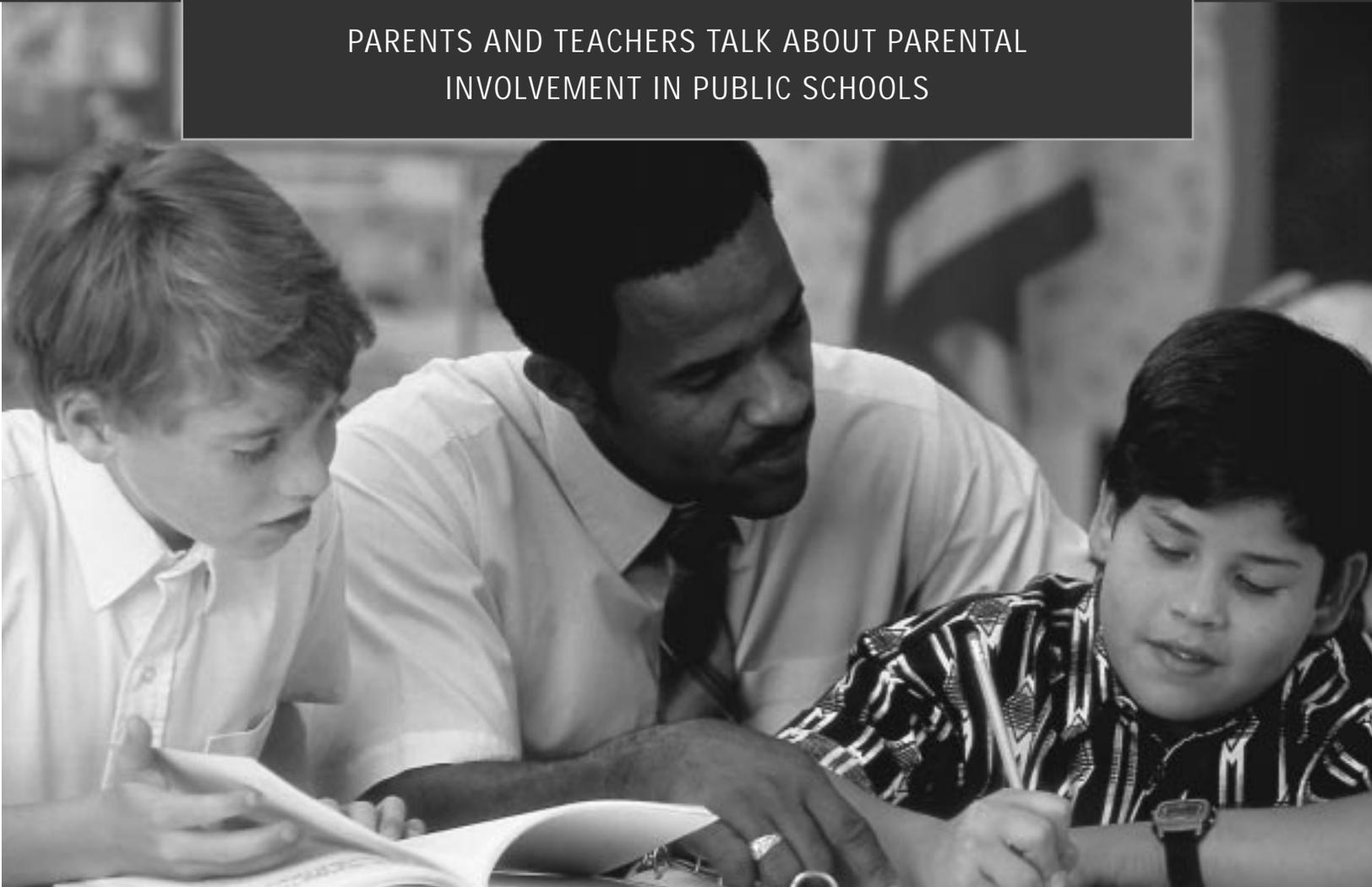




PLAYING THEIR PARTS:

PARENTS AND TEACHERS TALK ABOUT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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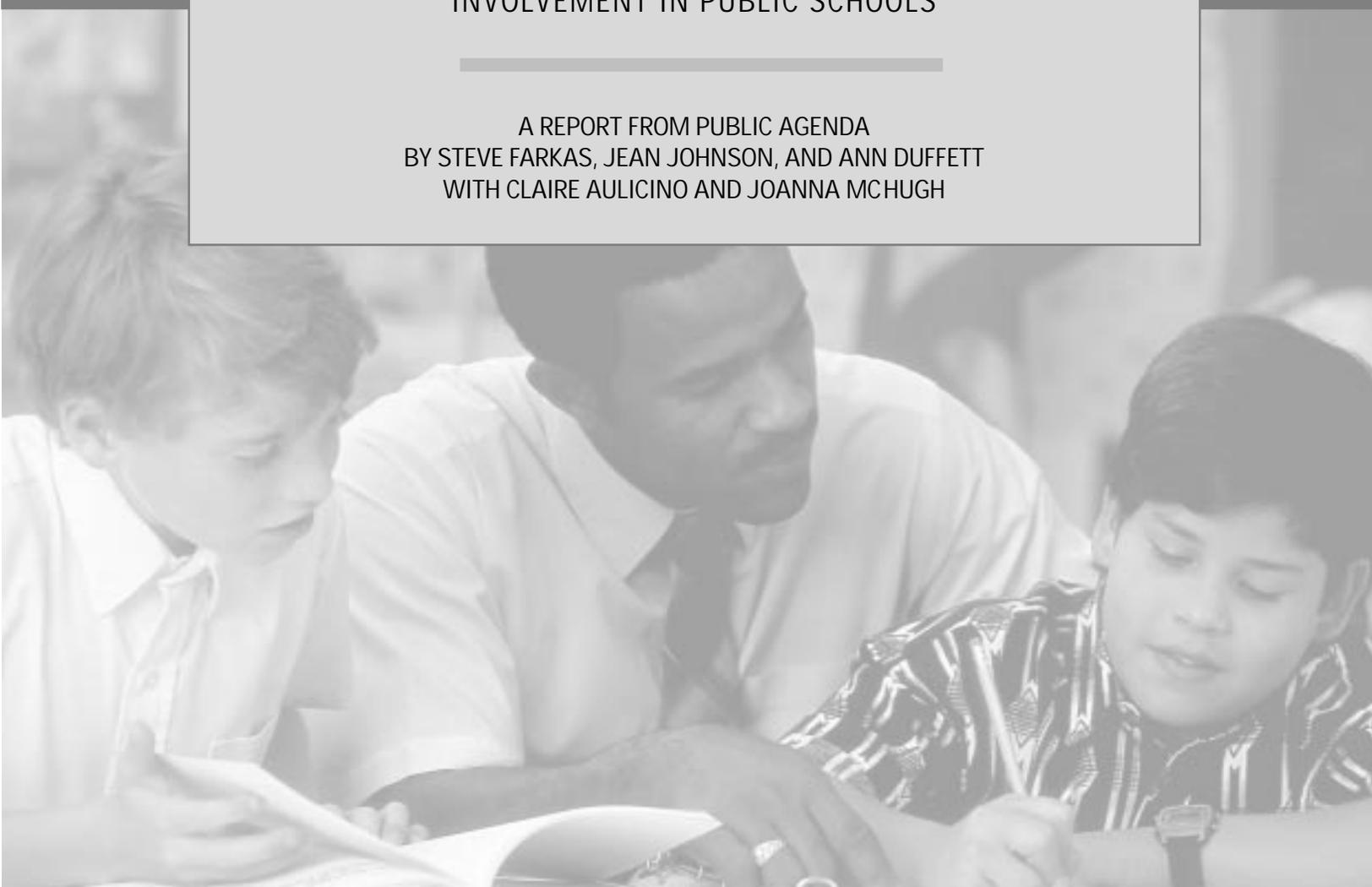
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PLAYING THEIR PARTS:

PARENTS AND TEACHERS TALK ABOUT PARENTAL
INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A REPORT FROM PUBLIC AGENDA
BY STEVE FARKAS, JEAN JOHNSON, AND ANN DUFFETT
WITH CLAIRE AULICINO AND JOANNA MCHUGH



ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda 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 citizens think about policy forms the basis for 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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And Public Agenda's Executive Director, Deborah Wadsworth, whose dedication to the issues and remarkable insight guide our organization.

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INTRODUCTION



On the face of it, parental involvement seems to be one of the least controversial areas in public education. Increasing parent involvement is one of the country's eight National Education Goals—a set of public policy objectives backed by Presidents Bush and Clinton, the governors of the 50 states and U.S. territories, and all manner of business and education groups. Parents, teachers, and policy makers all seemingly endorse the concept. While research on vouchers, class size, per-pupil expenditures, and reading and math instruction has been hotly contested by scholars who draw starkly different conclusions, studies suggesting that children whose parents are involved in their education achieve more academically have been accepted with little dispute.

The Smooth Surface of Agreement

Beneath this smooth surface of agreement, however, are a number of potentially divisive and contentious questions. What, exactly, does parental involvement mean to those aiming to increase it? More parents serving on school boards? Parents approving curriculum guides or textbooks? Helping with homework? Chaperoning field trips? Backing teachers when children misbehave in class? And, given the breadth of activities parental involvement might encompass, do parents and teachers really see eye-to-eye on what the core elements should be?

The Basis of the Study

Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools summarizes findings from two national opinion surveys that looked at these and related questions. One survey assessed the views of 1,000 public school teachers, while the other examined the views of 1,220 parents of children currently in public school. Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that regularly reports on public attitudes toward major policy issues, designed and analyzed both surveys following a series of focus groups with parents, teachers, and teenagers and one-on-one interviews with education and child care experts. The research was sponsored by Kraft Foods.

On the face of it, parental involvement seems to be one of the least controversial areas in public education.

For Public Agenda, *Playing Their Parts* is the latest of more than a dozen opinion studies on public education conducted over the last decade. This body of research examines a wide variety of educational topics, including student achievement, academic standards, curriculum, safety and discipline, integration, accountability, and bilingual education, among others. During this time, we have looked closely at the views of the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers, and college professors, along with those of key subgroups such as white, African American, Hispanic, traditional Christian, and foreign-born parents. Public Agenda has also explored Americans' overall attitudes about children, teens, and families in a series of tracking surveys begun in 1997 (sponsored by The Advertising Council and Ronald McDonald House Charities) and continuing to the year 2002.

Universal Accolades, Underlying Doubts

Playing Their Parts delves into teacher and parent attitudes on what may be the most broadly popular of current educational initiatives—“increasing parental involvement in children’s education.” But while the idea attracts nearly universal accolades, earlier Public Agenda studies surfaced underlying doubts, discrepancies, and dissatisfactions that seemed to warrant a closer look. In focus groups, for example, teachers routinely say parents need to be more involved, but some also complain about parents who are overinvolved, overly indulgent, and sometimes abrasive. Parents often say that they don’t know how to help their child learn, and some complain that schools aren’t actually all that welcoming. Earlier surveys show that parents give themselves reasonably good marks for involvement, but teens say their parents mostly just complain about grades at report card time. Some experts have questioned whether widespread parent involvement is realistic in an era of two-job families, surges in single parenting, and growing numbers of parents who speak minimal, if any, English. So, this study asks, what is really happening here? What do teachers and parents really expect, and just how close are they to getting it?

No Neat Package of “To Do’s”

The findings we lay out in the following pages may unsettle some who have worked diligently—and with enormous goodwill—to advance specific approaches to parental involvement. Adding to the disappointment and frustration some readers may feel, *Playing Their Parts* does not offer a neat package of “to do’s” that schools can quickly and easily act on to bring more parents into the fold.

Playing Their Parts does, however, clarify some extremely murky areas of miscommunication among parents, teachers, and school officials. Even more important, it reveals a deep well of concern about the state of the nation’s children—one that is shared by parents, teachers, and the general public alike and one that has received relatively little attention from leadership and the media. As such, we believe this report requires more than a cursory reading. It calls for genuine contemplation about the issue it reveals and a far more explicit conversation about what parents and schools should do—jointly and separately—to advance our children’s academic success.

FINDING ONE: A Veneer of Cordiality

On the surface, parents and teachers have cordial and positive relationships, and a tone of mutual respect is evident. Parents give teachers good marks for accessibility and offering sound advice. Teachers report generally positive interactions with parents—at least the ones they see. Some widely discussed problems such as lack of support on discipline problems, for example, appear to be relatively infrequent occurrences. Nonetheless, teachers are quite dissatisfied with the performance of parents overall. Substantial majorities of teachers and parents as well believe that far too many parents are just not living up to their end of the deal.

It is axiomatic that for education to be a successful enterprise, parents and teachers have to work together and relations have to be comfortable—not marred by distrust, fear, and recrimination. The good news from this study is that parents and teachers agree that their interactions are routinely positive and cooperative: parents report that teachers care about their kids and give sound advice on ways to help children learn. Teachers report that parents often compliment them and generally support them when student discipline is a problem.

Yet teachers—and parents themselves—are far from being satisfied with the state of parental involvement in education today. Moreover, discussions on how to improve parental involvement are complicated—even bedeviled—by conflicting, overlapping, and even confused definitions about just what it should be.

