
Standards and Accountability Where the Public Stands

**A report from Public Agenda
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by Jean Johnson
with Ann Duffett

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Standards and Accountability: Where the Public Stands

Opinion research conducted by Public Agenda and others has shown high levels of support for raising academic standards in the nation's public schools. In question after question and survey after survey, Americans endorse the concept of asking students to learn more, and they want public schools to take steps to make sure that this learning does in fact take place. Support for raising standards is strong among Americans in every part of the country and from every walk of life.

Public Agenda's most recent *Reality Check* survey, conducted in cooperation with *Education Week*, shows, for example, that overwhelming majorities of parents (83 percent), teachers (79 percent), employers (94 percent) and college professors (90 percent) say having guidelines for what students are expected to learn and know helps improve academic performance. Majorities agree that high school students would be better off taking tougher classes where expectations are higher. Teachers, employers and professors in particular say students would benefit from being pushed harder.¹

Appalled at a Lack of Basic Skills

Surveys consistently show that Americans are especially anxious for every child to master at least basic skills – generally defined as a command of standard English, including grammar, spelling and punctuation, plus arithmetic.² Public Agenda studies also have shown that people hope most children will learn far more than the basics in school. The large majority of parents, in fact, expect their own child to attend college. But for most Americans, basics springs to mind as the very first standard – the set of skills that all children absolutely must master.³ In focus groups, people are often outraged that any youngster is allowed to drift through school without acquiring such minimal skills. According to a 1998 Peter Hart survey, almost nine in 10 Americans (88 percent) say “low academic standards” is a serious concern in the nation's schools.⁴

Public Agenda has found that employers and college professors in particular voice frustration over lack of basics. More than three-quarters of both employers and professors give recent high school graduates fair or poor ratings for grammar and spelling. Just as many say students' ability to write clearly is generally fair or poor. Most also express disappointment with student work habits, motivation and basic math skills.⁵

Reality Sets In

Given these views, it is not surprising that the movement to raise academic standards in the nation's public schools strikes such a responsive chord. It addresses a problem that people care about, and it does so in a way that appeals to people's common sense. But strong public support for higher standards does not mean that the issue is immune from the normal controversies and complications that accompany any large-scale policy change.

In communities nationwide, the reality of higher standards is just beginning to set in. Students face new promotion or graduation requirements and tougher tests. In many districts, their chances of mandatory summer school or “being kept back” have increased markedly. Parents, teachers and administrators are all coping with unfamiliar procedures and guidelines. So the question is – given the public’s strong commitment to the goal – what can leaders do to smooth the way through the inevitable rough spots that will occur? And how can leaders avoid the missteps that could undermine (or at least jar) public confidence in standards reform?

Reminding People Why We’re Here

Experts and decision-makers often must concentrate on the labyrinth of complex details needed to make a policy work in real life. But to sustain public support for change, particularly change that touches people’s families and daily lives, leaders need to take time periodically to restate the basic rationale, to remind people of the beliefs and values that underlie reform. When the going gets a bit rough, people need to be reminded of why we’re here.

For most Americans, there are several key beliefs that underlie their support for standards.

You Ask More, You Get More

Central to the public’s belief in higher standards is what amounts to a philosophical rule of thumb for dealing with children. Ask more from them, and they will do more. Ask less, and they will do just enough to get by. This belief is especially powerful for many people because it often stems from experiences they have had in their own lives. In focus groups, participants often tell stories about teachers, parents, bosses or even drill sergeants who challenged them, and as a result, brought them to a higher plane of accomplishment. If it’s been true in my own life, people reason, then it will work for others as well.

Basics First

Surveys show that while Americans expect many things from public schools, one mission repeatedly rises to the top of everyone’s list: Schools must guarantee that all children read and write English and do basic arithmetic. In earlier studies, Public Agenda has attempted to clarify what some see as the public’s “preoccupation” with basics. As we point out, Americans believe that a young person without basic skills will struggle economically for the rest of his or her life. They don’t understand how a student can go “beyond the basics” until he or she has them firmly in hand. And they simply cannot conceive how it is possible for a student to spend a decade or more in school and not learn how to read and write. For much of the public, this is the most compelling rationale of all for raising standards.

