, an innovative citizen-education campaign, is designed to help your community overcome this obstacle — and get on with the challenge of improving our schools and workplaces.

If you want to...

- Involve the public in public policy
- Raise public awareness about what it will take to reverse America's declining economic competitiveness
- Bring together diverse groups for a fair-minded, constructive discussion about how to solve the economic challenges facing the country
- Build broad support for school reform in your community
- Help your employees understand the importance of constantly upgrading their skills
- Work in partnership with your local media ...

Public Agenda's Help Wanted citizen-choice project can help

The Premise Of Our Work

★ The Public Agenda Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization headed by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, bases its work on a crucial distinction — the difference between public opinion, people's top-of-the-head reaction to an issue, and public judgment, what people think about an issue after they have confronted and worked through the choices it presents. To help people move from public opinion to public judgment, more than a decade of Public Agenda research suggests that:

- ✓ • **People need choices, not just more information.** Americans are inundated with information daily, but people need the structure of choices — alternative courses of action with the pros and cons clearly spelled out — before they can begin to understand and grapple with complex issues, such as school reform and workplace training.
- ✓ • **People need the structure and intensity of a campaign in order to work through an issue.** They need to have important ideas, concepts, and choices presented and repeated over time in an intense, consistent, and organized fashion. Hearing or reading news items from time to time is just not enough.
- ✓ • **People need a neutral, nonpartisan guide to the debate.** On any issue that provokes intense emotional response, such as education and training, it is essential that people have a neutral and nonpartisan guide. If there is confusion or skepticism about pertinent facts, if people suspect bad motives or partisan arguments, they often stop listening entirely.
- ✓ • **People need an incentive to participate in the debate.** Grappling with complex issues, examining choices, deciding among them, debating, and thinking about them is hard work. People will not invest the time and effort to do that work unless they believe their views will be taken into account by leaders in their local communities and at the national level.
- ✓ • **People need an opportunity to move beyond quick-fix solutions.** Complex policy questions resist easy answers. People need a chance to wrestle with the reality that no one group is solely responsible for the problem. And no single group or individual can solve it.

Why Do a Campaign on School Reform and Job Skills?

An undereducated, undermotivated workforce poses a threat to the *future prosperity of us all*.

More than one in four American students drop out of school each year. An additional 500,000 graduate with only enough education to hold down a low-skilled, dead-end job.

Even the best American students fall far short of their foreign counterparts in the critical areas of science and math.

On the job, 20-30 million American adults are functionally illiterate.

✓ However, based on our focus group interviews and public opinion research, we have learned that many Americans don't recognize the magnitude of the problem.

✓ Fundamentally, many don't see the connection between educational excellence and economic prosperity. Many believe the education problem is confined largely to inner-city schools and do not recognize that virtually every U.S. community is at risk. Moreover, many Americans are preoccupied by safety and discipline, seeming to accept mediocre skills as long as students are working hard in a safe school. And few citizens recognize the importance of continuous on-the-job training.

Findings such as these convinced us that sustained and widespread school reform will not occur until these public-expert communications gaps are closed. **Help Wanted** is closing those gaps by inviting the public to participate in a constructive, nonpartisan discussion about America's education and training challenge.

What a Community-Wide Campaign Looks Like

**What's Involved in Sponsoring a
Community-wide Campaign**

Suggested Roles for Campaign Sponsors

Benefits to a Community Sponsor

Benefits to a Corporate Sponsor

Benefits to a Media Sponsor

What a Community-Wide Campaign Looks Like

With active participation of the local newspaper and TV station in each locale, the communications campaigns feature discussions of the pros and cons of various reform options. The discussions take a variety of forms: town meetings, front-page news stories, newspaper editorials, print and broadcast ads, televised documentaries, small discussion groups on college campuses, articles about education and training in employee newsletters, etc.

Each campaign culminates with the publication of a special supplement and ballot, which summarizes the choices and gives citizens a chance to vote on several specific reform recommendations. The following outlines the schedule for a typical community-wide campaign:

Sample schedule

PLANNING PHASE *(three to six months)*

- Identify community sponsors
- Solicit media partners
- Coalition building/Community outreach
- Event planning/scheduling
- Moderator training
- Write local ballot questions
- Print local materials

CAMPAIGN

Week One

- Kick-off event
- Media promotion begins (build campaign name ID)
 - Print and Broadcast PSA's
- Community promotion begins

Week Two

- Intensive media coverage begins
 - Daily news coverage
 - Special programming
- Print and Broadcast PSA's continue
- Community events begin
- Discussion groups begin
- Ballot distribution begins

Week Three

- Intensive media coverage continues
 - Ballot Supplement published
- Print and Broadcast PSA's continue
 - Ballot Promotion emphasized
- Community events continue
- Discussion groups continue
- Ballot distribution continues

Week Four *(not necessarily contiguous)*

- Ballot cut-off date
- Print and Broadcast PSA's continue
 - Ballot collection emphasized
- Community events continue
- Discussion groups continue
- Ballot collection completed

Week Five *(not necessarily contiguous)*

- Ballot tabulation to Public Agenda
- Ballot analysis returned to community within seven days

Week Six

- Ballot analysis released in media
- Ballot analysis discussed in community events
- Community reports on public response to leaders
- Television partner submits one beta-format tape of logged coverage to Public Agenda
- Newspaper partner submits clip collection of coverage and 100 supplements to Public Agenda
- Community sponsor submits activity report to Public Agenda
- Community and media partners participate in Public Agenda review and critique of campaign

What's Involved in Sponsoring a Community-Wide Campaign

A community-wide campaign is a partnership involving the efforts of the local sponsoring organization(s), the local media partners (TV station and daily newspaper) and Public Agenda. The following describes the major roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Public Agenda Provides

Research

- The results of analysis of public opinion data over the past decade and focus-group interviews in a cross-section of 10 cities around the country provide the basis for our media campaigns.
- All materials were carefully reviewed by experts in education, labor and business — and pre-tested with additional focus groups of citizens.