Teachers: Positive Feedback Is the Norm

By teachers' own accounting, parents are generally cordial and far from hypercritical of their performance. Asked to reflect on their experiences, few teachers report they have been subject to criticism by parents; for most, positive feedback and compliments are closer to the norm. More than eight in ten (84%) say parents have never or only once or twice complained to the principal about them. In contrast, two in three (67%) say parents have occasionally or regularly praised their work to their boss.

The vast majority of teachers (86%) have never or seldom had parents who criticized their teaching

abilities. In fact, about nine in ten teachers (89%) say parents occasionally or regularly give them compliments. One teacher interviewed for the project noted: "They thank you for showing an interest in their children, when you spend extra time with their kids, to talk with them."

Even when teachers discipline their students, most (80%) say they get support from the parents. A Michigan teacher had his own statistic to report: "Ninety-nine percent of the time I am backed up by the parents."

Discussions on how to improve parental involvement are complicated—even bedeviled—by conflicting, overlapping, and even confused definitions about just what it should be.

"The Teacher Seems Real Nice"

For their part, parents too are pleased with the interaction they have with their children's teachers, and most report that teachers are normally friendly, concerned, and accessible.

The vast majority (83%) of parents interviewed for this study reported that they had already met with their child's teacher by the time of the survey (December 1998)—and, by overwhelming majorities, they left that meeting with good feelings. Nearly all (95%) report the teacher made them feel "very comfortable and welcome." Just 22% of parents who had met with a teacher had the feeling that he or she "seemed to be in a rush to get through the meeting."

A mom in a Chicago suburb was typical of many parents interviewed for this study when she compared today’s teachers with the ones she had growing up: “Teachers seem to care more now. They have a day where the family comes in, the teacher seems real nice. The building is the same, but the teachers are more friendly—you can call them anytime.” Other groups of professionals—lawyers or doctors—would probably be quite pleased if their constituents gave them similar evaluations.

Getting Good Advice

Parents also credit teachers with genuine concern about their child’s academic progress and valuable expertise on what helps kids learn. More than nine in ten (95%) parents say they got the sense that “the teacher seemed to genuinely care about my child.” Almost as many (90%) left parent-teacher meetings with the impression that the “teacher seemed to really know how to motivate kids and help them do their best.” In fact, almost six in ten (59%) parents say they

have gone to teachers for help about how to motivate their child, reporting that the teacher took their concerns seriously (83%) and gave them specific advice that turned out to be effective (79%).

More Emotional Terrain

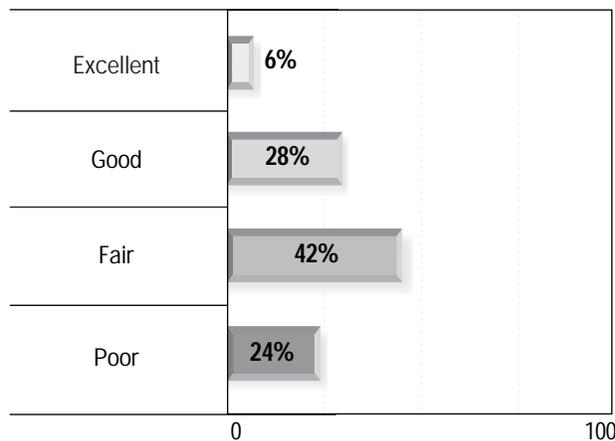
Even when it comes to the far more emotional terrain of discipline and punishment, most parents say that in their own experience, teachers have usually been right when they have complained about their children’s behavior. About four in ten parents (41%) say that they have had a teacher complain about their child’s behavior in school; of these, most (64%) say the complaint was fair; and most (67%) punished or disciplined their child as a result. “You have to analyze every situation on its own merits, but I tend to believe the teacher’s side,” said a Westchester parent. “Teachers have a tough role, and I want to support them—especially in maintaining discipline.”

These perceptions indicate that teachers still enjoy a presumptive sympathy and a healthy respect from

Should Parents Be More Involved?

TEACHERS

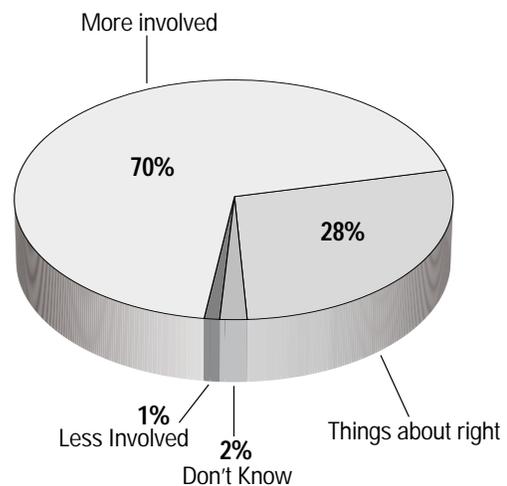
Overall, how would you rate the parents at your school in terms of their involvement with their children’s education?



NOTE: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available from Public Agenda in the Technical Appendix for this study. Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

PARENTS

Thinking about the parents you know, do most parents need to get more involved in their children’s education, less involved, or are things about right?



most parents. This does not mean parents operate under blind faith: if a teacher complained about their child's behavior but the child said the teacher was mistaken, 44% say their first reaction would be to believe the child; indeed, 46% of teachers say parents are sometimes right to question them on matters of discipline or grades. Nevertheless, the widespread belief among parents is that when it comes to teachers, civility is the best policy: 85% agree that a parent "should never criticize a teacher in front of their child," with 64% *strongly* agreeing. "If I didn't like a teacher, I wouldn't put her down," said a Connecticut mom. "You want to teach your child to have respect for adults and to have respect for their teachers." For this dad in Massachusetts, it was a simpler matter: "I don't believe you should ever criticize somebody in front of somebody else. For instance, I wouldn't work for a boss that would criticize me in front of another employee. It's just common courtesy."

A Vote of No Confidence

But despite all the optimistic signs pointing to a surface calm, there are also compelling indications from this study that something is seriously amiss

Despite all the optimistic signs pointing to a surface calm, there are also compelling indications from this study that something is seriously amiss when it comes to parent-teacher relations.

when it comes to parent-teacher relations. For all their positive views toward parents, only one-third of teachers (34%) give their school's parents excellent or good ratings on involvement with their children's education—while two-thirds (66%) give them fair or even poor ratings. And while

teachers say that their relations with the parents they actually see are cordial, many express concern about the level of involvement among parents generally. Only 27% say parental involvement at their school is high, while 35% say it is average and 38% say it is low.

Parents join teachers in saying that parental involvement is inadequate. Asked about the parents they

know, seven in ten (70%) say most need to get more involved in their children's education. Fully 82% agree that "too many parents expect the school to do their job for them," with 54% *strongly* agreeing.

Parent Involvement: The Catch-all Term

The term parental involvement seems to mean many things to many people. For some, parental involvement means getting more parents involved in school government and management and in participating in academic arenas such as shaping curriculum and selecting textbooks. For others, the traditional image of parents as school volunteers and field trip chaperones is what immediately springs to mind. Others seem to focus on what is happening in the home: that is, what parents do—or fail to do—that helps children become motivated and eager to learn.

School systems nationwide are devoting enormous energy and enterprise—not to mention taxpayer dollars—to "increasing parental involvement." In many communities, these programs seem to touch variously on all these areas—governance, volunteering, and what parents do at home. But findings for this study strongly suggest that both parents and teachers, when they are asked to focus specifically and directly on what is most important to them, share a distinct set of priorities about which definitions of "parental involvement" are most and least productive, which are essential, and which are merely supplementary:

- In Findings Two through Four, we attempt to untangle the varying definitions of parental involvement and suggest which forms of it are most and least important to parents and teachers.
- In Finding Five, we describe what it is about this issue of parental involvement that so disturbs and distresses today's teachers.
- In Finding Six, we examine the complex tangle of reasons why so many parents today struggle and may ultimately fail to meet teachers' expectations.
- Finally, in Finding Seven, we turn our attention to the issue of homework—a daily phenomenon in millions of American homes and one that seems to capture, even embody, teachers' and parents' sometimes conflicting concerns.

FINDING TWO: Power to the Parents?

Neither parents nor teachers want parents more heavily involved in managing public schools or making decisions about staffing or curriculum. Most parents say they don't feel qualified to make these decisions and wouldn't be comfortable doing so. Teachers, for their part, fear that getting parents more involved in academic and staffing decisions would result in uninformed meddling and second-guessing. Very few teachers or parents have much firsthand experience with this kind of parental involvement. However, teachers in schools where parents do take part in this type of decision-making have more positive attitudes about it.

Education reformers and elected officials often assume that greater parental control of local schools—empowering parents—is a desirable goal, at the very least something parents want. School districts from

“I'm involved in my daughter's classroom, but choosing the topics, that's not my area. I don't really know the requirements, how the system works.”

—New Mexico Parent

New York to California, Alaska to Florida, have sought to increase parents' authority in such realms as evaluating teachers, choosing new principals, and revising curriculum. And reforms that focus on how schools are governed, such as school-based management, often

expect parents to rise to the occasion, to “take their place at the table” along with teachers and principals in decision-making councils or committees. Few have stopped to ask: Just how interested are parents in sharing power and responsibility over running their children's schools?

Little Hunger for Power

As the following findings report, public school parents are willing to take on many roles related to their children's education, but most simply are not eager to assume significant responsibility for running the schools. Responding to a series of questions designed to capture their definition of parental involvement with some precision and detail, parents are least attracted to ideas that would give them real authority over the schools.

Parents show little hunger to control their schools' funds—only 36% would be very comfortable having a say over how their child's school spends its money. Even fewer parents—one in four (25%)—would feel very comfortable helping to plan their school's curriculum. And just 27% would feel very comfortable joining a committee to look at changing how teachers teach in classrooms. “I'm involved in my daughter's classroom, but choosing the topics, that's not my area,” commented a New Mexico mom. “I don't really know the requirements, how the system works. That should be up to the school. As long as my daughter is learning more and more every day, then I feel they're doing something right.”

“I Don't Think I'm in a Position to Judge”

Survey after survey shows that parents consider teachers the most critical variable when it comes to educating their children.¹ It may seem surprising, therefore, that so few parents appear ready to participate in evaluating or hiring the teachers at their schools. Only 37% would feel very comfortable evaluating their school's current teachers; less than a third (31%) would feel very comfortable joining a committee to hire new teachers or a principal.

In interviews conducted for this study, parents voiced a variety of concerns: “I wouldn't be very comfortable evaluating teachers—the criteria are alien to me, to nonmembers of the teaching profession,” explained a Florida dad. “I used to be in the Air Force, and we had very different criteria for evaluating different jobs.

So I don't think I'm in a position to judge the teachers. Plus, I don't think the teachers would appreciate it. Any time people are looking at your job, you will look at them a little suspiciously."

Parents Least Comfortable With Governance

How comfortable would you feel doing each of the following?

Have you personally done this during this school year or the last one?

	PARENTS	
	% saying "very comfortable"	% who "have done"
Helping to plan the school curriculum	25%	15%
Serving on a committee to propose changing how teachers teach in their classrooms	27	12
Serving on a committee to decide which new teachers or principal to hire	31	7
Helping decide how to spend your school's money	36	19
Helping to evaluate the quality of your school's teachers	37	17
Serving on a committee to propose changing the lunch menu	42	6
Helping the school decide its policy on student behavior and discipline	50	20
Volunteering to help supervise and guide kids in after-school activities	53	38
Helping with school events like career day or a book sale	62	44
Volunteering to chaperone your child's class trip or party	73	57

An Alabama mom anticipated different problems but essentially reached the same conclusion, saying: "I don't think parents should be the ones deciding. You can get a lot of pettiness. You have people who dislike others regardless of whether they can teach or not, just based on their personality." In this study, more than six in ten parents (61%) also say that teachers now use techniques that were very different from when they were in school—a finding that suggests yet another reason why parents are so reticent about making judgements in this area.

A Sound Basis for Judgment?

Parents generally seem uncertain about their ability to judge the quality of teachers or classroom course work, and previous research by Public Agenda suggests that many have good reason to hesitate. *Reality Check*, Public Agenda's annual tracking survey conducted for *Education Week*, points to serious gaps in parental knowledge about some of the most important aspects of their children's schools. Only 24% of parents say they know a lot about the qualifications of their child's teachers; only 39% know a lot about how their child's school ranks academically against others in the district.²

Relatively few seem to have a well-defined or independent basis for judging a student's academic progress, even when the focus is squarely on their own child. Only a handful say they know a lot about how their child's skills compare with those of children in their own state or nationwide. Even fewer know a lot about the international comparisons that prompt so many educational and political firestorms.

The 2% Solution

If parents seem generally unenthusiastic about greater involvement in school governance, many teachers seem to recoil from it. Given a list of 11 ways parents can get involved at schools—ranging from classroom tutoring to curriculum design—and asked to choose the four most important, virtually no teachers choose meatier areas of responsibility. Just 2% of teachers say helping to design curriculum is one of the most important things parents can do; only 2% want parents to help

decide which administrators to hire; and only 8% say it is critical to have parents who know the difference between good and bad teaching methods.