The Cruelty of Social Promotion

Educators nationwide now are engaged in a heated debate about social promotion and retention, with many arguing that retention by itself does not improve student learning. It is unlikely that the public has absorbed the details of this debate, and for many, a debate between retention versus social promotion may seem a false and frustrating choice. Surveys routinely show that most Americans believe it is preferable to keep children back rather than to pass them along without having learned the needed skills.⁶ Some research also suggests that people may be more

open to promotion for underachievers if these students receive intensive remedial help.⁷ But for the public, the heart of the issue is not whether retention is such a good idea, but rather that social promotion seems to be such an awful one. For many Americans, social promotion (as they believe it has been practiced) seems downright cruel.

Not Ready to Write Off Kids

Some standards advocates worry that many Americans believe that young people, especially ones from disadvantaged backgrounds, cannot achieve at high levels. But Public Agenda surveys show that people have enormous confidence in the potential and resilience of today's youngsters, even those who don't get the best start in life. In a recent study of public attitudes toward children and teens, Americans voice bitter disappointment with the behavior of today's youth. But almost in the next breath, they reiterate their conviction that virtually every youngster can learn to become a capable and productive adult. Seventy-five percent of Americans say that "given enough help and attention, just about all kids can learn and succeed in school."⁸ Despite their frustrations and their fears about today's youth, most people just aren't ready to give up on them.

Standards and Equal Opportunity

Last year, Public Agenda took an in-depth look at the views of white and African American parents on the issue of equal educational opportunity. For African American parents, lagging academic achievement among black youngsters is a crisis. For white parents, the situation is more likely to be seen as a serious problem, not a crisis. (Relatively few parents say the problem is exaggerated.) For differing reasons, both groups voice wariness about time-honored strategies such as busing or redistricting. But both groups soundly endorse establishing and enforcing higher academic standards in schools with large numbers of minority youngsters. Among African American parents, for example, 87 percent say having teachers and principals who push students to study and excel is absolutely essential to a good school (compared to 82 percent among white parents).⁹

What Could Undercut Support for Higher Standards?

By many measures, Americans' current support for standards might be considered "as good as it gets." Compared to Americans' attitudes about reforming Social Security or health care, for example, public support for raising standards is long established and remarkably stable. But the public's belief in the goal of raising standards does not mean that leaders can shift into automatic pilot or bypass the fundamentals of sound policymaking. Here are some pitfalls that could derail and unsettle support:

Standards Not the Cure-All

Support for raising standards is broad and deep, but reformers would be mistaken if they assume that standards and accountability are the only education problems people have on their minds. Even before the killings at Columbine High School sparked far-reaching anxiety about school violence, Americans routinely named problems with safety and order as top public school concerns. According to the 1998 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa survey, over two-thirds of Americans say drugs, discipline, smoking, alcohol and teen pregnancy are serious problems in public

schools in their own communities. Almost as many express serious concern about fighting and gangs.¹⁰ Almost all Americans want students to learn more, but most doubt that learning can take place in unsafe, uncivil or overcrowded schools with inexperienced and continually changing staff. Very few Americans see raising academic standards as the cure-all for schools that do not have their basic daily operations well in hand.

Fairly Managed?

No policy reform, no matter how broadly supported, can hold onto public support if it is not competently and fairly managed, and that means more than just delivering bottom-line results. Standards advocates might do well to take a lesson from those who have tried to reform health care over the last decade. Surveys in the 1980s showed Americans deeply concerned about the cost of health care, convinced that doctors often perform too many tests and procedures, and at least open to some features of managed care. But support for the managed care approach has dwindled as patients have encountered one-day hospital stays for deliveries and mastectomies and colluded with doctors on ways to get care covered under layers of new rules. Most Americans now say managed care is inferior – not because of declining health care statistics and life-expectancy rates – but because they fear that the system is becoming arbitrary, callous and arcane. By the same token, school reform advocates had better be prepared to show how they intend to help all children reach these high standards.

Getting Teachers on Board

Most districts have already taken steps to include administrators, senior teachers and union representatives in the development of new standards and accountability practices. But to assume that these steps, as worthwhile as they are, are all that is needed to “involve teachers” could be a dangerous miscalculation. For most parents, classroom teachers serve as the interpreters, even the ambassadors for reform. If teachers believe that standards policies are important and well thought out, they can sustain and nourish parental support. If teachers are convinced that standards policies are unfair or destructive, they can undercut parental support with extraordinary speed.