Negotiations with Media Partners

- On-site presentation of campaign to encourage media sponsorship.
- Follow-up negotiations with local newspapers and TV stations to solicit their participation.

Materials

- Broadcast-quality, 22-minute documentary narrated by Bill Blakemore (ABC News). Available for use by school and community groups, as well as by television partner.
- Four-page, camera-ready print supplement describing the education and training problem and an array of proposed solutions. To be distributed by the participating newspaper in its Sunday edition, as well as by such other participants as local banks, retail stores, supermarkets, etc.
- Camera-ready ballot for citizen involvement covering both national and local aspects of the issue.
- Series of informational and promotional advertisements for use by television and newspaper partners.
- Collection of op-ed pieces by nationally known experts on various aspects of the issue.
- Series of :30 second public service announcements based on our research.

Analysis

- Post-campaign analysis of the ballots.
- Practical suggestions for following up on your campaign.

Consultation

- Access to research staff for assistance writing local ballot questions.
- On-site visits with local participants (civic leaders and media) to plan a local campaign.
- Community-organizing assistance (forums, town meetings, discussion groups, etc.) through the National Issues Forum's network of trained conveners.
- Phone access to Public Agenda staff throughout the campaign.
- Ongoing consultation about sources of information, additional programming, and resource people.

Community Sponsors Provide

- Assistance in securing the participation of local newspaper, television station and civic leadership to work with Public Agenda in planning and managing the campaign.
- Coordination of community group meetings, liaison with media partners, distribution and collection of the ballot, appearance on talk shows, etc.
- Presentation of Public Agenda ballot analysis, distribution and report of results to community leaders, policy makers, etc.
- Participation in a Public Agenda-organized review and evaluation of the campaign.

Media Partners Provide

- Concentrated media attention to the issue: regular newspaper articles and op-ed pieces; daily television news coverage; television documentary and special programming.
- Broadcast time for public service announcements, TV documentary and talk shows.
- Regular space for print ads and distribution of the four-page supplement and ballot in the major newspaper.
- Coordinated efforts among news, marketing and community relations departments providing comprehensive sponsorship.

Suggested Roles for Campaign Sponsors

PAF Provides	Community Group(s) Provides	Newspaper Provides	TV Station Provides
✓ Nonpartisan objective research publication detailing policy choices.	✓ Local coordination of campaign with local sponsors/coalition.	✓ Consistent and sustained news coverage of local campaign issues.	✓ Consistent and sustained news coverage of local campaign issues.
✓ Pretesting of concepts and materials in focus groups.	✓ Entree to local media decision-makers.	✓ Space for print ads.	✓ Public service and promotional time for TV spots.
✓ Bibliography and list of resource contacts.	✓ Development of localized campaign materials.	✓ Cross-promotion coverage with TV participant.	✓ Cross-promotion coverage with newspaper participant.
✓ Assistance obtaining the media sign-up.	✓ Organization of town meetings/forums.	✓ Printing, distribution and promotion of ballot/supplement.	✓ Promotion of ballot distribution and coverage of results.
✓ Planning session with local media.	✓ Sponsorship/hosting of community events.	✓ Complete set of campaign clips to PAF.	✓ Beta Format tape of all coverage to PAF.
✓ Promotional print ads and TV spots describing campaign and its purpose.	✓ Op-ed series by community leadership on campaign issues.	✓ Post-campaign evaluation.	✓ Post-campaign evaluation.
✓ Camera-ready design and copy for newspaper insert, including citizen-choice ballot.	✓ Speaker/panelists for TV, radio, and community events.		
✓ 22-minute, broadcast documentary.	✓ Formulation of two local questions for ballot.		
✓ On-going campaign consulting. Phone access to PAF throughout the campaign.	✓ Tabulation of ballots locally (to be sent to PAF for analysis).		
✓ On-site visit with local participants.	✓ Post-campaign evaluation.		
✓ NIF moderator training for community discussions.			
✓ Professional assistance writing two local questions for ballot.			
✓ Analysis of ballot results.			

Benefits To A Community Sponsor

For institutions sponsoring community-wide campaigns, **Help Wanted** provides:

- **A cost-effective way to help build public support for school reform.** Your contribution to the campaign is leveraged many times over — through the community commitment of the TV and newspaper sponsor an un-paralleled concentration of coverage helps focus the debate. It's the kind of comprehensive coverage that is priceless.
- In addition, the media partners provide thousands of dollars of promotional and informational advertising, again prominently featuring the participation of all local sponsors.
- **A chance to introduce proposals for change** — retraining, community volunteer efforts, parental programs, etc.
- **A chance to work as a partner with the media** — hence, improving your long-term relationships with the local newspaper, TV station.

Benefits To A Corporate Sponsor

For institutions sponsoring community-wide campaigns, **Help Wanted** provides:

- **A cost-effective way to help build employee support for school reform.** Your contribution to the campaign is leveraged many times over — through the use of the informational and education material provided by Public Agenda (newspaper supplement and ballot, informational TV and print ads, broadcast-quality documentary, etc.).
- **A cost-effective way to educate your employees** and other stakeholders about the competitive challenges facing your company.
- **An opportunity to engage *all* of your employees** on a single issue of mutual concern — helping to break down barriers among departments and between managers and employees.