It is probably not surprising that large majorities of teachers reject proposals that would bring parents deeply into staffing decisions, and interviews for the study suggest that at least some of the teachers' objections are quite similar to those voiced by parents themselves. More than six in ten (64%) teachers reject the idea of asking parents to help evaluate their school's teachers. A similar majority (63%) oppose involving parents in choosing new teachers or administrators. More than seven in ten (73%) object to parents contributing suggestions on changing classroom teaching methods. "I have a problem with parents being involved in the evaluation of teachers," said a public school teacher in Iowa. "They're not aware of how things work at school. They don't know enough about education. Just because you have enough skills in the business world doesn't mean you know what it takes to deal with kids."

"Qualifications Matter"

An art teacher in Georgia struggled to be open to the idea but in the end had to conclude otherwise: "It's a tough call. They can help in the interview process, but I'm not sure the ultimate decision should be made by them. Parents aren't qualified to sit in the classroom and evaluate the job a teacher is doing. Then again, some administrators I've had don't know what they're doing. But principals do have some kind of background in education. Parents can be a part of it, their comments can be taken into consideration, but they shouldn't be the bottom line. Qualifications matter."

But many teachers are also troubled by something other than the educational qualifications of parents. Many seem to harbor doubts about parents' capacity to judge dispassionately and with discretion. One teacher worried that parents would be too easily guided by personal innuendo and that given enough license parents might ruin—without just cause—the career of a good teacher. "I can see some real problems with word of mouth, with parents not being objective, with taking rumors that they've heard and blowing [them] out of proportion...I taught in a

district with highly involved, affluent parents...When they went to the administration and said, 'We don't like this, we want it changed,' it was changed."

Let's Do Lunch?

Public school teachers seem more open—though not necessarily eager—to increasing parental involvement in areas that do not involve staffing decisions. A little more than half (54%) would approve of parents participating in deciding how to spend school funds. Nearly half (49%) would approve of parents suggesting materials and topics for the curriculum, although here again, some teachers voiced fears that the politics of a minority of vocal parents might carry the day. Finally, teachers appear to have few objections to parental involvement when the issue is peripheral or lacks academic substance. The most acceptable out of six ideas for increasing parental involvement in school decision making is having parents propose changes to the school's lunchroom menu. Fully 85% of teachers say that would be fine with them.

Teachers Rate Parental Involvement Ideas

Would you approve or disapprove of parents at your school participating in a committee to do each of the following?

	TEACHERS % saying "approve"
Propose changes to the lunchroom menu	85%
Make decisions on spending school funds	54
Suggest materials and topics for the curriculum	49
Evaluate the quality of your school's teachers	26
Make hiring decisions on incoming teachers and administrators	25
Propose changes to classroom teaching methods	15

The Reality

Regardless of teacher and parent perceptions, the reality, based on this survey, is that very few of the nation's schools seek significant parental involvement on governance or academic matters. Few teachers report that parents at their schools help in teacher evaluations (12%) or propose changes to teaching methods (7%). More teachers do report their schools allow parents to suggest topics for the curriculum (39%) or participate in choosing new administrators or teachers (34%). Just how much influence or authority parents have even in schools that report involvement is another question. Follow-up interviews with teachers suggest that parents rarely lead the charge in these areas.

Parents essentially confirm what teachers report. Only 15% of parents say they have helped plan their school's curriculum; few (17%) have participated in evaluating their teachers, and even fewer have proposed changes to classroom teaching methods or helped choose a new principal or new teachers.

Familiarity Breeds . . .

This study strongly suggests that reformers working to increase parental involvement in school management and academic decision-making face an uphill battle—high levels of resistance from teachers and low levels of comfort and urgency from parents. But the survey results also show that teachers whose schools already have some level of parental input in decision-making typically approve of it. Those few teachers working in schools that involve parents in evaluating them—about 12% of teachers surveyed—are more than twice as likely to approve of this idea as are those teachers whose schools do not (by a 65% to 24% margin).

Teachers in schools that permit parents to make curriculum suggestions or have input on hiring are also more likely to approve of these ideas than teachers in schools that do not.

No Rush to Govern

When asked who would do the best job of holding teachers and principals accountable for improving academic performance, parents still look to traditional centers of power—local school boards (49%) and school superintendents (19%).³ Parents do not summarily reject suggestions that they help govern the schools, and teachers who have seen parents in action inside the schools appear to appreciate their contributions. But expanding parental authority within the schools is clearly way down on people's list of matters parents should attend to.

Whatever the reason, there is no surge of parents knocking on closed school doors, anxious to assert control.

The pronounced lack of parental enthusiasm may arise from a deference to professional educators, an awareness of their own limited knowledge, or simply having their “hands full” with the demands of everyday life. Whatever the reason, there is no surge of parents knocking on closed school doors, anxious to assert control. Advocates of governance reform must confront the reality: Only a small segment of parents have any real desire to pitch in on this front. The rest admit that it is simply not their current priority.

FINDING THREE: Bake Sales and Chaperones

Both parents and teachers endorse what might be called the “bake sale” model of parental involvement—parents as school volunteers and helpmates. But while many parents report engaging in these types of volunteer activities from time to time, only a small group of “superparents” participate regularly. Teachers say this kind of involvement is very helpful, and large majorities of teachers voice positive attitudes toward parents who take on this role. Nevertheless, although both groups believe volunteering is helpful, it is not the chief priority for either group.

The Volunteer Force

Traditionally, parents have been a kind of flexible volunteer force schools could tap for help with extracurricular activities. In focus groups, when they begin to talk about parental involvement in the schools, both parents and teachers still refer to these traditional ways of helping at school. Substantial majorities of parents report that they would be very comfortable chaperoning a class trip, helping with such school events as career day, or supervising kids in after-school activities. This category of activities is much more appealing to parents than participation in school management or academic decision-making—though, as will be seen, it is neither their fundamental concern nor their chief priority.

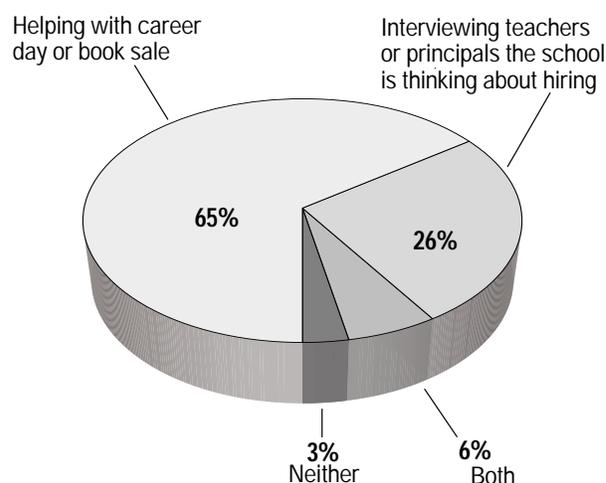
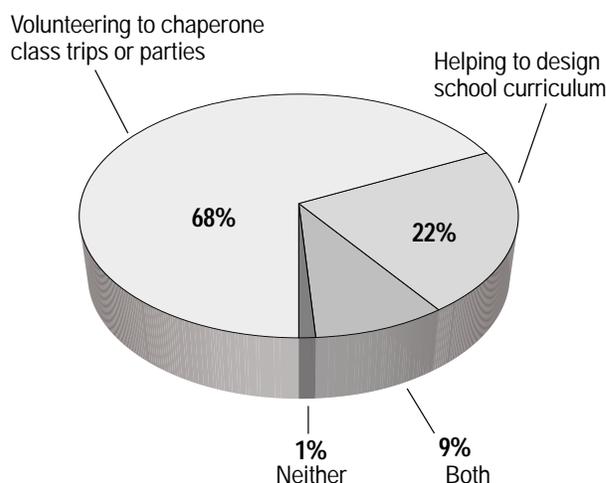
Parents, for example, would much rather chaperone class trips or class parties than help design curriculum, by a 68% to 22% margin. They also feel far more comfortable helping with career day or a book sale than interviewing prospective teachers or principals, by a 65% to 26% margin.

“Being with All the Children”

Parents not only feel comfortable participating in these areas, many follow through with action. Almost six in ten (57%) say they have chaperoned a class trip or party in this year or the past; 44% have participated in career day or a book sale at school; and nearly four in ten (38%) have supervised kids in after-school activities. “I bake for the school, I’ll chaperone when

Parents’ Preferences For Getting Involved

Which would you personally feel more comfortable doing?



ever I can,” said a Westchester mom. “I enjoy being in the classroom very much and being with all the children,” said an Alabama mom. “I go in once a week and do whatever the teacher wants.”

Some gaps in involvement persist between dads and moms, although they may not be as large as presumably existed in the past—either because fathers are doing more or mothers are doing less, or both. Moms are more likely than dads to have helped out during career day or a book sale (48% to 37%) or to have chaperoned a trip or party (64% to 47%).

Other differentiations seem even less important. Active school volunteers are as likely to be low- or middle-income as affluent; they are as likely to be African American as white; and they are as likely to live in a city as in a suburb. Even such expected factors as being college educated and/or married and not working are only slightly correlated with being a regular school volunteer.

The “Superparents”

The true division seems to be one of personality and motivation—between the typical parent and an easily identifiable corps of “superparents” who are regularly in the schools, ready to lend support and assistance.

“I go there to help my kids and so I can be there for other kids. It’s good for them to see me; they see that Mom thinks school is important.”

—Kentucky Parent

Over the past several years, Public Agenda has conducted more than a hundred focus groups with parents about education, and at least one superparent has shown up in virtually every one. Teachers and parents can readily point them out, with 98% of teachers and 87% of parents saying, “It is always the same group of parents who are helping out at the school.” And superparents seem to recognize themselves: one in four (25%) self-identify as such, saying “I am a parent who is very active at my child’s school—I often volunteer for events, and many people in the building know me.”

Altruism and Surveillance

Much of the reason these superparents show up regularly in schools is clearly altruistic—simply wanting to help and to communicate to their own children and others that school is an important endeavor. One Kentucky parent said, “I go there to help my kids and so I can be there for other kids. It’s good for them to see me; they see that Mom thinks school is important, and that Mom thinks they are important.”

But part of the superparents’ motives are also admittedly self-protective: They want to keep an eye on their child’s progress and shepherd him or her through the system by gathering some firsthand intelligence on which teachers and programs to avoid and which to seek out. What’s more, these parents say they believe that their mere presence inside the school is a signal to the institution—and to the teachers—that their child matters and should not be allowed to fall through the cracks.

“The Education You Fight For”

Superparents can speak frankly about their less altruistic motives for school involvement. “I hate to say it, but as far as your child goes, they get the better education when you’re in that school,” explained an Alabama mom. “The teachers actually are more apt to pay attention to your child if they know you. If they see you care more, they care more. And if your child has a problem, you can get it quickly fixed.” In Westchester, a dad said, “If you are involved in fundraising at the school, you will definitely see who the better teachers are. I think your kid is going to get the education that you fight for. If I don’t get involved, then who knows—they might shuffle my child through the system.”

Perceptions that this is how the world works are widespread among parents overall. More than seven in ten (72%) agree that “kids whose parents are not involved at school sometimes get shortchanged and fall through the cracks.” About four in ten (41%) go so far as to say children are more likely to get better teachers and avoid the worst ones when their parents are involved in the school (55% say it does not make a difference).

Who Looks Out for the Others?

A fair number of teachers are also alert to this problem. While 56% of teachers say that “regardless of how active their parents are, all children are treated equally by the school,” more than a third (36%) have come to the opposite conclusion—that “active parents know how the system works, so their kids tend to get better treatment by the school.” “One of the things I worry about is that involved parents get the resources, so other kids get less,” admitted a first-grade teacher. “It comes down to this: Powerful parents advocate for their kids—who advocates for the others?” Active parents may steer their own children away from the one bad apple teaching at the school, these teachers seem to acknowledge, but the bad apple remains on staff. What can be done for the unlucky child whose parents are not—or cannot be—as vigilant?

A Welcome Helping Hand

Public school teachers may have far-reaching concerns about parents moving into academic and

management arenas, but there can be little doubt that the vast majority appreciate the help parents provide as school volunteers. More than eight in ten (82%) teachers say parents who come to school or the classroom “are a big help and are very valuable to the school.” Teachers say—by an overwhelming 85% to 9% margin—that most parents who are active in their school help them do their job rather than make their job harder. A mom in San Leandro, California, said, “Any teachers I’ve worked with are so appreciative of the smallest thing you help with. Teachers really like having the outside people come in.” And although many superparents admit to dual motives for volunteering—the desire to help coupled with the desire to get the best the school has to offer for little Johnny—only 37% of teachers say the volunteer parents they encounter focus too much on their own children.

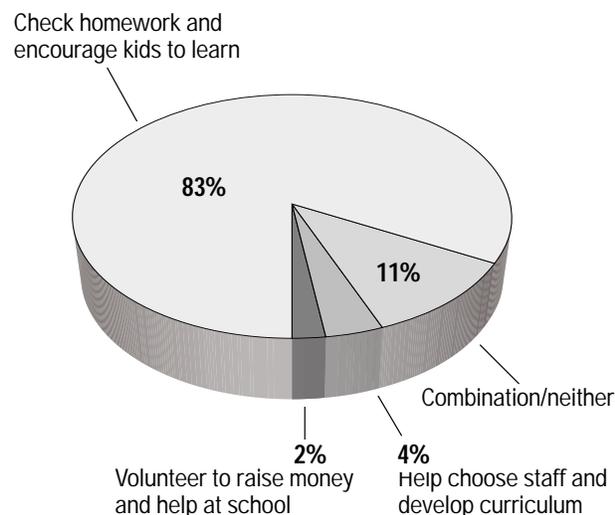
But Is It Realistic?

