



Ready For The Real World?

Americans Speak
On High School Reform

Executive Summary

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Public opinion research conducted by
Peter D. Hart and David Winston

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schools Are Central to America's Success, but School Ratings Show Little Progress

Americans are of one mind about the importance of the public education system in that they see our past commitment to public education as the leading factor contributing to our nation's success in the world (as important as our democratic system of government and more important than our military strength and our entrepreneurial culture). Despite the importance Americans place on education, fewer than one in ten (9%) say that students graduating from America's public schools have faced high expectations, and Americans strongly feel that public schools must improve for America to retain its competitive position in the world.

Few (11%) Americans say that schools are working well enough today (the same proportion who said that this was the case four years ago) and they continue to be divided between those who say that we should make minor changes to public schools but basically keep them as is (39%) and those who say that schools need major changes (30%) or a complete overhaul (18%). The desire to improve education leads to strong majority support for a wide range of reform proposals, including setting high standards for student achievement, and holding students accountable through regular learning assessments—the principles that undergird the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) reform initiative.

Awareness of NCLB continues to grow, and a significant proportion (45%) feel positive toward it. But the full impact of the Act's reform efforts have yet to be felt, and the public grades American schools nearly same as they did prior to NCLB's passage, resulting in a C. Parents grade their child's school slightly higher with grades that average to a B. Although the NCLB reforms are directed toward K-8 education and do not extend to high school, it is noteworthy that high school teachers overwhelmingly feel unfavorable toward it (19% favorable, 75% unfavorable).

Policy Choices and False Choices

The general public and high school teachers part ways on other issues throughout the survey, and their differences may be rooted in a fundamental disagreement on how, or perhaps even whether, to set standards and measure performance. Most (55%) Americans say that all students, teachers, and schools should be held to the same performance standard even if many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds; once more, endorsing a fundamental precept of NCLB. Only one-quarter (26%) of teachers agree. Instead, 60% of teachers say that students enter school with different backgrounds and levels of academic preparation, and we should not expect teachers working with disadvantaged students to have their students reach the same performance level as teachers working in more affluent schools.

Both the public and high school educators believe that they are being offered what might be termed a false choice on how to measure schools and hold them accountable. When asked to choose between measuring student progress (how much a student has learned over a period of time) and achievement (how much a student knows compared with an established and firm standard), a majority (53%) of the public prefer to measure progress. The public (72%) and

educators (74% of administrators, 63% of teachers) say that a more practical and desirable system, however, would measure both progress and achievement.

The Public Believes That We Must Significantly Change Public High Schools

Even though the public sees elementary schools as higher priorities for reform, 51% say that high schools need major changes or a complete overhaul. Majorities say that high schools are coming up short or falling behind in preparing students to be successful in two- and four-year colleges (51%), giving students going into the work force the training and skills that they will need (63%), and matching the high school experience to be compatible with each student's next step in life (62%). Majorities also say that schools are coming up short or falling behind in teaching the basics (51%), maintaining high standards and challenging all students (64%), and supporting struggling students and preventing dropouts (69%).

Although political leaders and some educators may be turning the discussion to high school reform, the public and high school educators do not see K-8 education reform as “done” yet. Advocates have a difficult communications challenge ahead of them if their goal is to move on to high school reform. Fewer than one in ten (6%) adults think that a great deal has been accomplished in making the reforms necessary to improve K-8 schools, and only slightly larger proportions of high school administrators (10%) and teachers (18%) say the same. Many believe that one of the central problems with high school education is the education quality that students receive prior to high school. The general public, parents, high school teachers, and high school administrators all say that most students arrive at high schools with preparation gaps for high-school-level work. For these reasons, reforming elementary schools is seen as the highest priority. Given limited resources, the public resists saying that now is the time to turn our attention to high schools.

Disconnect Exists Between High School Educators' Views and the General Public's View

High school teachers (31% major changes/overhaul) and administrators (20%) clearly are following the beat of a different drummer than is the public when it comes to their views of the quality of public high school education, as far fewer of each group say that major changes or a complete overhaul of high schools is needed. The differences are especially clear when administrators judge how well high schools are doing providing the skills and training necessary for the work force (35% coming up short/falling behind), preparing students for college (25%), and teaching the basics (16%). Administrators (65%) and the public agree (69%) that schools are coming up short supporting struggling students and preventing dropouts.

Leading Causes of High School Problems Seen as Outside School Control

Although the public believes that high schools come up short on many counts, adults think that some of the key issues are those that often are outside a high school's control. When asked to identify the central problem with our high schools, the general public (64% good explanation) and high school parents (69%) are most likely to point to problems in our broader society and the strain they put on teachers in classrooms. The general public also cites schools not getting the funding that they need (51%) and the preparation that students receive in grade and middle

schools (50%).

Problems endemic to high schools are slightly less likely to be cited as the central problem by the public, but many still say that they are good explanations. Students not working hard enough or taking challenging courses because the standards are too low (45%) and large and impersonal high schools are the two next most-often cited problems (45%). Administrators are more likely to say that large and impersonal high schools are a good explanation of the central problem (52%), and they more frequently cite the lack of accountability than do other groups (53%).

All groups acknowledge that high schools are not doing well enough preventing dropouts. Nevertheless, the public does not blame dropouts as the central problem with high schools. Rather, the public recommends focusing on the middle of the student bell curve to ensure that students do not get passed through the system without the proper skills.