Benefits To A Media Sponsor

For sponsoring newspapers, TV stations, Help Wanted provides:

- An opportunity to establish a two-way dialogue with your viewers and readers about an issue of mutual concern.
- A chance to benefit from cross-over promotions with your local media partners.
- Market exclusivity for print and broadcast partners for this highly visible community campaign.
- A cost-effective way to integrate your news, community affairs, public affairs and marketing programs.
- A chance to work with other community leaders in addressing one of America's most important policy issues.
- A chance to join other news organizations who've worked with Public Agenda campaigns over the past decade:

NEWSPAPER

The Anniston Star
The Arizona Republic and
Phoenix Gazette
Austin American-Statesman
The Baltimore Evening Sun
Dayton Daily News
Dayton Journal Herald
The Des Moines Register
Durham Morning Herald & Sun
The Fayetteville Times &
Observer
Flint Journal
Gatesbury Register-Mail
Hartford Courant
The Stamford Advocate &
Greenwich Time
Indianapolis Star and News
The Kansas City Star
Mobile Press Register
The Muncie Evening Press
Nashville Banner
Peoria Journal-Star
The Philadelphia Inquirer
The Raleigh News & Observer
Reading Times
The Rocky Mountain News
The San Antonio Express News
The Seattle Post-Intelligencer
St. Paul Pioneer Press & Dispatch
The Syracuse Herald-
Journal/American
Wilmington News Journal
The Tennessean

TELEVISION/RADIO

Berks County Television
(Reading)
KBVO-TV (Austin)
KCCI-TV (Des Moines)
KCTV-5 (Kansas City)
KENS-TV (San Antonio)
KENS II (San Antonio)
KIRO-TV/Radio (Seattle)
KITN-TV (Minneapolis)
KLRU-TV (Austin)
KMBC-TV (Kansas City)
KMSP-TV (Minneapolis)
KSTP-TV (Minneapolis)
KTBC-TV (Austin)
KTVK-TV (Phoenix)
KUSA-TV9 (Denver)
KVUE-TV (Austin)
KXAN-TV (Austin)
Minnesota Public Radio
WBST-RADIO (Muncie)
WCAU-TV/CWAU-AM/FM
(Philadelphia)
WCCO-TV (Minneapolis)
WDTN-TV (Dayton)
WFSB-TV (Austin)
WFSB-TV (Hartford)
WHO-TV/WHO-AM/FM
(Des Moines)
WIPB-TV (Muncie)
WISN-TV (Milwaukee)
WIXT-TV (Syracuse)
WJRT-TV (Flint)
WJSU-TV (Anniston)

WJZ-TV (Baltimore)
WKEF-TV (Dayton)
WKFT-TV (Raleigh)
WKRQ-TV (Mobile)
WMBD-TV (Peoria)
WOI-TV (Des Moines)
WPTF-TV (Raleigh)
WPVI-TV (Delaware)
WRAL-TV (Raleigh)
WRAU-TV (Peoria)
WSMV-TV (Nashville)
WSYR-AM (Syracuse)
WTFV-TV (Nashville)
WTHR-TV (Indianapolis)
WTVD-TV (Raleigh)
WUSA-TV (Minneapolis)

What's Involved in Sponsoring an “In-House” Corporate Campaign

**What An “In-House”
Corporate Campaign Looks Like**

Help Wanted Case Study



**Union Carbide's In-House
Employee-Awareness Campaign**

What's Involved in Sponsoring an "In-House" Corporate Campaign

The Public Agenda Foundation has adapted the multi-media, citizen-education campaign, **Help Wanted**, for internal use by corporations, universities and other institutions. Such an in-house campaign is ideal for *raising employee awareness* of education and training issues and for encouraging citizens to take an active role in improving their local education system. Union Carbide Corporation successfully conducted a **Help Wanted** campaign in Fall 1991 (see attached case study).

While a *community-wide campaign* requires the participation of a local television station, radio station and newspaper, an *in-house campaign* includes only the participating local institution and Public Agenda. The following describes the major roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Public Agenda Provides Research

- Before preparing the print and broadcast communications materials, we tracked and analyzed public opinion data over the past decade and conducted focus-group interviews in a cross-section of 10 cities around the country.
- All materials were carefully reviewed by experts in education, labor and business — and pre-tested with additional focus groups.

Materials

- Broadcast-quality, 22-minute documentary narrated by Bill Blakemore (ABC News). Available for use by school and community groups, as well as by television partner.
- Four-page, camera-ready print supplement describing the problem and an array of solutions.
- Camera-ready ballot covering both national and local aspects of the issue.
- Series of camera-ready informational advertisements that encourage employee participation.
- Series of camera-ready informational ads that provide short, punchy "bites" of information. These can easily be adapted for use in employee newsletters or blown up as posters.
- Collection of op-ed pieces by nationally known experts on various aspects of the issue.
- A Moderator's Guide to facilitate employee discussion groups.

Analysis

- Post-campaign analysis of the ballots.
- Practical suggestions for following up on your campaign (practical ideas for how employers, employees, and communities can help change the schools).

Consultation -

- Up to three on-site visits with the sponsor to plan the employee-awareness campaign.
- Inventory of existing resources and communications vehicles to help ensure the campaign is carefully tailored to each organization's own structure and culture.
- Phone access to Public Agenda staff throughout the campaign.
- Ongoing consultation about sources of information, additional programming, and resource people.
- A special moderator-training session for corporate volunteers, provided by the National Issues Forum's network of discussion groups.

In-House Sponsors Provide

- The leadership needed to coordinate employee group meetings, work with the corporate communications and public affairs staff, coordinate distribution and collection of the ballots, etc.
- Distribute ballots to employees, other stakeholders.
- Report results to employees, other stakeholders, community leaders, policy-makers, etc.
- Participation in a Public Agenda-organized review and evaluation of the campaign's effectiveness.

What An "In-House" Corporate Campaign Looks Like

With the active participation of the communications/public affairs, community relations or human resources office, the communications campaigns feature employee discussions of the pros and cons of various reform options. The discussions take a variety of forms: employee meetings, articles about education and training in employee newsletters, small discussion groups, employee involvement fairs, etc.