The real question that many raise about the volunteer mode of parent involvement is not so much whether it

Most Important Role for Parents

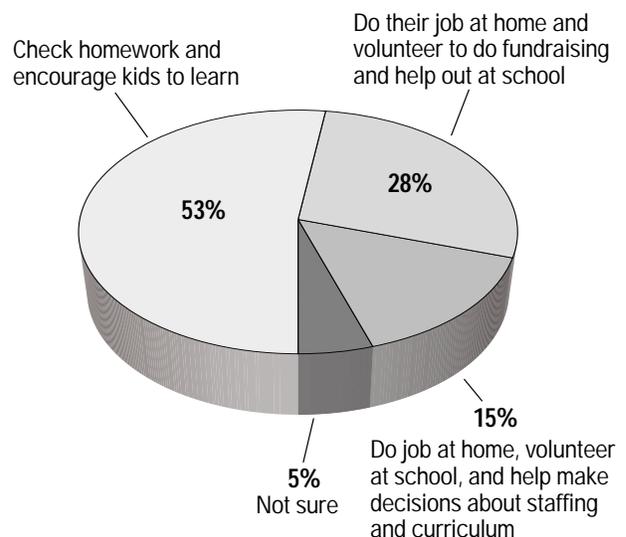
PARENTS

Which is MOST important for parents to do in the partnership between parents and school?



TEACHERS

Which description of the partnership between parents and school comes closer to your own? For parents to:



is desirable—both teachers and parents agree that it is—but whether it is realistic given the circumstances most contemporary school families face. Only 15% of teachers say there are parents in their classroom on a regular basis—54% say they almost never have parents there. And while a majority of school parents say they are very involved at home, just 25% fall into the “superparent” category.

The comfortable image of the stay-at-home mom ready and willing to help during the bake or book sale has been challenged by dramatic demographic shifts. By

“Realistically, Mom is not home at three P.M. with cookies and milk, with a big smile and her pearls on. That was TV, that was the fifties.”
—Birmingham Parent

1996, for example, the percentage of children with both parents working full-time had jumped to 55%, up from 17% in 1980.⁴ And in the focus groups, parents were often painfully aware that things had changed. “I don’t work two jobs because I’m selfish. I do it because it’s what I need to do—not to get a lot of stuff,” said a mom in

Birmingham. “Realistically, Mom is not home at three P.M. with cookies and milk, with a big smile and her pearls on. That was TV, that was the fifties.”

Parents seem ambivalent and conflicted about whether these profound demographic changes have brought harm or good for the nation’s children and

their schools. Asked to evaluate the net effect of moms being less likely to stay at home during their children’s school years, 54% say the trend has had mixed effects, and 40% say it has done more harm than good (only 6% say more good than harm). More than half (54%) of parents say children whose moms stay at home are more likely to do well in school, but nearly four in ten (38%) say it makes little difference.

Volunteering: Nice But Not Essential

Despite all the images and concerns the subject raises, volunteering in the schools is seen by both parents and teachers as a supplemental role parents can play in their children’s education, but not the fundamental one. Almost two-thirds of teachers (65%) say they currently have academically successful students whose parents they have never met. “I see it every day,” said one principal. “I was just dealing with this kid from Yemen who was brought over to work in the family store; we’ve never met them, there’s not a place for school in their lives. But he’s headed for the college-prep program.”

And when explicitly asked to choose the one most important job parents should do, parents overwhelmingly say it is not to volunteer to help raise money for the schools (just 2% say this should be the priority), nor is it to help choose staff or develop curriculum (4%). Instead, more than eight in ten (83%) parents say the preeminent job they must play in their child’s learning concerns what they do at home.

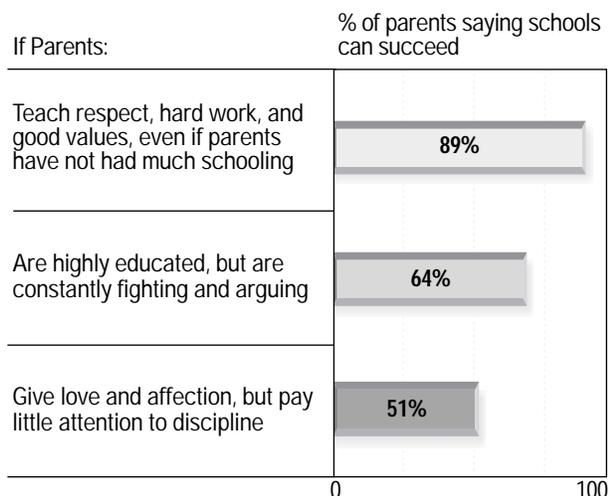
FINDING FOUR: The Well-Behaved Child Who Wants to Learn

Both parents and teachers believe that the most fundamental and indispensable job for parents is raising well-behaved children who want to learn. For both groups, the same basic lessons—respect, effort, self-control—emerge again and again as the essentials that every child must master before academic learning can even begin. Parents and teachers consider parental attention to these core values more important than even such classic staples of parental involvement as attending teacher conferences and helping with homework. Teenagers for their part seem to recognize—and even secretly appreciate—the value of their parents’ persistence and vigilance in these areas.

Teachers and parents agree that the crucial test of whether or not parents are doing their job helping their child learn is not what they do at school, but rather what they do at home. And in large majorities across the country, among parents and teachers alike, the same themes emerge again and again. “There are key points—hard work, discipline, respect. If those are taught in the home, that’s more than 50% of what you need to succeed,” said a New Jersey mom. “Even a below average kid will do well if his parents teach him that.”

Schools Can Succeed If...

Suppose a child has parents like the ones described below. Do you think the schools should still be able to do a good job of teaching this child or not?



“It’s Just So Obvious”

The job that parents can do best—and the most critical things they can teach—are so intuitively obvious and so ingrained as to be almost instinctual, things that parents sometimes find hard to explain. One mom was initially at a loss for words when she was asked why she thought self-control and hard work were so important to student success. “It’s just so obvious, I guess it’s hard to be articulate,” she said. “But if the kids will sit there and listen—and there are qualified teachers—if a child has respect and wants to do work, it’s just so obvious to me. He’ll be all right.”

Parents believe that schools and teachers should be able to overcome at least some shortcomings in a student’s background. For example, about nine out of ten parents (89%) say the schools should be able to teach a child whose parents have not had much schooling themselves as long as the parents teach the child respect and hard work. But when parents neglect to teach discipline and good behavior, parents are more divided on whether schools will be able to do their job. Half (51%) still say the schools could do a good job with students whose parents give them love and affection but pay little attention to discipline and supervising their behavior. But more than four in ten (43%) also say that in this case, the schools would fail.

Love Is Not Enough?

Love and affection, according to many of the parents interviewed, are essential to helping children learn in school. In fact, nearly nine in ten (87%) parents say

this statement—“The most important thing parents can do to help their child succeed in school is to provide a stable, loving home”—comes very close to their own view—numbers that point to an overwhelming affirmation. But interviews for this study suggest that while parents know love is necessary, many also believe that love by itself may not be sufficient to spur academic success.

In some cases, parents had a deeper, more nuanced notion of love and self-esteem, refining their use of these terms so that they aren’t so much about constantly affirming to children that they are special and cherished as they are about teaching children to live within rules and within themselves. A New York mom was sure that “love and affection will not build self-esteem—you need discipline and guidance to build self-esteem.” How carefully parents adhere to this definition of self-esteem is, as we will see in Finding Six, an open question.

“She Doesn’t Care If She Flunks”

A mom from Indiana tied self-esteem to respect and hard work: “If they’re lazy and uncooperative, they won’t have self-esteem. I’m a monitor on a school bus, and we have this one girl who has no self-esteem. She doesn’t care what she says, what kind of trouble she gets into. Her parents haven’t taught her responsibility. She has money, the latest earrings, the baggy pants, but she doesn’t care if she flunks every grade. I wonder where she’s coming from and where she’s going.” Under this definition, children have a sense of self-worth when they develop self-control and a sense of respect toward themselves and toward others.

Indeed, many parents say this aspect of educating their children is even more important than having discussions with teachers about their children’s academic progress and expectations. By a margin of two to one (48% versus 23%), parents would choose teaching children to be respectful and to have good work habits over attending teacher-parent conferences to know what their children should be learning.

Teachers Voice the Same Concerns

When public school teachers are asked to name the most important things parents can do at home to help children succeed in school, they point to precisely the same priorities as parents. Teachers, like parents, believe that parents’ work teaching their children values and good behavior is even more important than parental duties that sometimes seem to receive far more discussion.

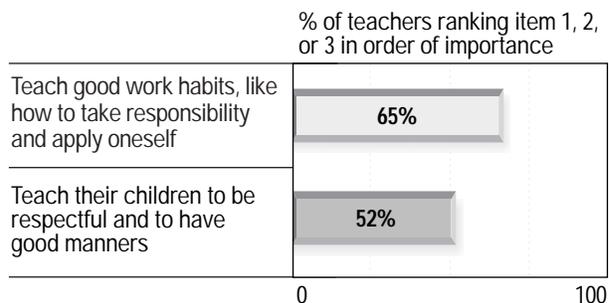
When teachers are asked to choose the *most important* actions parents can take at home—in a list ranging from teaching love of learning to making reading at home routine—teachers immediately zero in on the values issues. About two in three (65%) assign top priority to parents teaching good work habits like how to take responsibility and apply oneself. A little more than half (52%) name teaching kids to be respectful and to have good manners as most important. Indeed, these goals are so crucial that they overwhelm widely discussed—and inarguably important—parental responsibilities such as controlling TV and computers (only 8% say this is most important).

When the Parents Care

“Parents have to work,” said a Texas teacher, “so I may not see them at our open house or conferences, and we don’t do bake sales. But the child has to know the parent cares. If the parents are behind them, they can succeed. If the kid knows that if they bring home

Teachers Want Effort and Respect

What are the most important things parents can do at home to help their children’s education?



a less than acceptable grade their parents are going to be all over their case, they're going to try harder. They're the ones who will come in early for tutorials or ask, 'Miss, I didn't get this question right, what can I do to improve?'"

Many educators—like this 30-year veteran teacher from Arizona—try to foster in their classrooms the kind of atmosphere they would like their students to have at home. “We come to terms in the beginning—there’s one adult, there are rules. Rule One is respect. Under respect comes ‘You are going to be respectful to your teachers.’ If you set a standard and stand up for it, the children are going to live up to it... I don’t have robots in my class. I encourage discussion, I encourage interaction, but they are under control.”

Kids These Days

The concerns and priorities voiced by both parents and teachers do not occur in a vacuum. The priority both groups place on the need to raise a generation of respectful, respectable, polite human beings echoes concerns Public Agenda has identified among the public in general and across the population, among all income groups and demographic categories. In a 1997 study entitled *Kids These Days*, for example, just 12% of Americans say it is very common to come across children and teenagers who treat people with respect. Meanwhile, more than three times as many (41%) say it is very common to come across teens with poor work habits and poor self-discipline. Almost half of adults (48%) say spoiled children are a very common sight.⁵

The Teen Perspective

So if parents and teachers agree on the core—the most essential elements of parental involvement—what do kids have to say about it? Public Agenda has looked at teens’ views on these and related issues in two in-depth national surveys—the *Kids These Days* study mentioned above and *Getting By*, a study of public and private high school students completed in 1997.⁶ In addition, this study included focus group discussions with teens from both working-class and affluent communities. In different ways—and confirming findings from the larger national surveys—the teen

focus groups paint a picture of their parents’ role in their lives that is remarkably compatible with the adult findings.

In Greensboro, NC—a working-class community—some of the teens seemed to be academically successful and on the college track even though their parents had not gone to college and were struggling financially. This happened, according to the kids, because their parents cared about them, taught them right from wrong, and taught them how to work. They sometimes gloated that their parents could no longer help them with schoolwork. What’s more, these teens reported that their parents hardly ever showed up at their schools, even during the early grades. To this group, what seemed to matter most was stability at home, a psychological sense that their parents were reasonable, fair, and in control.

“That’s Their Job”

In the more affluent Westchester County, NY suburbs, virtually all the students thought the most important thing parents can do for their kids is to stay involved in their lives and schoolwork. Some described how their parents resorted to finely calibrated systems of punishment and reward to get them to work. The laundry list was as long as it was predictable. Going out, sports practice, shopping, not to mention yelling and guilt, were all put to use. But most of the teens understood—and perhaps at some level appreciated—that their parents fought them on behalf of school. “That’s their job,” one teen said. “Sometimes we need to be pushed, sometimes we don’t behave ourselves.

“I’m a monitor on a school bus, and we have this one girl who has no self-esteem. She doesn’t care what she says, what kind of trouble she gets into. Her parents haven’t taught her responsibility.”

—Indiana Parent

When I’m a parent I’ll probably do the same.” Most interestingly, many of the kids read threats and punishments—when these seemed both justified and enforced—as a sign that their parents cared and were

unwilling to give up on them. One youngster who did seem alienated and angry recalled at length an episode when his mom had stopped pushing him to improve his behavior and work in an algebra class. To his mind, that was the moment she had given up on him.