Surveys show that teachers generally back raising standards, but they are less likely than others to say that standards in their own schools are too low.¹¹ What’s more, large numbers of teachers feel frustrated by what they see as lack of student effort and parental and administrative support.¹² In focus groups, teachers often say that they learn more about major district-wide changes from rumors than from the administration. District directives are often ridiculed or resented, and experienced teachers have already been through waves of reform, which in their minds produce very little of value. Public Agenda’s research strongly suggests that bringing the nation’s teacher corps firmly inside the movement to raise standards could be the most pivotal challenge of all.

Counting on Parents to Lead the Fight

Like other Americans, parents strongly support raising standards. Large majorities say it is essential that schools have teachers who push students to excel, and they want schools to promote kids only when they have learned what they need to know.¹³ But standards advocates

who hope that parents will become the driving force behind reform could well be disappointed. Public Agenda studies suggest very few parents feel comfortable as activists, getting deep into the nitty-gritty of curriculum design or teaching reform.¹⁴ Most are not especially well-informed or vigilant consumers, even concerning their own child's progress.

In general, parents accept grades as accurate measures of their child's proficiency, and very few know much about how their child's skills compare to those of youngsters nationwide, much less how they compare to the skills of kids abroad.¹⁵ Relatively few parents have the experience to say precisely what their child needs to learn or when – and how – he or she should learn it. Parents, even well-educated ones, look to teachers and schools to provide guidance on this, and they generally accept what teachers tell them.

Expecting 100 Percent Happiness

A common question among standards advocates is what will happen when tougher new tests and more rigorous accountability measures really come into play – when the rubber hits the road. Will some parents begin to have doubts? Will some begin to complain? Will some start saying the entire enterprise is useless and unfair? Opinion research cannot predict every response, but the answer to these questions is undoubtedly yes. No serious policy change is ever universally popular, and even the most level-headed parents may become upset if their own child's progress is questioned. The challenge for educators and decision-makers is to plan for at least some level of disenchantment and regret, since it will be almost impossible to avoid.

The Question No One Wants to Ask

Most of the current discussion about standards and public opinion centers on one question: Will public support for standards endure as schools move forward to raise the academic bar and as they put consistent accountability practices into place? Research suggests that as far as public opinion goes, Americans have signed on. Across all demographic groups, Americans say they want leadership to move ahead. They want schools to improve student learning and they want them to guarantee at least a basic academic education for every child.

But another question may be much harder to answer. What happens if the nation's public schools don't succeed in raising standards? What happens if this reform effort, like some before it, disintegrates or derails? Opinion research can't predict what would happen in this event, but the research does suggest, very strongly, that this is one question the public hopes researchers will never have to ask.

Jean Johnson, author of this piece, is a senior vice president with Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in New York City.

Following the "Standards and Accountability" endnotes are additional education resources from Public Agenda Online, the Inside Source for Public Opinion and Policy Analysis.

Endnotes

1. *Reality Check '99*, Public Agenda. National surveys of public school teachers, public school students, parents, college professors and employers, conducted October–November 1998. Published in *Education Week's Quality Counts '99*, January 11, 1999.
2. *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,198 adults, conducted August 1994. Also, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,200 adults and 1,151 leaders, conducted October 1995.
3. See *Assignment Incomplete*, Public Agenda.
4. Peter D. Hart Research Associates (sponsored by Shell Oil Company). National survey of 1,123 adults, conducted July 17–20, 1998.
5. See *Reality Check '99*, Public Agenda.
6. See *Reality Check '99*, Public Agenda.
7. Princeton Survey Research Associates (sponsored by *Newsweek*). National survey of 407 parents of children in grades K–8, conducted March 5–10, 1998.
8. *Kids These Days '99*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,005 adults, conducted December 1998.
9. *Time To Move On: African American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools*, Public Agenda. National survey of 800 African American and 800 white parents with children in grades K–12, conducted March–April 1998.
10. Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). National survey of 1,151 adults, conducted June 5–23, 1998.
11. See *Reality Check '99*, Public Agenda.
12. *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Public Schools*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,220 parents with children in public school and 1,000 public school teachers, conducted November–December 1998.
13. See *Time To Move On*, Public Agenda.
14. See *Playing Their Parts*, Public Agenda.
15. See *Reality Check '99*, Public Agenda.



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