Each campaign culminates with the publication of a special supplement and ballot, which summarizes the choices and gives employees a chance to vote on several specific reform recommendations. The following outlines the schedule for a typical corporate campaign:

PLANNING PHASE *(two to four months)*

- Public Agenda conducts communications audit
- Proposal to management levels involved with campaign
- Moderator Training
- Produce in-house materials
- Plan events/discussion groups

Week One

- Kick-off event
- Promotional phase
- Build awareness and name ID for campaign

Week Two

- Educational efforts begin based on communications audit and plan
- Discussion groups begin
- "Choice One" posters, video, newsletter articles, letters, luncheons and other events begin
- Ballot distribution begins

Week Three

- "Choice Two" activities begin
- Ballot distribution continues

Week Four

- "Choice Three" activities begin
- Ballot distribution continues

Week Five

- Ballot distribution completed
- Ballot cut-off date
- Ballot collection and tabulation
- Tabular report to Public Agenda

Week Six

- Public Agenda analysis returned within seven days
- Announcement of ballot analysis to employees

Help Wanted Case Study



Union Carbide's In-House Employee-Awareness Campaign

In Fall 1991, Union Carbide Corporation (UC) joined with the Public Agenda Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan public opinion and research organization, to launch an employee-awareness campaign. The goals were to help employees:

- Understand the connections among a quality education, a literate and skilled workforce, and America's ability to compete globally.
- Eliminate common misconceptions about student achievement (such as school problems are confined to inner cities) and employee productivity (such as Japan is the only major competitor).
- Become directly involved in the schools (mentoring, classroom demonstrations, school board, etc.).

The first campaigns took place at Danbury, Connecticut (UC headquarters) and at the company's Indianapolis facility. In all, about 1,000 employees participated. Future campaigns at additional UC sites are under consideration.

Acting on a Corporate Commitment to Improve Education: The Help Wanted campaign follows up a recommendation from a UC Task force report (Undereducated, Undercompetitive USA) "to establish a world class education system by the dawn of the next century." Chief among the proposals was a "rigorous and high-profile internal information program" to raise employee awareness of education issues.

Developing a Campaign: A Public Agenda campaign consultant conducted site visits to take inventory of existing UC resources and internal communications vehicles. Working closely with UC staff, five-week campaigns were designed to complement and accommodate each site's corporate internal structure. In turn, UC developed a team of human resource and corporate communications professionals to carry out the campaigns.

Preparing Research-based Print and Video Materials: Print and video materials (prepared by Public Agenda based on its in-depth public opinion research) were adapted for UC's corporate use and incorporated into the framework of the campaigns. The materials helped participants to overcome common misconceptions — identified through the focus group research — that so often prevent support for constructive education reform.

Materials included: Letters from UC Chairman and CEO Robert Kennedy to employees and senior management, encouraging them to participate; promotional banners; informational displays (posters, videos and printed handouts) outside the UC cafeteria; documentary videotapes lent to employees to take home; articles in the employee newsletter; print materials that described various reform options and provided pros and cons for each choice; and a ballot for employees to register their preferences.

Encouraging Meaningful Discussions and Breaking Down Barriers: Throughout the campaigns, employees and management actively participated in 90-minute, on-site discussions led by Public Agenda-trained moderators. Indeed, the **Help Wanted** campaign was credited with breaking down barriers between UC departments and among employees on various levels. In the 16 discussion groups, participants learned about the role of a sound education system and a skilled work force in maintaining a strong economy. And they debated the costs and trade-offs of possible solutions.

Increasing Employee Involvement: An integral part of the campaign was an Education Involvement Fair, which informed UC employees about how they might directly make a positive change in their own communities and encouraged them to become actively involved as volunteers — running for school board, tutoring adult literacy classes, participating in the company's mentor program, etc. As a result of the **Help Wanted** campaign, UC also developed a parental resource library for use by UC employees.

Registering an Informed Judgment: The intensive five-week educational effort culminated in the distribution of a **Help Wanted** ballot, giving UC employees a chance to vote on their preferred education and training solutions. Through a variety of communications vehicles, UC is reporting back the ballot results to its employees worldwide and to community leaders, education organizations and civic groups in the company's participating communities. The results are based on analyses of the ballot returns provided by Public Agenda.

Initiating Community Outreach: The campaigns provided avenues for UC employees to interact with the community on all levels — school officials, teachers' organizations, elected leaders, media and various community groups. UC sent informational packets about its efforts to these groups and key individuals, and invited them to participate and to share information on a number of **Help Wanted** activities.

Help Wanted Works

What Participants Say About Help Wanted

What's Different About Help Wanted?

Help Wanted Works

With its **Help Wanted** project, The Public Agenda Foundation has developed a very practical way to help citizens confront the reality of America's declining economic competitiveness — and begin to grapple with solutions.

The project helps the public see the connections among education, training and competitiveness, gives people a chance to weigh the pros and cons of various solutions, and provides outlets for them to express their views to local and national leaders.

In cooperation with groups such as the Business-Higher Education Forum, The Business Roundtable, Cap Cities/ABC and the National Issues Forums, Public Agenda conducted pilot communications campaigns in Connecticut, Indianapolis, Nashville and Phoenix in 1991. Additional campaigns all over the country are scheduled to kick off throughout 1992. Combining extensive media coverage, town meetings, public forums and in-house employee discussions, each campaign has focused the spotlight on such crises as adult illiteracy, student dropouts, and inadequate science and math education.

The campaigns demonstrated that, after being exposed to intensive, quality discussions about education and training, Americans are better prepared to discuss these issues, to understand their personal stake in reform and to grapple with the tough choices that need to be made.