Thriving Under Structure

The teens' stories about their parents echo observations students make about their teachers and schools and suggest the secret value youngsters place on adults who pay close attention to their progress, provide structure, and insist on responsibility. In the *Getting By* study, for example, 86% of high school students say it is extremely important for schools to teach them "good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined." Almost as many (79%) say schools should make sure students are on time and complete their work. In fact, more than six in ten (61%) say that "getting your classwork checked

and redoing it until it's right" would actually improve their learning.⁷ Rather than resenting and discounting the need for structure and accountability, most teens seem to say they would actually thrive under it.

There is a broad, surprisingly precise, agreement among parents, teachers, and even students themselves on the desired goal: nurturing children and young people who have the motivation, self-discipline, and persistence to learn. But as we shall see in the following findings, teachers are convinced that too many parents fall short, and many parents themselves are struggling to find an effective and reliable formula for reaching their goal.

One youngster recalled when his mom had stopped pushing him to improve his behavior and work in an algebra class. To his mind, that was the moment she had given up on him.

FINDING FIVE: From Behind the Teacher's Desk

Teachers across the country believe that they simply cannot do their best job teaching because too many students lack the basic upbringing and supervision that make them ready to learn. For teachers, the most dispiriting problems they face are not the daunting challenges of teaching poor or abused children or the special difficulties of teaching children from non-English-speaking homes. Instead, teachers say they feel beleaguered by daily distractions from students who are lazy, disrespectful, and unmotivated. Teachers say that most teachers do a good job given the circumstances, but that far too many parents just aren't doing theirs.

The observation that today's teachers face problems that were rare a generation ago is almost commonplace. But based on findings from this study, some of the obstacles most likely to make the headlines—classrooms filled with desperately poor, hungry children living chaotic and tragic lives—appear to be mercifully rare. Rather, today's teachers—as a group—seem to be experiencing a metaphorical death of a thousand cuts—an unending parade of low-level indignities and incivilities (and sheer laziness) that, in their view, make teaching less effective than it could be and far less rewarding than they would like.

Most teachers' chief complaints circle again and again around student attitudes—cavalier attitudes toward their schoolwork and their teachers. Teachers put the blame for this squarely on parents—or a lack of parental involvement.

Ready to Learn

When teachers talk about what frustrates them most, their recurring theme is kids who are not ready to learn. But public school teachers rarely talk about the concept in the traditional, physical sense of the term used by child advocates and educational experts. Only 15% of teachers say severely troubled kids who are hungry or poor, or who are physically threatening (also 15%), are a serious problem in their classrooms.

Similarly, when teachers talk about uninvolved parents, they rarely refer to concrete barriers—such as language difficulties or the decline of neighborhood schools. Only 13% of teachers say they often deal

with parents who have difficulty understanding English; only 7% often come across parents who live too far away to participate in school activities. Teachers also tend to discount the much discussed problems of parents who are intimidated by educators or, conversely, parents who are overprotective and meddlesome. Only 5% say they often come across parents who are timid and quick to defer to educators; only 23% often come across overprotective parents who are too quick to intervene on behalf of their children.

“If my students ever had any training at home, they've forgotten it. Either their parents don't have time to teach culture or manners or responsibility, or they actually don't give a damn.”

—Arizona Teacher

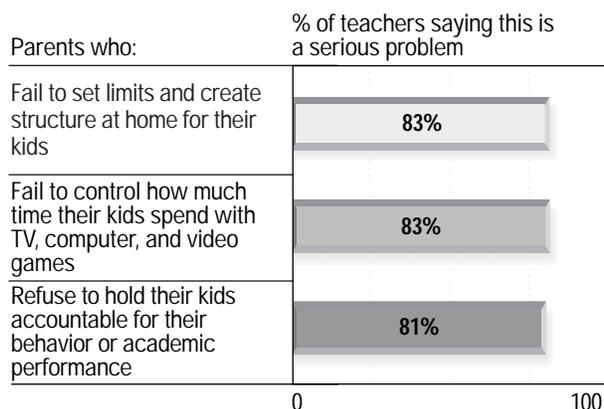
Although problematic parents seem to be the exception, they appear to leave their mark: a jarring 56% of teachers report they have had an extremely negative experience with a parent which strongly affected them. Most (76%) say the experience made them more careful in dealing with other parents.

The Attitude Problem

Yet the most serious and pervasive problem, according to teachers, is that too many parents are failing at the most fundamental and traditional elements of parenting—teaching their children the discipline, perseverance, and good manners that allow them to

Teachers' Top Complaints

Based on your experience and observations at your school, how serious a problem are the following?



work within the classroom structure. Fully 81% of teachers cite as a serious problem parents who refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance. More than eight in ten (83%) complain about parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home for their kids.

For many teachers, students' inability to behave themselves and apply themselves in class is a direct result of a lack of structure and follow-through at home. One teacher in Texas said, "Some kids come to class with an attitude that they don't have to listen to you, that just because you're an adult, you don't have the right to tell [them] what to do. They think they're in charge, because they don't have that structure at home."

A California teacher also talked about lack of structure and supervision at home, attributing the problem mainly to the economic pressures contemporary families face. "Some parents don't care, but most just don't have the time that's needed to give to their kids. They're working two jobs. The kids are left to do what they want, and when they misbehave and are punished, the rules are not enforced. They're not home to make sure the kids are doing the punishment."

A Michigan teacher also focused on lack of supervision at home but believed that too many parents just have their priorities misplaced. "As long as our society puts money ahead of children," the teacher

observed, "we'll have problems. Parents have to choose: Do we want a second car, second boat, or do we need to raise our kids? Somebody has to be at home. And you need two parents. If you try to do it alone, you will have problems."

Classroom Consequences

For teachers, there are practical classroom consequences when a student's home lacks structure and accountability. Nearly seven in ten (69%) teachers indicate the most serious problem they face is with students who try to get by doing as little work as possible. More than half (55%) say it is with students who fail to do their homework. More than four in ten (42%) point to kids who are disruptive in class.

"Sometimes parents don't follow up when their kids are in trouble with academics," said a teacher in an affluent suburban Minneapolis school district. "They'll show up concerned, they'll ask for a special work improvement plan for their child. But the parent needs to check whether their kids are doing them. If the parent doesn't follow up at home, we're dead in the water—nothing can happen when there's no parent backing." A teacher working in a rural Nebraska district complained, "Parents are not sending them to school prepared. Simple things like basic manners, but lots of parents don't do this anymore—'please, thank you, close your mouth when you chew.' The parent hasn't taught the child: 'Get your things together the night before, leave them in front of the door.' I know it's easy to say things were better, but today's kids need more than what they're getting."

In the Inner City and Nationwide

There are some important differences between the problems encountered by teachers in inner cities compared to encounters by suburban teachers. Sixty-five percent of inner-city teachers—compared with only 27% of their suburban counterparts—say they often see parents with so many personal problems that their ability to care for their kids is compromised. Inner-city teachers are also three times more likely than suburban ones to rate student behavior as only fair or poor (65% to 22%).

But suburban school teachers have their own problems: They are far more likely than inner-city teachers to run into parents who put too much pressure on their kids to get good grades (44% to 17%) or who set unrealistic expectations for them (42% to 17%).

What's more, majorities of both groups of teachers share some common perceptions. Most inner-city (81%) and suburban (59%) teachers say their students try to get by with doing as little work as possible. Majorities of both suburban (67%) and inner-city (82%) teachers also say that too many parents have little sense of what is going on with their kids' education.

A New Generation of Cheaters?

The level of frustration and anger teachers feel on these issues is hard to overestimate. "Very few students bring good habits to class," said a teacher in Indiana. "It's out of sight, out of mind: 'Oh yeah, you gave us homework.'" An Arizona teacher complained bitterly: "If my students ever had any training at

"How can she teach? The classes are crowded, the teacher has got a kid throwing his backpack around and can't get him to stop because she can't send them to the principal's office. Someone has got to take control."

—San Leandro Parent

home, they've forgotten it. Either their parents don't have time to teach culture or manners or responsibility, or they actually don't give a damn." Teachers believe this is job one for parents; their sense that so many fail to do it creates enormous bitterness.

A number of teachers interviewed for the study tied cheating—a perennial sore spot for educators and one that high

school students report is rampant among their peers⁸—to lack of parental guidance and supervision and the dubious messages many children receive at home. "I have some cheating in the classroom. The kids who

have involved parents, I don't see them cheating so much. The ones that do cheat don't take pride in their own work; they say, 'I'm going to take the easy way out.' I cheated once at school. It was my mom who caught me, and she turned me in to the teacher. I never cheated again, just for the fear of what would happen. Nowadays, the parents don't even believe us when we say the child is cheating."

Perhaps surprisingly, parents seem to share many of the concerns teachers voice about discipline and civility. Three-quarters (76%) say the statement that "today's teachers have to deal with a lot more discipline problems than in the past" comes very close to their own view. Many parents are sympathetic to the challenges teachers face on this front: "How can she teach?" asked a San Leandro dad. "The classes are crowded, the teacher has got a kid throwing his backpack around and can't get him to stop because she can't send them to the principal's office. Someone has got to take control."

Given the Circumstances

In a Public Agenda survey of professors of education conducted in 1997, most attributed classroom discipline problems to teachers' inability to craft engaging lessons and lead interesting discussions among their students. Alternatively, some readers may suggest that the real fault lies with schools that do not enforce discipline policies or with teachers who bring on their own problems by being inconsistent or trying too hard to "be a pal."

But, when teachers are asked to evaluate their own performance, they cannot help but factor in their sense that they are now shouldering other people's responsibilities and problems. More than nine in ten (92%) say the quality of the teachers in their building is good or excellent. In another Public Agenda study of teachers, fully 92% gave their own school an excellent or good rating.⁹ In effect, teachers are saying, "We are doing pretty well considering the circumstances we have to deal with."

FINDING SIX: The Parent Trap

Parents, like teachers, feel somewhat beleaguered. They know education is important to their child, and they say they try to do their best. Indeed, today's parents feel they do much more than their own parents did when they were in school. But they also face a number of competing priorities or cross-pressures. Many seem to engage in a continual balancing act when it comes to reinforcing and monitoring their child's schoolwork—and it's more than juggling the demands of job and home. Parents are often conflicted about just how far to push their child on the academic front, and the judgments they make on a day-to-day basis may not be the ones that most educators would readily approve of.

When it comes to helping their child succeed in school, parents' views are complex and perhaps even internally contradictory. Parents believe they are more involved in their children's education than their own parents ever were, yet they feel they are not doing enough. They know that academic success is the key to their children's future, but they also want to raise happy, well-rounded kids. They want their children to "do their best," but they also worry about browbeating them or making schoolwork the provocation for daily family battles. They know they should check on their child's endeavors, but they also want their children to learn to function on their own. And though educators often dread encountering parents who have contracted "the Lake Wobegon syndrome" (based on Garrison Keillor's fictional community where all the children are above average), most parents seem to accept that not all kids can be academic superstars.

"We Talked to the Realtor"

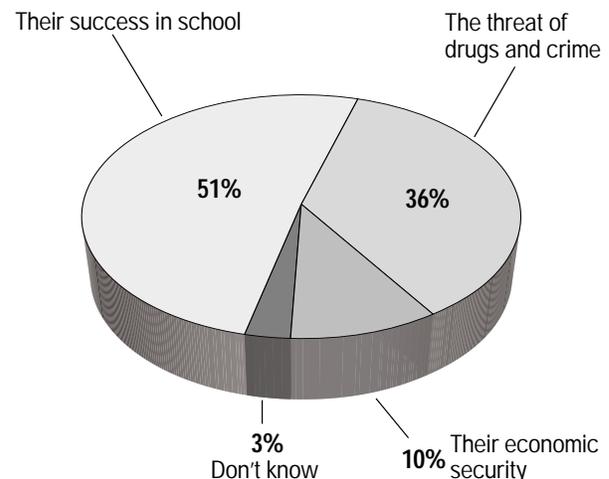
Parents are far from inattentive to their children's education. The vast majority (73%) are so concerned about their child's education that the quality of local schools is an important factor in determining where they live. "We talked to the realtor and asked how the schools were," said a California mom, "and she told us they were really good, and the academic level was high. We walked around the school on the weekend, we looked in through the windows, looked at accomplishment boards [where] the homework assignments...were posted. Then I talked to the secretary at the school, and I talked to a couple of parents. Two of the neighbors

are teachers, and their children go there, and they said the school was very good. So we were satisfied."

This mother is not so unusual. More than half of parents (56%) say they interviewed the principal or teachers before their child started their current school. One-third (33%) checked with other parents to see which teachers would be best. In fact, half of parents (51%) say they worry more about the quality of their children's education than about other contemporary social pressures such as the threat of crime or drugs (36% worry about this more) or economic security (10%).

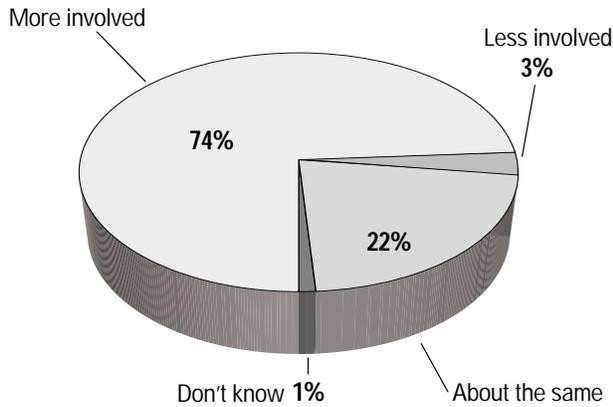
Parents Worry About School Success

Which of the following do you tend to worry about more when it comes to your children?