Expectations Are Not High Enough and Students Are Not Challenged

Despite the important role they believe that education plays in our success as a nation, Americans do not believe that we provide a rigorous high school experience for most students. Fewer than one in ten (9%) adults say that expectations are high and most students are significantly challenged in high school. The majority (57%) believe that expectations are moderate and most students are somewhat challenged, whereas three in ten (30%) say that most students face low expectations. This corroborates the findings of a recent survey conducted by Achieve, Inc., in which only 24% of recent high school graduates say that they faced high expectations and were significantly challenged.

Using an Individualized Approach to Build Core Knowledge

The public seeks education that values each individual student's needs, interests, and abilities, but it also thinks that a number of classes should be included in a core knowledge for all students. As we are so often reminded when it comes to complex or difficult public policy issues, the choice of words matters. Those who propose making college preparatory classes standard for all high school students have a steep hill to climb when it comes to convincing the public of the merits of that specific reform proposal; all the groups surveyed believe that some students are better off outside a college preparatory education and instead should receive training for specific job skills (76% of the public). Yet, despite strong support for vocational education for some students, the public defines a rigorous course of study, something that appears a lot like a "college prep" curriculum, as the core knowledge that all students should have before graduation, including four years of English (85%), three years of history and civics (81%), four years of mathematics (73%), at least three years of science (69%), and two years of foreign language (63%). Of significance is the overwhelming proportion who support including one year of computer science (95%) in that core curriculum.

Again, while the public reacts negative to college preparatory classes for all, without a strong career and technical education component for students going straight to work, they also support requiring all students to take advanced courses. Although the public acknowledges that not all

students head to college, it expects a broad and deep education that prepares them for whatever challenges await them next.

In a variety of ways in the survey, the public is clearly stating its belief that that high schools can both be made to offer a more individualized learning experience and at the same time hold all students to high standards of achievement. The public wants a high school system that is personalized and takes into account the unique needs of every student, but it believes that this approach should include a rigorous set of core skills and knowledge should be part of every high school student's experience.

The Public Endorses Teacher Quality and Real-world Learning

Education is so central and the public's desire for improvement is so strong that people strongly support a broad range of proposed solutions, even when they seem contradictory. Indeed, when the public is given a long list of specific proposals to improve high schools, majorities favor each proposal. The highest proportion (74%) of the public strongly favor making sure that teachers are experts in their subjects, demonstrating how central quality teaching is to education.

The public supports measures that create more individualized approaches to learning and take into account each student's unique needs, abilities, and plans for the future. A 64% majority strongly favor work-study programs, community service, and vocational courses to place greater emphasis on real-world learning. Fifty-seven percent strongly favor a change to the basic approach to the senior year of high school, giving students an option to spend less time in high school classes if they are in a qualified work-study program, working toward industry certification, or taking college classes. Proposals to make the high school experience more individualized by having students develop their own plan of study and pursue their own goals and giving students more choices about the type of high school they attend by creating different types within the same school system also are supported by a majority.

At the same time, the public would put greater emphasis on an individualized education, it also favors reforms that raise standards and hold both schools and students accountable for meeting those standards. Adults do not see these approaches as mutually exclusive, as fully 80% favor (53% strongly, 27% somewhat) requiring students to pass a statewide graduation test before they receive a diploma and seven in ten favor (42% strongly, 30% somewhat) extending the NCLB reforms to high school to raise standards and hold schools accountable.

The public also approves of developing more academically rigorous standards with greater emphasis on honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes (36% strongly); however, some oppose this proposal, especially adults who are worried about possible dropouts. The public wants to raise standards, but it wants each student to have the option to pursue higher standards in a way that makes sense for them.

Most Americans also favor increasing high school funding. A majority strongly favor increasing teacher salaries to hire and retain more well qualified teachers (51%). The public favors spending more on high school education, even if it means an increase in taxes, however,

this support is contingent upon confidence that the money spent would improve education quality.

Reform Needed for Global Competitiveness

Throughout the survey it is clear that the public believes the stakes in reforming education could not be higher. Three-quarters (76%) say that America's ability to compete in the world would be weakened if 25 years from now high schools have not changed and still are operating the same as they do now. Americans believe that our public education system is not only the reason that America has become a world leader, but also that continued improvement and reform is crucial to retaining that position in the newly more competitive global marketplace.

The public strongly believes that our high schools must be improved, and that students must take more rigorous courses and be challenged to reach a higher standard of learning and skills development to be successful in the next stages of their lives. Their strong support for such a wide range of reform proposals gives education leaders broad latitude to put forward a reform agenda that they believe offers the best chance for meaningful improvements in our nation's public high schools.

From April 5 to 17, 2005, Peter D. Hart Research Associates and The Winston Group conducted a national survey among 2,250 adults, including a national sample of 1,009 adults. Additional groups were oversampled to provide statistically significant results, specifically, an additional 180 parents of K-12 students to bring the total to 666 parents of K-12 students, an additional 150 parents of high school students to bring the total to 371 parents of high school students, 300 adults in California for a total of 439, 302 adults from New Jersey for a total of 319, and 309 adults in Ohio for a total of 393. In addition, telephone surveys among 300 high school administrators (superintendents, school board members, principals and vice principals) and 300 high school teachers were conducted. At the 95% confidence level, the data's margin of error is ± 3.1 percentage points among all adults and larger for the subsamples of parents of K-12 students ($\pm 3.8\%$), parents of high school students ($\pm 5.1\%$), California adults ($\pm 5.6\%$), New Jersey adults ($\pm 6.7\%$), Ohio adults ($\pm 6.1\%$), high school teachers (± 5.7), and high school administrators (± 5.7). Sample tolerances for other subgroups are larger.

Prior to conducting the surveys, Hart Research convened four focus group discussions among parents of public school children (2), and high school administrators (2). Groups were conducted in Alexandria, Virginia, and Columbus, Ohio.