Help Wanted campaigns have resulted in:

- **Public Consensus for Basic Changes.** Those casting ballots in Connecticut, Indianapolis, Nashville and Phoenix overwhelmingly endorsed several sweeping changes in American education: requiring math and science in all grades, mandating an achievement test for high school graduation, and launching a national literacy program for adults. Random-sample polling confirmed support for these measures.
- **Increased Support for Changes with Tradeoffs.** Public support for some measures that were not initially popular — extending the school year and giving tax breaks to businesses that offer technical training to their workers — increased after the campaigns. Support among the audiences of the sponsoring TV stations and newspapers was even higher.
- **Increased Understanding of Long-Term Threats to the Nation's Prosperity.** Citizens generally expressed more concern about long-term threats to the nation's prosperity: inadequate schools, illiteracy and a shortage of workers with advanced scientific training. Generating more interest in these longer-term issues is a major goal of the project.
- **Enhanced Media Coverage.** Vanderbilt University's Chancellor Joe Wyatt (Nashville) attributes sustained improvements in local media coverage of education issues to the campaign. WFSB-TV (Connecticut) has made a year-long commitment to continue **Help Wanted**-style coverage. Daily coverage in both Indianapolis newspapers was sustained for several weeks.

- **More Business Involvement.** The active participation of Connecticut's 25 largest corporations guaranteed that the campaign directly reached half of the state's 11.4 million employees. Moreover, **Help Wanted** prompted most of the corporate sponsors to revise their employee benefit plans to encourage more involvement in the schools. In Phoenix, about two dozen of the area's largest employers sponsored the campaign.
- **Broader Discussions.** The campaigns helped bring together diverse groups to discuss their common concerns about the economy, the schools and the workplaces. Republicans and Democrats, business and labor, teachers and students, parents and non-parents — all had a chance to examine their shared stake in this issue — and to debate various reform options.

Results such as these offer two very encouraging messages. First, voters in communities across the country are ready for a serious discussion about school reform and workplace literacy. And second, if experts take the time to talk straight to the American people about various options (including the tradeoffs of each choice), the public will respond.

What Participants Say About Help Wanted

"If you have the opportunity to become involved in the **Help Wanted** campaign, grab it because it offers tremendous benefits to your institutions — a chance to be at the center of debate on a major public policy issue, to become a very real part of your community, and to build a deeper, and perhaps more positive, relationship with your local media."

— *Raymond Jansen (Publisher, The Hartford Courant)*

"Working together, educators, parents, public officials and the business community are building a partnership to reshape our schools. The **Help Wanted** campaign was an important part of the effort. Not only did it reinforce the idea that education is a fundamental economic issue — a standard-of-living issue — it helped make the public a partner in all that we are doing."

— *Edward Budd (Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, The Travelers Corp.)*

"Ninety-nine percent of the American people are not part of the conversation about major policy issues such as education. As a result, they tend to tune out what leaders have to say. **Help Wanted** is a much-needed remedy."

— *Daniel Yankelovich (Public Agenda Foundation)*

"One unexpected bonus of the Nashville **Help Wanted** campaign is that it has led to vastly improved ongoing media coverage of school reform and workplace literacy. The coverage is more sophisticated and has more depth than before."

— *Joe Wyatt (Chancellor, Vanderbilt University)*

"The **Help Wanted** campaign is addressing what I believe is the single biggest barrier to education and training reform: the monumental communications gap between what the public believes about the interrelated issues of education, training and the economy — and what leaders and experts think about these issues."

— *Former Labor Secretary Ann McLaughlin (The Urban Institute)*

"**Help Wanted** is not pushing any top-down agenda for reform. The campaign does not have any ax to grind. Its sponsors do not have any specific solutions in mind for improving the education that occurs in the schools or the training that happens in the workplace. Instead, the campaign is designed to give people a chance to *voice* their *opinions* about these key issues."

— *Colby Chandler (Eastman Kodak Company)*

"We took a risk at Union Carbide by conducting an education campaign during a business down cycle. Our employees now understand that public education in America is a business issue that affects the personal standards of living of each of us."

— *Robert D. Kennedy (Chairman & CEO of Union Carbide Corp.)*

What's Different About Help Wanted?

✓ It Involves the Public

Most school-reform and workplace-training reform initiatives have centered on experts making recommendations to other experts, leaving the public out of the debate. Sustained reform, however, will not occur without broad public support. Thus, rather than just draw attention to yet another set of expert proposals, **Help Wanted** is designed to encourage a two-way dialogue between leaders and the public.

✎ It's News-Driven

Help Wanted's unique media coverage and repeated exposure to choices gives the public a chance to struggle with solutions — not just more information. By co-sponsoring campaigns and by providing extended news and editorial coverage and informational and promotional ads, participating local TV stations and newspapers are giving citizens of their communities a chance to look closely at the pros and cons of various policy options.

✓ It's Research-Based

Help Wanted is based on more than two years of research by the Public Agenda Foundation and Business-Higher Education Forum. Before preparing the print and broadcast communications materials, we tracked and analyzed public opinion data over the past decade and conducted focus-group interviews in a cross-section of 10 cities around the country. All materials were carefully reviewed by experts in education, labor and business — and pretested with several additional focus groups of citizens.

✓ It's Non-Partisan

Help Wanted does not advocate any specific program or reform agenda. Instead, by focusing on the top priorities, by expanding the dialogue to include the public and by increasing awareness of what's at stake, the campaign's goal is to involve more people in the important issues being debated in education today. Some communities will push tougher standards, for instance. Others, science and math. Still others, site-based management, etc. In each case, at the end of the campaign, citizens will be better informed, energized by the discussions and more ready to act.

✓ It's Local

Help Wanted is based on Public Agenda's proven format for focusing people on choices and helping them grapple with tough policy issues facing the country. The media coverage and community activities are all locally planned and executed, ensuring the campaign's relevance to your community.

For more information on **Help Wanted** contact:

Scott Swenson, The Public Agenda Foundation, 6 East 39th Street,
New York, NY 10016, (212) 686-6610

**THEY SHOULD LEARN WHAT
I LEARNED IN SCHOOL:**

**Public Misperceptions about
Educating Americans**

Speech by
Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director
Public Agenda Foundation

Governors' Policy Advisors Institute
Cambridge, Mass.
May 3, 1991



For the past two years, my colleagues and I at the Public Agenda Foundation and Business-Higher Education Forum have been struggling to understand *why* — despite all the recommendations for change, all the conferences, all the meetings such as this and all the leadership pronouncements — so little progress has been made in solving the education and training crisis.