Today's Parents More Involved Than Their Parents

Would you say that you are more involved in your children's education than your dad/mom was in yours, less involved or is it about the same?



NOTE: Women were asked about their "mom," men about their "dad."

More Than My Mom and Dad Ever Did

Given these explicit efforts to find good schools for their children, it is understandable that when parents are asked to think back on their own experiences growing up, they conclude that they are putting more effort into their children's education than their own parents did for them. About three in four (74%) say they are more involved than their own parents were. Perhaps surprisingly, this finding holds for both men and women: dads say they are more involved than their fathers (78%), and moms say they are doing more than their own moms (72%).

The paradox for many of today's parents is that even as they feel they are more active than their parents ever were, most also believe they are not doing enough. Seven in ten (71%) wish they could be doing more, and only about three in ten (29%) are satisfied with the way things are. Are these the perennial pangs of guilt parents always feel, or is there discretionary effort to be tapped? Asked if they could realistically be more involved in their children's education by trying harder, 42% say they could, but 57% say they are now doing as much as they can.

Naturally enough, most parents do not indict themselves as careless or ineffective or think their own kids are particularly awful or difficult. In surveys and in real life, it is often "other people's" kids who are the cause of trouble. But many parents also acknowledge that their own children may be not totally up to par when it comes to doing their best in school. Almost half (45%) of parents surveyed for this study say that at least some improvement is in order when it comes to their child having good work habits, such as being on time and responsible. "Her work habits need to improve," said one New Jersey mom. "She needs to be more willing to study, to complete her work and turn it in, and to stop with 'I lost it' when it comes to homework."

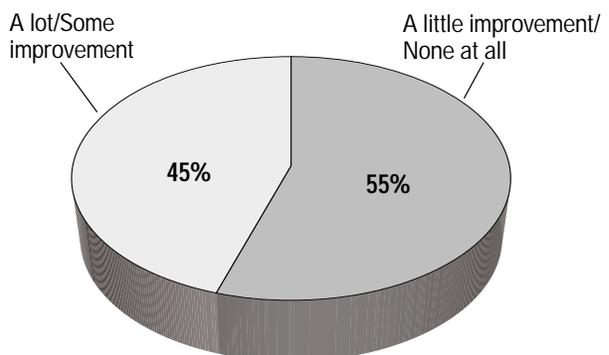
Many Fall Short

In fact, only about one in five of the parents interviewed in this study could be classified as highly effective and organized when it comes to reinforcing their children's academic endeavors. Just 23% of parents say they know a lot about how to motivate their children and that schoolwork almost always gets done at the same time every day. The remainder sometimes come close and sometimes land far from this ideal.

Public Agenda's surveys of teenagers also suggest that some parents may not be doing all they can to get the

Parents Rate Their Children's Work Habits

How much improvement would you say your child needs to make when it comes to having good work habits, such as being on time and responsible?



most out of kids academically. In Public Agenda's 1997 study of high school students, just over half (56%) said that their parents could name their favorite teacher;¹⁰ in another Public Agenda study, only 36% of teens reported that they get help or advice from their parents on schoolwork almost every day.¹¹

Just Do It?

So if parents believe that education is so important and that parental involvement is essential to a child's academic success, why is it that both teachers and parents voice such dissatisfaction with the status quo? Are parents, as many teachers surmise, just too overwhelmed with work and schedules? Do they sincerely

Do parents make decisions that—in their minds—seem reasonable and justified at the time, but that, from the viewpoint of teachers and educators, may lead to less than optimal results?

aim to help but continually fall short of their own intentions—like someone who repeatedly resolves to lose weight or quit smoking? Or do they make decisions that—in their minds—seem reasonable and justified at the time, but that, from the viewpoint of teachers and educators, may lead to less than optimal results?

Too Little Time?

One common explanation—and the one often cited by teachers in focus groups—for the widespread conviction that parents are falling short is worth repeating simply because it seems so compelling: Few of today's families can fully devote their energies to their children and home. Only 14% of parents responding to this survey live in the traditional model of a household, where one parent works full-time outside the home and another works full-time inside it. But recent surveys suggest that most Americans have reasonably sanguine views about their ability to balance the demands of home and work. A 1998 study by the University of Connecticut shows that half of working Americans say they are very satisfied with their ability to balance work and family.¹² Another study (Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, 1997)

shows more than seven in ten Americans believe there is no conflict between having a successful, high-paying career and being either a good mother or a good father.¹³ Meanwhile, a 1997 study of women by Princeton Survey Research Associates shows that only about one in five working women say balancing work and family is a major problem; 78% consider it a minor problem, or not a problem at all.¹⁴

Qualitative interviews in focus groups suggest that some parents do struggle with meeting their work and family commitments at the same time. "It was just me; my ex-husband was not an involved father, and I was working," said one California mom. "I felt rushed all the time, pressed, I didn't handle [my daughter] right. I've learned a lot since then." In the survey, parents endorse practical measures intended to help them juggle competing demands: for example, about eight in ten (79%) strongly favor offering working parents appointments in the early morning or evening so they can meet with a teacher.

But this study also suggests that the demands of work, either the fatigue it brings or job-related stress that may seep into family life, are not the sole—perhaps not even the preeminent—factor leading many parents to sometimes weigh success at school against other goals they believe are equally important. Different concerns and judgments about what's good for children also seem to play a role.

Don't Worry, Be Happy?

Some observers have attacked what they see as a national obsession with self-esteem, viewing it as a once valid psychological notion now gone haywire. And while parents voice strong beliefs that children should learn values such as hard work, discipline, and respect, there is little question that they also place a premium on not undermining their child's confidence. Parents often see a conflict between urging their child to do better in school and their natural desire to raise a happy, confident, and secure child.

Survey after survey shows that parents believe in the importance of high academic standards and expectations and want their children to behave themselves.¹⁵ But they also want their children to be happy and to feel good about themselves and their school years.

This means some tension and uncertainty is almost inevitable: parents weigh measures to press their kids to do their best academically against taking care that they do not push their kids—or their relationship with them—too much.

Nearly all parents (95%) say they “want school to be a fun and enjoyable experience my kids will remember for the rest of their lives,” with 76% saying this is *very* close to their view. Nearly nine in ten (85%) use a child’s mood as an indication of academic success, saying that “when my child comes home happy from school, I know they’re doing well.” “Kids need to stay positive or they won’t get

Most parents look at the latter years of their children’s schooling with significant levels of fear and even dread—and it is not calculus they are worrying about.

anywhere,” said a Tennessee mom. “If a child is not doing well, parents can take away privileges—no Nintendo, no TV—but don’t ‘down’ the child. Always say, ‘Do better.’ Don’t call them stupid.”

Parents also seem reluctant to pressure their child academically or imply that a less than stellar performance at school

should result in children feeling bad about themselves. They may not accept excuses—73% say it’s wrong to skip a school assignment because of a special occasion—but nearly nine in ten (88%) say that as long as they try hard, children should never feel bad about themselves because of poor grades, with 65% saying this is *very* close to their view.

Building Self-Reliance

A second cross-pressure parents struggle with—and one that again may put them at odds with many of their children’s teachers—is their desire to make their children more self-reliant, able to accomplish more on their own without continual parental nagging. Thus, even as many educators frown upon the oft documented decline in parental involvement in junior and senior high school, parents point to it as a mark of achievement, a goal to which they aspire. Nearly all

(93%) of the parents interviewed for this study believe that “as children get older, it’s important that they increasingly handle schoolwork on their own,” with 72% saying this is *very* close to their view. By a 63% to 30% margin, parents say that less parental involvement in later grades is natural and a sign the student is learning to be independent and to manage school on their own, rather than a sign of trouble.

A Kentucky mom raising six children said, “I see too many kids who can’t tie their own shoelaces and they’re 14 years old! My little 4-year-old, she pulls up the chair and does the dishes on her own. They have to learn life skills now. You can’t wait to teach them everything when they’re 18. They have to get out in the workforce; they won’t have Mommy and Daddy there all the time.”

According to 46% of upper-grade parents, it’s true their kids sometimes press them not to get involved in school, and another 46% also say that homework becomes more difficult in the later grades and they are less able to offer advice about it. But these factors interact with perhaps another important consideration: Parents are gearing their children—and themselves—for life in the higher grades, for work, and for life outside of school. “I tell my daughter...high school is getting closer. She’s going to have a lot more work to do, and she’s going to have to do it on her own,” said a Westchester mom.

Accepting Less than the Best

A third area where parents come to perhaps different conclusions from those of many educators is their seemingly calm acceptance of limits on what their child can achieve. Many parents report that their own children achieve at different levels even though they come from identical backgrounds, and they suspect that no matter what they do, a child’s innate ability matters. In fact, nearly nine in ten (89%) agree with the view “As much as parents try to help, children’s academic success still has a lot to do with their natural abilities.” And most (60%) parents who have more than one child say that some of their children have more aptitude and talent than others. “The funny thing is my daughters bring home A’s and B’s, the boys D’s and C’s, sometimes F’s. The boys slack off, try to slide. I ask them, ‘Did you do your work?’ and they try to lie to me,” said an Ohio mom.

Not in Panic Mode

Although few parents are happy if a child stumbles academically, they may not automatically shift into panic mode. For one thing, parents are capable of realism when it comes to their children's abilities: fully 56% say their child is "a typical student who sometimes does well and sometimes struggles"; 36% say "gifted"; and only 7% say "struggling." Perhaps this explains why the number of parents saying they "would be very disappointed if my child got average grades in school this year" is not higher than 60%, with 40% rejecting the view. And, perhaps remembering times when they themselves were less than focused on academics, nearly nine in ten (87%) also say, "Most children go through times when they are distracted and slacking off at school." *Reality Check*, Public Agenda's tracking surveys of parents, students, teachers, employers, and college professors, offers another, even less comforting reason for lack of parental panic. Few parents seem to understand how much their child's future may be at risk: while strong majorities of employers and college professors believe a high school diploma is no guarantee a student has learned the basics, few parents agree.¹⁶

Swimming Upstream Against Social Pressures

Some readers may be tempted to criticize parents as being too lax and inconsistent and too unwilling to hold their kids accountable. But for their part, parents often see themselves as swimming upstream against social mores and messages that seem to fight them every step of the way, particularly as their children become teenagers. In Public Agenda's surveys of Americans' attitudes about children and teens, eight in ten parents—and members of the public across the board—agree that it is much harder to be a parent these days than it was in the past. Both parents and the public agree that children and teenagers face an array of dangers and temptations that make parenting a much more difficult and treacherous enterprise.¹⁷

Parents interviewed for this study often spoke of a fear of losing control and influence over their children as they begin to spend more time in school and among their peers, and as adolescent hormones begin to kick in. And despite their positive views about teachers, parents do not always see the atmosphere of schools—

and of society in general—as reliable allies in their effort to bring their children up responsibly.

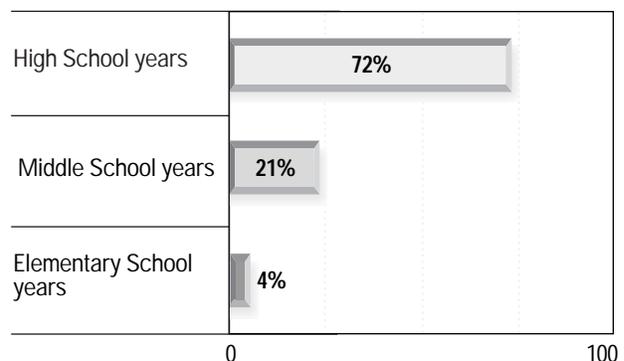
"An Angel Until She Was 14"

Indeed, many parents feel they may have little choice or leverage as their kids approach their teens. Most look at the latter years of their children's schooling with significant levels of fear and even dread—and it is not calculus they are worrying about. Asked which years will cause them the most worry, fully 72% point to the high school grades.

"The high school has too many negative influences, drugs and cigarettes and alcohol—this is when they start learning all the bad things," said a dad in New Jersey. A Connecticut mom said, "This is when they start rebelling. I was 13 once, too; they think they know it all. She was an angel until she was 14, and now it's like she's making up for lost time," she confided to an interviewer, whispering because her daughter was in the room while she was on the phone. Some parents whose children are about to come of age seem almost to be psychologically stealing their children—and themselves—for warfare: "I am trying to establish a foundation, I am trying to make him accountable," said a Westchester dad. "Soon he is going to be on his own; if he understands the foundation, he can survive. If he doesn't...I have to be ready." With the teenage years looming, it seems many parents would be thankful to emerge just with their relationship with their children intact.

Parents Dreading High School

Which years do you think will cause you the most worry as far as school is concerned?



FINDING SEVEN: Homework— Complete with Yelling and Crying

Homework is the vortex where teacher complaints and parental pressures seem to converge. In many households, it is tinder that ignites continuous family battles and a spawning ground for mixed signals and even some resentment between teachers and parents. In the end teachers don't feel supported; parents feel obligated and harassed.