I know you, too, have been similarly preoccupied.

Certainly, ambitious plans have been proposed and debated. A number of superb programs, largely under your leadership, have gotten underway at the local level — supplementing such successful longer-term efforts as *Cities in Schools* and Head Start, to name but just two programs that have been around for awhile. And yes, *some* students in *some* schools and *some* workers in *some* jobs have made good progress in acquiring the skills they will need for the 21st century.

But overall, progress has been spare and slow. In fact, you said it best yourself in your recent Education Task Force report :

"Every Governor can point with pride to new programs and promising initiatives. Each has been propelled by a deep awareness that our economic competitiveness, the quality of American life and the continued health of democratic government depend upon the quality of public education and the knowledge, skills and attitudes of our citizens. Yet despite the efforts of Governors and of many other Americans from coast to coast, our nation's future is still very much at risk."

Why so little progress? And, more important, what can be done to accelerate the effort — to create what Education Secretary Alexander recently referred to as a broad-based "crusade" for reform?

I believe I have at least partial answers to both questions, answers which I would like to share with you tonight.

First, why so little progress? Of course, there are many explanations, but our research and communications project focused on one in particular— a major gap between how leaders such as yourselves and the public view the crisis in our schools and the skills gap in our workforce.

Based on an extensive review of public opinion polls, plus focus group interviews in cities around the country last year, we found that leaders and the public make entirely different diagnoses of what's causing the problem— and very different prescriptions for curing it.

The public and experts such as you have different preoccupations. And you speak different languages.

Let me illustrate what I mean, using the six education goals you have developed, which recently have been strongly endorsed by the President. Although we did not use these particular goals as a frame of reference for our research, I believe you will agree that our findings are very relevant.

First, there is no question that of all your goals, the sixth — creating safe, disciplined and drugfree schools — is the one that most closely reflects public opinion. While it is the ~~last~~ goal on your list, I would argue that it is the one the public starts with.

This goal is the antidote to the public's diagnosis of the problem. Eroding values. Loss of discipline. Decline of the work ethic. Kids not trying hard enough. Teachers not being tough enough. Parents not involved enough. Too much TV. Not enough homework. Lazy workers. Corrupt bosses. You know the litany.

For the public, these moral failings have become a major preoccupation. And for that reason, they are a major obstacle to the kind of reforms you and other leaders have been promoting.

While leaders such as yourselves talk about skills, the public is worried about morals and motivation.

While leaders refer to reports like *Workforce 2000*, which call for a new kind of learning to make sure our students and workers have the advanced skills needed for the new world of work, the public would be content if we could just bring back the McGuffey Readers and slide rules.

While President Bush and Secretary Alexander talk about the "New American Schools" and you talk about "new schools for the 21st century," much of the public would be content with the Little Red Schoolhouses of the 19th century.

While leaders talk about such issues as teacher professionalism, site-based management and lack of parental choice, the public is more interested in talking about classrooms that lack discipline and schools with no standards.

Many leaders share the public's dismay with the perceived decline in discipline and motivation. But since they see no practical policies for improving Americans' values, policymakers tend to focus instead on programs, services and funding to foster better skills.

Thus, when leaders address the public about these issues, they often omit or downplay problems of motivation and standards — and their message misses the mark. When leaders say “more” is needed — more pay for teachers, more scientists and engineers, more diverse curricula — the public tunes out. For the public, what is missing is the *will* to make use of what we already have.

Turning briefly to the other goals, my guess is that your first two — school readiness and high school completion — would have quite broad support, though with some strong reservations. First, you will have to persuade people to see beyond their concerns about motivation and standards.

Then, you will need to convince people that making sure all students come to school ready to learn and then graduate with a diploma 13 years later does not mean a reincarnation of the Big Government/Great Society programs of the 1960s.

Yes, the public acknowledges there's a problem with kids starting school unprepared and leaving uneducated, but people remain very unwilling to spend money on fixing the problem — until they are convinced that those running the schools know what they're doing, are willing to enforce discipline and are serious about high academic standards.

I think public support for your first two goals is potentially weakened by an additional complication. In the public's mind the dropout problem is largely confined to inner-city schools and underprivileged kids. It's a problem, but it doesn't affect them immediately or personally. Although there seems to be support for helping inner-city kids, many Americans do not understand the serious threat this problem poses to the nation as a whole — to our standard of living and to our way of life. As you have said so eloquently, the future prosperity of the entire nation is at stake.

✓ But the even more significant block is the widespread lack of public understanding that the crisis extends well beyond the inner city to middle-class suburban kids and schools. Until the middle class sees that *their* kids are lagging behind as well — they are likely to continue to remain complacent, detached and reluctant to support needed programs.

As for goal number 3, I believe you will find mixed support. My guess is that most people are far more interested in the accountability part of this achievement goal — testing at grades 4, 8 and 12 — than they are to acknowledge that the poor achievement problem extends far beyond the inner city. The public sees the skills problem in terms of millions of high school dropouts and functionally illiterate adults. Experts, however, are just as disturbed about another dimension of the challenge: that our "norms" are slipping, that even our best and brightest students are having a hard time measuring up to world-class standards in some fields. The public has virtually no recognition of this part of the education challenge.

✓ That brings me to your fourth goal — math and science achievement. Let me just say that you have a **long, hard struggle ahead**. According to our research, the public is light years behind the country's leaders in understanding the necessity of the United States maintaining world-class preeminence in science, math and technology.

/ The public holds several contradictory views on this subject simultaneously. On the one hand, ~~there is widespread complacency~~ — an attitude that we remain far ahead of even the Japanese and Germans in virtually all cutting-edge technologies. I'm sure that the images of those "smart bombs" going down the smokestacks in Baghdad did nothing to dispel the illusion of continued U.S. superiority in technology.