Homework is a controversial matter among educational experts and child psychologists, with some questioning its usefulness, particularly in grade school, and others seeing it as an essential way to reinforce classroom learning and develop critical habits of self-discipline and self-motivation. But beyond this academic debate, homework is, without question, “where the rubber hits the road” when it comes to parental involvement in their children’s education.

The Litmus Test

For teachers, homework is a litmus test of whether parents are upholding their end of the bargain. What teachers want is relatively clear: The first preference of nearly six in ten (57%) is for parents to check their children’s work to make sure it was done and done correctly; another 30% think parents should go further and help students do the work. Only a handful believe parents should merely ask if the work was done and leave it at that.

But teachers overwhelmingly believe parents fail to deliver on these expectations. Only 10% believe their students’ parents indeed check to make sure homework is done and done correctly; even fewer (6%) think parents are helping students with their assignments. Instead most teachers (78%) believe parents take a perfunctory approach to the issue, simply asking if the work was done or just leaving it up to the student altogether.

Junior on His Own

A Michigan teacher said, “Mom and Dad are just not sitting together at the kitchen table helping their child

Teachers Rate Parents on Homework

	TEACHERS	
	What parents <i>should</i> do:	What parents do:
Check the work to make sure it was done, and done correctly	57%	10%
Get involved in helping them do the work	30	6
Ask the student if the work has been done, and leave it at that	9	34
Leave it up to the student	2	44

with homework any more. Junior is on his own, and with homework any more. Junior is on his own, and they’re off on their own.” The result: A 55% majority point to students who don’t do their homework as a serious problem in their own classrooms.

The sense among teachers is that parents are shirking their responsibility on this important front, sometimes because they are overwhelmed, sometimes because they are irresponsible. More than half (53%) of teachers think parents get so tired of battling their kids over homework that they give up. “Occasionally it’s a bad parent,” said a Minnesota teacher, “but I would say that many parents have job stresses that are horrendous. They have to travel, and they work tremendous hours. They’re not intentionally neglecting their child; they just have too much on their plate.”

Distractions Galore?

At first blush, parents seem to report that schoolwork is fully under control in their homes. Fully two in three (66%) say homework is rarely a source of struggle and stress between them and their children. A similar number (68%) say their child is self-motivated and does work independently, while only 27% say they have to stay on top of them to make sure the work gets done.

There certainly seems to be an abundance of distractions available in a typical home. Half (50%) of parents report their children have a TV in their room; 29% say they have a computer; 27% report they have a phone. But parents also say this part of the homework problem is in check: more than six in ten (62%) believe their kids are not distracted by having these things in the room. “TV is definitely a concern,” said a Westchester parent, “but you can use it as leverage. ‘If you want to watch Rugrats, then you are going to have this much homework done.’”

Too Tired to Fight

Nevertheless, pressures and frustrations sometimes boil over: in the past year, 50% of parents have had one or more serious arguments with their child—complete with crying or yelling—over doing homework. And although most parents (58%) say it’s the wrong thing to do, nearly half (49%) have walked away from their children when they were stalling and getting distracted from doing their schoolwork to let them deal with the consequences.

What’s more, there are signs that some parents are conflicted about just how firm they should be in enforcing the homework regime. In the focus groups, when parents said they were “too tired to fight,” they sometimes meant they were wary of engaging in a sustained battle with their kids after spending most of the day apart. “It’s not so bad now, but when she was younger it was a real battle,” recalled a Birmingham mom. “It made me feel real bad. I wanted this time to be quality love time, and it couldn’t be because of this homework. I have stayed up at night after putting him to bed and done projects for him, just to save that time. I have.” In fact, one in five parents (22%) admit they have done their child’s homework because the assignment was too difficult or the child was too tired.

Homework as Parents’ Headache

% of parents saying they have done the following:

Have had serious arguments with child where there was yelling or crying over schoolwork	50%
Have walked away and let child deal with the consequences of not doing their schoolwork rather than dealing with child’s constant stalling	49%
Have done part of child’s homework because it was too difficult for them or because they were too tired	22%

“It Was Too Much”

Frustration led some parents to question whether all the homework assignments were really necessary or whether they were busywork. “My daughter, it was taking her literally three hours a night. What are they learning in school that they have to do so much at home?” asked a Chicago parent. “It was too much. Me and my wife both talked to the teachers about it. Some of the teachers were supportive; some were kind of insulted by it.” A California parent recalled in frustration, “It was literally three and a half hours of homework a night. It got to the point where I didn’t want to come home from work.”

Going with the Flow?

While educators often recommend the virtue of fostering routine and structure when it comes to doing homework, many parents do not achieve this ideal. Although 58% of parents say schoolwork always gets done at a set, regular time in their home, 42% say it varies depending on how the day is going. Some parents even thought that enforcing a routine structure or time was counterproductive. “If you put a desk up, or make him sit in a certain place at a certain time, it’s like he’s sitting in school. You have to go with the flow, like let them work in the living room on the coffee table. They usually do their work in their rooms with the stereos on, and it works.”

On Their Own

Although teachers criticize the notion of kids doing work on their own without parental supervision, many parents view this as the ultimate signal that their goal of raising a self-sufficient child is being realized. “My daughter is definitely self-motivated,” said one parent from a Chicago suburb. “I even worried because she never asked for help, but she was getting good grades. So I told my husband, ‘Wow, we finally made it.’ It’s definitely good for her to do it on her own.”

Other parents take the notion of a division of labor one step further—their job is to make a living, their children’s job is to do their homework. “I don’t feel I’m supposed to be involved in their homework unless they need help,” said a Chicago dad. “That’s their job to me. I feel like she should just come home and get her homework done. She complains about how much she has, but then she’ll get it all done before dinner.”

The Homework Wars

While some parents enjoy self-motivated children who know what to do and get right down to business when homework time comes, many others go through

elaborate efforts and use finely calibrated reward-and-punishment routines to motivate their children. Often it is just not enough: about six in ten parents (59%) admit that their child “sometimes cuts corners on schoolwork to do things that are more fun.”

Howard Gardner, a leading scholar on education issues, recently likened the “homework wars” to the most decisive battles of history—such as Agincourt or the struggles of the Civil War: “For many parents and children, the encounter over homework bears the mark of a similar armed struggle: Who is in control? What weapons should be used? What are the spoils of victory, the costs of loss? And the ultimate question of warfare: What is it all for?”¹⁸ There seem to be no hard-and-fast rules guiding parents as they struggle to negotiate outcomes that are peaceful—and productive.

“It made me feel real bad. I wanted this time to be quality love time, and it couldn’t be because of this homework. I have stayed up at night after putting him to bed and done projects for him, just to save that time. I have.”

—Birmingham Parent

RETHINKING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

An Afterword by Deborah Wadsworth

Public Agenda has written over a dozen major studies in the last ten years, giving voice to the concerns of parents, teachers, taxpayers, teenagers, professors, employers, and even journalists on all manner of issues coalescing around public education. This research, we have been told, has untangled differing perspectives, clarified misunderstandings, and challenged the conventional wisdom about the views of many key groups, including white, African American, Hispanic, traditional Christian, and foreign-born parents. None of the studies, I would submit, has more striking implications for the country's battle to improve schools than *Playing Their Parts*, and none may be as difficult to absorb.

Give Parents More Clout?

The findings on what parents and teachers mean by “parental involvement in education” are quite clear and, for these two groups, at least, surprisingly uncontroversial. But the research is at odds with the assumptions of many

What is absolutely indispensable, according to both teachers and parents, is what families do to shape a child's character, to promote decency, civility, integrity, and effort.

reformers working to improve education by “empowering” parents—that is, bringing parents inside the schools and giving them the clout to put an educational agenda into place. Few can doubt the reformers' good intentions or their energy and zeal. But their take on what parents should do to improve their children's education often omits what may be the most bedeviling and deep-rooted anxiety parents and teachers face today.

Based on all we heard in the thousands of interviews conducted for this study, a parent could attend every school meeting, sit on multiple committees, volunteer regularly for assorted school tasks, meet the teachers personally, and routinely check on test scores and grades, and still not be the kind of parent who is essential to a child's academic success. What matters most—what is

absolutely indispensable, according to both teachers and parents—is what families do to shape a child's character, to promote decency, civility, integrity, and effort. This is the province of parents, the job that they, and only they, can do.

Computers and Encyclopedias?

Neither parents nor teachers seem to want greater parental involvement in governing or managing public schools. Both groups say volunteering is helpful, but neither sees this as imperative. Both groups focus on what happens at home, but it's not correcting spelling or buying a computer or encyclopedia that really counts. Job One—the kind of parental involvement teachers crave and parents aim for—is raising respectful, mannerly, cooperative, and well-behaved children who come to school ready to work hard and eager to learn.

In *Playing Their Parts*, as in several other recent Public Agenda studies, the public rails about spoiled, lazy, rude, “smart aleck” youngsters they encounter daily. Teachers and even parents concur on the seriousness of the problem. But parents also voice considerable ambivalence on how to get a handle on it. They say they feel battered and overwhelmed by the daily requirements of parenting with too little time and too much guilt to do what is needed. TV and homework become the flashpoints—nightly opportunities for combat at the end of an already wearying day. In the face of still another conflict, parents are beset with doubts: “How far should I push?” “We have so little time together. Do I really want to spend it in a fight?” Surprisingly, this study, along with others Public Agenda has conducted, suggests that many youngsters actually long for supervision and structure and secretly value their parents' vigilance and concern.

No Crisply Itemized Agenda

As is often the case, making the diagnosis is easier than affecting a cure. There is no magic bullet, no single solution, no crisply itemized agenda, that easily addresses this problem. It cannot be delegated to outside agencies or well-intentioned child advocacy groups or even the schools themselves. Indeed, the problem seems particularly convoluted and complex—one that may call for a profound cultural rethink on how we go about raising good kids.

Readers may have a variety of reactions to the ambivalence and puzzlement many parents express. Some may put the blame on economic pressures that have made the two-job family a seeming economic necessity. Others may point to misplaced priorities and parents' unwillingness to make the financial trade-offs that would give them more time with their child. Others may see parents as weak-kneed—focusing too much on a child's self-esteem and too little on their character and sense of responsibility. Some may blame teachers for pouring on homework but

Indeed, the problem seems particularly convoluted and complex—one that may call for a profound cultural rethink on how we go about raising good kids.

neglecting to set high standards themselves and make learning a compelling enterprise. Still others may put the blame on a society that sends parents mixed messages about how to raise their children and seems to undercut their authority and confidence at every turn. Doubtless there are other explanations that merit discussion. Indeed, there's a debate to be had here, and it's an important one.

Many parents admit they need help, but frankly, relatively few institutions even acknowledge the problem as the parents and teachers describe it. Some of the most influential and well-organized initiatives promoting greater parental involvement in education skip over this issue entirely. Others address it with a light rhetorical flourish. The media and wider culture, according to many parents and teachers, seem utterly hostile.

Any Parent Can Apply

Strong, consistent parents who raise well-behaved, motivated children are what teachers want. Parents agree that this is their role. Parents do not have to be well educated. They don't have to be wealthy or articulate. They do not need to speak English. They may not even need more time off from work (although most would undoubtedly appreciate the offer from time to time). But parents may well need better advice, reassurance, and moral support from the rest of us. The question is: Are we actually willing to give it?



Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Vice President

SUPPORTING TABLES

TABLE ONE: Parents' Views on Schools and Children

How close does each of the following come to your own view? [Insert Item]—is that very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your view?

PARENTS	Very or Somewhat Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close
The most important thing parents can do to help their child succeed in school is to provide a stable, loving home	99%	87%	12%
I want school to be a fun and enjoyable experience my kids will remember for the rest of their lives	95	76	19
As children get older, it's important that they increasingly handle schoolwork on their own	93	72	21
Today's teachers have to deal with a lot more discipline problems than in the past	92	76	16
Today's teachers often use very different techniques to teach their subjects than when I was in school	89	61	28
As long as they try hard, children should never feel bad about themselves because of poor grades in school	88	65	23
Most children go through times when they are distracted and slacking off at school	87	51	37
When my child comes home happy from school I know they're doing well	85	56	29
One of the main reasons I live in this neighborhood is the quality of its schools	73	53	19
I would be very disappointed if my child got average grades in school this year	60	34	26
It's OK to let a child skip a school assignment on special occasions	27	10	16

A full questionnaire with all answer categories is available from Public Agenda in the Technical Appendix for this study. Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

Parents: n=1,220

TABLE TWO: Parents' Views on Parental Involvement

Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. [Insert Item]—do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree?

PARENTS	Strongly or Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree
As much as parents try to help, children's academic success still has a lot to do with their natural abilities [†]	89%	45%	44%
It is always the same group of parents who are helping out at the school [†]	87	59	28
Parents should never criticize a teacher in front of their child*	85	64	21
Too many parents expect the school to do their job for them*	82	54	28
Kids whose parents are not involved at school sometimes get shortchanged and fall through the cracks [†]	72	38	35
When it comes to behavior and values, it's at school that my child often learns the wrong things*	52	16	36
The schools sometimes unfairly blame parents for things that should be the schools' responsibility [†]	46	16	30
Parents should avoid disputes with their child's teacher because the teacher could take it out on the child [†]	43	15	27
I need to keep a close eye on the teachers and school to make sure my children get treated well*	42	16	27

*Split sample: n=659

[†]Split sample: n=611

TABLE THREE: Reasons Parents Become Less Involved in Later Grades

Here are some reasons why parents may become less involved in their children's education in later grades. For each, please tell me if you think this is a major reason parents become less involved, a minor reason, or not a reason at all.

HIGH SCHOOL PARENTS	Major Reason
Schoolwork becomes more difficult for parents to help with	46%
Kids are embarrassed if their parents get too involved	35
The high schools and middle schools make less effort to get parents involved	28
Kids can handle school on their own and need parents less	25
There are so many teachers in later grades that it is hard to keep contact with them	24
Parents run out of the energy they had when their kids were little	20

High School Parents Only: n=507

TABLE FOUR: Parents' Responses to Ideas for Parental Involvement

Now I'll read you some ways to try to get parents at your school more involved in their children's education. How much do you favor or oppose each of these ideas for your school? How about [Insert Item]—would you say you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea?

PARENTS	Strongly or Somewhat Favor	Strongly Favor	Somewhat Favor
Offering working parents school appointments in the early morning or evening so they can meet with teachers*	96%	79%	18%
Giving parents advice on how to get kids excited about learning†	96	68	28
Giving parents more information about how their schools compare with other schools in their area*	90	63	27
Giving parents advice on how to supervise their children's schoolwork*	90	46	43
Giving parents more information on the qualifications of their children's teachers*	87	54	33
Requiring the parents of failing students to attend programs that teach them how to help their kids learn*	81	51	30
Requiring parents and teachers to sign contracts that spell out what each is expected to do to help students succeed*	68	38	31
Requiring teachers to visit the homes of children whose parents have never come to school*	52	24	29

*Split sample: n=643

†Split sample: n=561

TABLE FIVE: Teachers' Ratings of Schools and Parents

Overall, how would you rate the following?

TEACHERS	Excellent/ Good	Fair/ Poor
The quality of the teachers at your school in terms of their ability to teach	92%	8%
The students at your school in terms of their ability to learn	71	29
The reputation your school has among other teachers in the district as a desirable place to work	70	29
The students at your school in terms of their behavior	67	33
Your school's principal in terms of leadership and effectiveness	61	38
The parents at your school in terms of their involvement with their children's education	34	66

Teachers: n=1,000

TABLE SIX: Teachers' Complaints About Students

How serious have the following student problems been in the classes you have recently taught — very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not serious at all?

TEACHERS	Very or Somewhat Serious	Very Serious	Somewhat Serious
Students who try to get by with doing as little work as possible	69%	26%	43%
Students who don't do their homework	55	16	39
Students who are disruptive in class	42	11	32
Students who are chronically late and unprepared for class	40	9	31
Students who are violent or physically threatening in class	15	4	11
Students who come to class hungry because of poverty	15	3	13

Teachers: n=1,000

TABLE SEVEN: Teachers' Views on Parental Involvement in Schools

How close do the following statements come to describing your experiences with the parents at your school—very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all?

TEACHERS	Very or Somewhat Close	Very Close	Somewhat Close
It is always the same group of parents who are helping out at the school	98%	76%	22%
Without involved parents, it is very hard for a student to succeed in school	81	39	42
My school tries hard to get parents involved but there's just no reaching some parents	79	38	41
Most parents of underachieving kids wait for their children to fail before they intervene	78	36	43
Too many parents have little idea of what is going on with their kids' school and education	78	35	43
Most parents respect their children's teachers	77	19	58
Too many parents automatically take their children's side when there is a conflict with their teacher	72	28	45
You cannot count on most parents to watch out for other kids—they are mostly interested in their own children's progress	65	26	38
Most parents try their best to help their kids succeed in school	61	15	46
Some teachers are too sensitive when parents make suggestions about their classrooms	55	7	49
Kids whose parents are not involved at school sometimes get shortchanged and fall through the cracks	48	14	35
Sometimes parents are right when they challenge teachers on grades or discipline matters	46	10	36
Some parents don't trust teachers who are of a different race	29	9	20
Parents are so worried about threats to their kids such as drugs that academic achievement is way down on their list of concerns	22	4	18
It is more difficult for me to have productive conversations with parents who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds	11	2	9

Teachers: n=1,000

TABLE EIGHT: Teachers' Views on Parental Role at Home

Based upon your experiences and observations at your school, how serious a problem are each of the following — very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not serious at all?

TEACHERS	Very or Somewhat Serious	Very Serious	Somewhat Serious
Parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home for their kids	83%	36%	47%
Parents who fail to control how much time their kids spend with TV, computer and video games	83	34	49
Parents who refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance	81	31	50
Parents who allow sports and social popularity to be their kids' biggest priority*	66	19	47
Parents who are so tired of battling their kids over homework that they give up	53	12	41
Parents who are so focused on their own careers that their children's schooling is not a priority	50	12	38
Parents who go directly to the principal when there is a problem instead of talking to the teacher first	47	13	34
Parents who blame teachers for their children's failures	46	11	34
New teaching strategies and approaches that confuse parents	33	4	29
Parents with unrealistically high expectations for what their children can achieve academically	31	5	26
Parents who put too much pressure on their kids to get good grades	31	4	27
Parents who are so concerned that their kids have fun and enjoy school that academic achievement takes a backseat	25	5	20
Parents so attached to old ways of teaching that they resist innovative and improved teaching methods	19	3	16
Parents who are so active at their child's school that they stifle the independence and maturity of the student	16	3	13

Teachers: n=1,000

*This question was asked only of middle school, junior high school, and high school teachers: n=427

ENDNOTES

1. For example: *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda, (1995). Also see: *Time To Move On: African American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools*, Public Agenda, (1998); and *The Essential Profession: A National Survey of Public Attitudes Toward Teaching, Educational Opportunity and School Reform*, Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. National survey of 2,525 adults, conducted August 12 - September 12, 1998.
2. "Public Agenda: Reality Check," *Education Week*, 11 January 1999.
3. Respondents were asked: "In your community, which of the following would do the best job of making sure teachers and principals are held accountable for improving student academic performance - the State Department of Education, the Governor, the Mayor, local school superintendents, or local school boards?" State Department of Education, 20%; Governor, 4%; Mayor, 1%; Local school superintendents, 19%; Local school boards, 49%; Don't know, 7%. "Public Agenda: Reality Check," *Education Week*, 11 January 1999.
4. *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, December 12-18, 1998, p.20.
5. Respondents were asked: "Now I'm going to describe different types of teenagers and ask if you think they are common or not. How about teenagers who treat people with respect. Are they very common, somewhat common, not too common, or not common at all?" Very common, 12%; Somewhat common, 49%; Not too common, 33%; Not at all common, 6%; Don't know, 1%. Respondents were also asked "How about teenagers who have poor work habits and lack self-discipline. Are they very common, somewhat common, not too common, or not common at all?" Very common, 41%; Somewhat common, 44%; Not too common, 12%; Not common at all, 1%; Don't know, 2%. *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*, Public Agenda, (1997), p.37.
6. *Kids These Days*, (1997); *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools*, Public Agenda, (1997).
7. Students were asked: "Now I'm going to read a list of things you can learn in school and ask how important it is for you to learn each one by the time you finish high school. How important is it for you to learn good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined?" Extremely important, 86%; Somewhat important, 13%; Not that important, 2%. Students were also asked "Now I'm going to talk about different ways to try and help students do better in school. After I read each one, I want you to tell me if you think it's an excellent, good, fair, or poor idea for your own school. How about making sure students are on time and complete their work?" Excellent, 40%; Good, 39%, Fair, 18%; Poor, 3%; Don't know, <.5%. Students were also asked: "Now I'm going to read a list of things that might get you to learn more and ask if you think they'll really work. Remember, I'm not asking if you like these ideas, only if you think they will actually get you to learn more. Do you think that getting your class work checked and redoing it until it's right will actually get you to learn more or not?" A lot more, 61%; A little more, 26%; Not learn more, 13%; Make it worse, <.5%; Don't know, <.5%. *Getting By*, (1997).
8. Students were asked: "Please tell me how serious a problem this is in your school: students cheat on tests and assignments?" Very serious, 27%; somewhat serious, 42%; not too serious, 31%; don't know, 1%. *Getting By*, (1997).
9. Teachers were asked: "Overall, would you say your school is doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job?" Excellent, 49%; Good, 43%; Fair, 7%; Poor, 1%. "Public Agenda: Reality Check," *Education Week*, 11 January 1999.
10. Students were asked: "Do your parents or guardians know the name of your favorite teacher?" Yes, 56%; No, 42%; Don't know, 2%. *Getting By*, (1997), p.48.

11. Students were asked: “How often do your parents or guardians help you with your homework—every day, most days, once in a while, or never?” Every day, 17%; Most days, 20%; Once in a while, 46%; Never, 18%; Don’t know, <.5%. “Public Agenda: Reality Check,” *Education Week*, 11 January 1999.
12. Center For Survey Research and Analysis, University of Connecticut (sponsored by the Heldrich Center of Rutgers University). National telephone survey of 1,001 employed adults, conducted August 5-16, 1998. “I’d like to find out how satisfied you are with different aspects of your job. For each, please tell me whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with it. How satisfied are you with the ability to balance work and family?” Very satisfied, 53%; Somewhat satisfied, 34%; Neither, 3%; Somewhat dissatisfied, 6%; Very dissatisfied, 3%; Don’t know, 1%; Refused, 1%.
13. *Washington Post* (sponsored by Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University). National telephone survey of 1,202 adults, conducted August 14 - September 7, 1997. “Which of the following statements comes closer to your own views? Statement A: A man can have a very successful, high paying career and also be a very good father. Statement B: A man must decide between having a very successful, high paying career or being a very good father?” Can have a career and be a very good father, 78%; Must decide between career and being a good father, 20%; No opinion, 3%. “Which of the following statements comes closer to your own views? Statement A: A woman can have a very successful, high paying career and also be a very good mother. Statement B: A woman must decide between having a very successful, high paying career or being a very good mother?” Can have a career and be a good mother, 71%; Must decide between career and being a good mother, 27%; No opinion, 2%.
14. Princeton Survey Research Associates (sponsored by Pew Research Center). National telephone survey of 1,101 adult women, conducted March 14-26, 1997. Asked of working women with children under age 18: “Please tell me if each of the following is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem at all for you as a mother. Balancing work and family responsibilities?” Major problem, 22%; Minor problem, 44%; Not a problem, 34%; Don’t know, <.5%.
15. For example: *National Education Goals Panel*, Public Agenda, (1998).
16. “Public Agenda: Reality Check,” *Education Week*, 11 January 1999. p.102.
17. Respondents were asked: “Do you think it’s much harder or much easier for parents to do their jobs these days, or do you think it’s about the same?” Parent responses: Much harder, 80%; Much easier, 3%; About the same, 17%; Don’t know, <.5%. General public responses: Much harder, 80%; Much easier, 2%; About the same, 17%; Don’t know, <.5%. *Kids These Days*, Public Agenda, (1997).
18. *Time Magazine*, 25 January 1999, p. 62.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a telephone survey of 1,220 parents with children in public school grades K–12 and a mail survey of 1,000 K–12 public school teachers, both conducted in Fall 1998. The surveys were preceded by eight focus groups with teachers, parents, and teenagers, and more than two dozen interviews with experts and practitioners in relevant fields.

The Survey of Parents

A total of 1,220 telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of households with parents or guardians of children in public school grades K–12. Interviews were conducted between December 10 and 20, 1998, and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Respondents were selected through a standard, random-digit-dialing technique, whereby every household in the continental United States, including those with unlisted numbers, had an equal chance of being contacted. The margin of error for the national random sample of parents is +/- 3%; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The Survey of Teachers

The mail survey was conducted as follows: On September 15, 1998, a questionnaire was mailed to 5,000 randomly selected K–12 public school teachers in the continental United States; a reminder postcard followed; and this was followed by a second mailing of the questionnaire. A total of 1,000 surveys were returned by November 30, 1998. The sample was stratified by region and urbanicity. Middle and high school teachers were oversampled to insure a sufficient number of responses; when the study reports the views of teachers in general, their responses are weighted down to accurately reflect their proportion of the universe of all public school teachers. The margin of error for the sample of teachers is +/- 3%.

As in all surveys, question-order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes influence results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensive pre-testing of both questionnaires through in-person and telephone interviews.

The survey instruments were designed by Public Agenda, which is solely responsible for all analysis and interpretation of the results. The teachers' sample was provided by Market Data Retrieval, Inc.; the parents' sample was provided by Survey Sampling, Inc. Both surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc. of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Focus Groups and Expert Interviews

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were crucial to the design of the surveys. To give voice to the attitudes captured statistically through the survey, quotes were drawn from the focus groups and from follow-up interviews with survey respondents who had agreed to be re-interviewed.

Eight focus groups were conducted across the country: two with public school teachers, four with parents, and two with teens. The focus groups took place in Chicago, IL; Oakland and San Leandro, CA; Westchester, NY; Birmingham, AL; and Greensboro, NC. In all cases, local professional market research organizations recruited participants to Public Agenda's specifications. All focus groups were moderated by Public Agenda senior staff.

Before conducting the focus groups, Public Agenda interviewed 25 experts in the field to obtain grounding in the current substantive issues concerning parental involvement in education. These experts included researchers, educators, school administrators, and parents, among others. Background research for this study also included a review of the current literature and previous surveys on parental involvement.

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