Many people are personally uncomfortable with science and math and don't understand why kids need to study advanced algebra, calculus or physics.

Instead, people say: "Teach our kids what we learned in school. Just give them the three Rs. Forget the high-tech classroom with higher-order learning skills. What we need is the Little Red Schoolhouse."

While much of the public remains complacent about our math and science skills, others are scornful or fearful of science. People often see scientists as "them" — not "us". Some view them as Dr. Strangelovian characters — the high school nerds grown up.

For experts, technology is the key to productivity — being able to produce marketable goods at the right price. But the public has a totally different idea about how the economy works. For them, jobs are the key. A strong economy is one where everybody has a job.

Thus, the notion that people should have *more* skills raises the spectre of the Great Depression — when too many people were chasing too few jobs.

While experts stress that the key workplace challenge of the future will be just the opposite — not enough skilled people to handle all the available jobs — the public is still concerned that there won't be enough jobs to go around, even at the highest level. Very few Americans are aware that we have recently increased our immigration quotas to bring more scientists and engineers into the country.

Finally, let me address your fifth goal — adult literacy. People are sympathetic to this goal, but they do not see it as an economic imperative. They are much more tuned in to the plight of children. To the extent they think about job training at all, many Americans just assume it is up to individual employers — not a matter of public policy.

✓ There is one additional major obstacle, which does not relate to any of your goals, but which presents a very significant barrier to change. Until very recently, most people have failed to see how the success of schoolchildren and the ability of the workforce to compete effectively has any connection to society's overall standard of living and well-being. If there's no connection between know-how and economic prosperity, there's little impetus to act.

★ In summary, our research shows that while the public's consciousness has been raised on a number of important points, the public still holds a set of distortions, half-truths and misconceptions that, at best, get us only halfway toward grasping the education and training issue realistically, while at worst, effectively block constructive consensus and action. It's like being halfway across the Atlantic — you're nowhere.

✓ We called our research report *Crosstalk* to highlight the fact that you experts and the public are talking past each other about these issues. You're up here and they're down there. It's not that the public is necessarily wrong about these issues. It's just that they have a different perspective and a different level of understanding than leaders do.

✓ The problem is really a communications problem. Unlike some previous media-intensive, citizen-education campaigns in which I've been involved, the lack of consensus and action in this case does not proceed from a lack of practical solutions. On an issue like crime, for example, people simply cannot conceive of any proposals that could realistically deal with such a major issue.

✓ Nor is the education and training debate bogged down in divisiveness, such as in the abortion or budget deficit debates, where different values and competing interests have led to gridlock.

✓ The lack of consensus and action on this issue is the result of a failure to focus the national will on some agreed upon diagnosis and solution — and then to mobilize people's concerns. That's a communications problem.

★ From what I have heard and read, I think President Bush and Secretary Alexander understand this — and their efforts seem focused on finding new ways to describe the problems and solutions, and then to motivate the public to support their proposals. Our own project is centered around getting people to grasp the seriousness of the problem and connect that to a thoughtful consideration of a range of solutions.

But before describing our own campaign, let me turn to some very good news that did emerge from our research — and some even better news that has occurred since we used our research to develop our public communications campaign.

★ First, the reality of the recession is making the public much more willing to consider the possibility that the nation's competitiveness is slipping — and more important — that there's a link between skills and jobs.

★ Despite the misconceptions and half-truths that characterize the public's understanding of the issue, there is a widely held conviction, repeatedly voiced in the focus groups and confirmed in national survey data, that **"something is wrong"** with the U.S. economy, ~~that we're skating on economic thin ice and that somehow, somewhere, we have~~ lost ~~something crucial to our success~~ as a nation.

★ The second piece of good news is that the public is deeply committed to education. Time and again, in survey after survey, and in study after study, Americans have endorsed the concept of universal education, universal literacy, and universal opportunity through education.

★ Americans from all economic strata, in all areas of the country, share the belief that a good education should be available to every child and that education is the key to the American dream.

✓ Third, the public's basic common sense is an enormous asset in a communications campaign such as ours. The public may not spontaneously make the connection between educational excellence and economic prosperity, but once those links are spelled out, the public readily understands and accepts them.

✓ Americans may not spontaneously talk about the need to increase productivity, or the need to make the best products at the best price, or the need to have a skilled, educated and motivated work force, but these concepts make sense to people when they are explained.

★ Finally, the public is ready to act. Unlike what so many observers have witnessed among the populations of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Americans do not believe that "the good life" is something to be delivered to them by government. Americans continue to believe that they are the makers of their own futures.

★ Even better news than these research results has been our recent experience in Nashville, Tennessee. From the start, our research was intended to serve merely as the starting point for our communications project, which is designed to educate people about the issues of workplace skills and competitiveness, to help them understand what's at stake for them and their children, and to give them materials that frame choices and options in a way they can understand. That is, we first wanted to identify the gaps between public and expert understanding — and then reduce them.

In Nashville, our first test city, we just completed an intensive, very productive, six-week communications campaign. Working with such partners as Vanderbilt

University, the local newspaper, the local CBS television affiliate, local radio stations, and businesses and civic groups, we gave the citizens of Nashville a chance to seriously consider these issues from a variety of perspectives.

There were town meetings and talk shows, daily articles and op-eds in the paper, documentaries and spot ads on TV.

✓ The campaign laid out several possible strategies for addressing the problem, including setting higher standards in both schools and the workplace, launching programs at school and at work to ensure that all Americans can read, write and do basic arithmetic, dramatically increasing the amount of math, science, computer and foreign language courses students take, and making the investment to attract many more qualified teachers in these subjects.

✓ The campaign did not recommend any specific solutions, but helped citizens explore the benefits and costs of a variety of approaches. At the end, citizens "voted" on a range of proposals that might be enacted nationally or locally.

✓ The balloting results are quite startling — and very encouraging.

☆ In our public opinion research, as reported in *Crosstalk*, we learned that people tend to be stuck on the "moral solutions" — believing that higher standards and harder work will, by themselves, be sufficient to solve the problem.

✓ In Nashville, after our campaign more participants expressed concern about inadequate schools and illiteracy as threats to prosperity than expressed concern about the declining work ethic. Solutions that focused on motivation — for instance, pay for performance at work, tying teacher pay to student performance in the schools — received only moderate support, much less than solutions that focused on improving skills.

In *Crosstalk*, we reported that people seem to have special difficulty in believing that a shortage of scientists and engineers is a real problem.

In Nashville, concern about this problem was right up there with illiteracy. What's more, the people who voted overwhelmingly supported requiring math and science for *all* kids from kindergarten through high school. They even supported special government scholarships for advanced study in these areas.

In *Crosstalk*, as well as in other studies, researchers find that people want good things — good schools, universal health insurance, more aid for the poor — but that when pressed, they aren't willing to pay for them or accept other tradeoffs.

In Nashville, people who voted accepted some tough trade-offs. We emphasized costs and consequences in virtually every question, and these people still wanted to act.

In *Crosstalk*, we reported that people don't really make the connection between education, worker skills and the health of the economy.

In Nashville, poor schools, illiteracy, shortage of scientific/technical personnel and declining work ethic came out as the ~~top four~~ threats to prosperity.

Why the turnabout? Why the big difference between our research findings and our first campaign results? Frankly, we're not sure. Probably those who returned their ballots in Nashville — as in every city in which we have run a campaign — were more interested in these issues to start with and therefore perhaps more willing to support choices such as science and math than the broader cross-sections of people that comprised our research sample.

★ But another possibility — and one we obviously would like to believe — is that the clarity and persuasiveness of our campaign had an impact.

✓ We were able to lay out the problem clearly. ✓ We gave the public a chance to sound off on its concerns — morals, values, discipline, motivation — through town meetings, on talk shows and on their ballots. ✓ And we exposed the public to differing viewpoints — to hear arguments that tough standards and hard work aren't enough, that maybe we also need to work smarter to compete more effectively.

✓ As I said, we can't take full credit for the Nashville results, but we are encouraged by them. From here, our project moves to Indianapolis, Hartford, Phoenix and Seattle, which will host Nashville-like campaigns this fall. Early next winter, the campaigns will be extended to the entire state of Louisiana and to the city of Austin, Texas.

✓ Just recently, we began conversations with leaders in Washington, DC, Atlanta and Denver about conducting campaigns in those cities.

This next stage should yield more quantifiable results, for we have enough funding to conduct pre- and post-campaign surveys at three of those sites. We'll be able to pinpoint very closely which approaches are most effective in enhancing citizen understanding, which are not and to learn why not. We intend to share those results with you and other policymakers and experts as soon as they're available.

★ After we have completed campaigns in our pilot cities and our pilot state, we intend to review our communications materials — and then take the campaign to a national audience.

✓ We have several mechanisms in place. Later in 1991 and continuing through 1992, ✓ the media campaign will be offered nationwide through about ~~250 ABC television network affiliates~~; we are delighted that ABC's Literacy Plus has become a partner in this endeavor. ✓ We also will make use of Public Agenda's Network for Public Debate — major ✓ newspapers and TV/radio stations in communities across the country — and the National

Issues Forums — a consortium of over 3,000 universities, libraries, and other local groups that convene town meetings on issues of real importance to the country.

✓ Additional campaigns will be nurtured by members of the Business-Higher Education Forum, which has been our partner from the start, and members of the Business Roundtable, which is helping put together the Hartford and Austin campaigns. The project ultimately will reach millions of Americans. Again, the results will be communicated regularly to policymakers, the press and other opinion leaders.

Thus, over the next few years you can count on us as active partners. We are eager to work with you, with the President, with Secretary Alexander and with community leaders across the country.

All of us who have been involved in this effort are very excited. We believe strongly that we are on to something. Clearly, we all have a major job to do. As you observed in your report:

"It is not enough for a small group of leaders to recognize the need for change.

Unless the American public and education professionals are convinced as well, little progress will be made. Yet the time for action is at hand. The task ahead is enormous. We cannot delay."

✂ We are under no illusion that our communications project is *the answer* to the education and training crisis. After all, unlike you, we are not pushing any agenda or advocating any specific reform proposals.

However, we are getting people ready to think seriously about your ambitious and challenging goals — and then to work state by state, city by city and school by school to

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build the kind of broad public consensus needed to transform those goals into reality by the year 2000. We think it can be done.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our ideas and preliminary findings with you.

file early

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David A. Hamburg, M.D.
President

February 26, 1997

Melanne Verveer
Deputy Assistant to the President
and Deputy Chief of Staff to the First Lady
Office of the First Lady
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Melanne:

It was a great meeting yesterday, indeed far beyond my imagination. Do such imaginative, stimulating, wide-ranging, far-sighted discussions actually take place in the White House? The topics we explored were indeed fundamental and have a great bearing on the future of our country.

Right now, I want to follow up as promptly as I can on several aspects of our discussion: 1) the 0-3 conference; 2) the Africa trip; 3) the democracy project.

I am sending you and Hillary a couple of items that bear on 0-3 and the developmental strategy beyond the earliest years. I am also enclosing some material on Africa. In that context, could you let me know which countries you expect to visit so that I can make some specific suggestions?

I hope some of this will be useful to you, and I look forward with great pleasure to our continuing efforts.

Thanks so very much for your kindness to Peggy as well as to me. I am excited about the opportunity she will have and contributions she will make.

With every good wish,

As always,

David

P.S. Hillary mentioned she would like me to comment on her portion of the Reiner script. I'll be happy to do it.