

Excerpted from  
A Notion at Risk: Preserving Public Education as an Engine for Social Mobility,  
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## 8.

### CRITICAL SUPPORT: THE PUBLIC VIEW OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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**P**ublic education is supposed to be the “great equalizer.” While Americans oppose many redistributive social welfare efforts, they strongly believe in public education as a way of promoting social mobility. In recent years, a number of proposals have been floated to reform public education to address inequalities in educational opportunity stemming from unequal financial resources, unequal curriculum, unequal teacher quality, and the like. These reforms fall in seven broad areas of education policy, each of which will be discussed in this paper: standards, charter schools/public school choice and integration, teachers, discipline, social promotion/summer school, spending, and vouchers.

#### GENERAL VIEWS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

##### Ratings of Public Schools

There is clearly significant current dissatisfaction with the public school system. As has been widely reported, public confidence in, and ratings of, the school system are now at a low level. For example, just

25 percent of Americans rate the nation's public schools as excellent or good, and 66 percent rate them only fair or poor.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in a 1999 Gallup poll conducted for Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), just 24 percent of respondents gave the public school system a grade of A or B, and an astonishing 66 percent gave the system a grade of C, D, or fail (see Table 8.1).

Judging from Table 8.1, this dissatisfaction dates back at least to the early 1980s, abated somewhat in the mid-1980s, and dropped modestly in

**TABLE 8.1. GRADING THE NATION'S  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 1981–99 (PERCENT)**

How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally—A, B, C, D, or Fail?

DATE	A	B	C	D	FAIL	DON'T KNOW
May 1981	2	18	43	15	6	16
May 1982	2	20	44	15	4	15
May 1983	1	17	38	16	6	21
May 1984	2	23	49	11	4	11
May 1985	3	24	43	12	3	15
April 1986	3	25	41	10	5	16
April 1987	4	22	44	11	2	17
April 1988	3	20	48	13	3	13
May 1989	2	20	47	15	4	12
April 1992	2	16	48	18	4	12
May 1993	2	17	48	17	4	12
May 1994	2	20	49	17	6	6
May 1995	2	18	50	17	4	9
May 1996	1	20	46	18	5	10
June 1997	2	20	48	15	6	9
June 1998	1	17	49	15	5	13
June 1999	2	22	46	16	4	10

*Polls:* All data from annual polls for Phi Delta Kappa conducted by Gallup.

*Sources:* Jennifer Hochschild and Bridget Scott, "The Polls—Trends: Governance and Reform of Public Education in the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1998): 79–120; Phi Delta Kappa website: <http://www.pdkintl.org>.

the late 1980s and early 1990s to roughly its current level.<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that the total overall change from 1981 to 1999 is a matter of only a few percentage points, and it actually moves in a slightly optimistic direction. The public today is gloomy about the nation's schools, but not much more so than it has been for the past couple of decades.

One of the more intriguing findings of public opinion research on education is how optimistic the public tends to be about their own public schools. Indeed, the closer you get to the schools their children actually attend, the happier people say they are. For example, 49 percent give the schools in their local community an A or B, and a whopping 66 percent give the specific school their oldest child attends an A or B (see Table 8.2, page 254, and Table 8.3, page 255).<sup>3</sup>

As the tables show, this discrepancy is of long standing. As far back as we have data, respondents have been far more optimistic about their community's public schools than about the nation's, and downright sunny about the schools their own children attend.<sup>4</sup>

How can people rate the nation's public schools so poorly while rating their community's and especially their own children's schools so highly? Some analysts argue that the national ratings reflect people's true feelings and experiences, while people are reluctant to rate their own schools poorly because it makes them look bad for sending their children there. At the same time, others argue that the *local* ratings accurately reflect people's true experiences with the school system, while the national ratings are mostly a product of gloomy media coverage of problems in the schools. Academic analysts have reached no consensus on which, if either, of these hypotheses is correct. Therefore, until this issue is resolved, it would seem prudent for analysts to temper their alarm about low public esteem for the school system as a whole, with the knowledge that the public's views are considerably more positive about their own children's schools.

And there is another way to interpret these data: even allowing for considerable bias, people simply do not have the sense of crisis about their local public schools—reflecting fairly positive personal experiences with them—that they have about the national system. For example, they may have read about truly dysfunctional schools elsewhere (inner-city public schools would be the most common example) and consider this a very serious problem. So, when they rate the nation's public schools poorly, they may be expressing a sincere judgment about

**TABLE 8.2. GRADING PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN  
LOCAL COMMUNITY, 1974–99 (PERCENT)**

Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here—A, B, C, D, or Fail?

DATE	A	B	C	D	FAIL	DON'T KNOW/ NO ANSWER
May 1974	18	30	21	6	5	21
April 1976	13	29	28	10	6	4
April 1977	11	26	28	11	5	19
April 1978	9	27	30	11	8	15
May 1979	8	26	29	11	7	18
May 1980	10	25	29	12	6	18
May 1981	9	27	34	13	7	10
May 1982	8	29	33	14	5	11
May 1983	6	25	32	13	7	17
May 1984	10	32	35	11	4	8
May 1985	9	34	30	10	4	13
April 1986	11	30	28	11	5	15
April 1987	12	31	30	9	4	14
April 1988	9	31	34	10	4	12
May 1989	8	35	33	11	4	9
May 1991	10	32	33	10	5	10
April 1992	9	31	33	12	5	10
May 1993	10	37	31	11	4	7
May 1994	9	35	30	14	7	5
May 1995	8	33	37	12	5	5
May 1996	8	35	34	11	6	6
June 1997	10	36	32	11	6	5
June 1998	10	36	31	9	5	9
June 1999	11	38	31	9	5	6

*Polls:* Data from Kettering Foundation polls conducted by Gallup through 1980; thereafter from annual polls for Phi Delta Kappa conducted by Gallup.

*Sources:* Jennifer Hochschild and Bridget Scott, "The Polls—Trends: Governance and Reform of Public Education in the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1998): 79–120; Phi Delta Kappa website: <http://www.pdkintl.org>.

**TABLE 8.3. GRADING OWN CHILD'S  
PUBLIC SCHOOL,<sup>a</sup> 1985–99 (PERCENT)**

Using the A, B, C, D, and Fail scale again, what grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?

DATE	A	B	C	D	FAIL	DON'T KNOW
May 1985	23	48	19	5	2	3
April 1986	29	37	24	4	2	4
April 1987	28	41	20	5	2	4
April 1988	22	48	22	3	2	3
May 1989	25	46	19	5	1	4
May 1991	29	44	21	2	4	—
April 1992	22	42	24	6	4	2
May 1993	27	45	18	5	2	3
May 1994	28	42	22	6	1	1
May 1995	27	38	23	8	3	1
May 1996	23	43	22	6	5	1
June 1997	26	38	23	7	4	2
June 1998	22	40	25	8	3	2
June 1999	24	42	21	7	5	1

<sup>a</sup> Public school parents only.

*Polls:* All data from annual polls for Phi Delta Kappa conducted by Gallup.

*Sources:* Jennifer Hochschild and Bridget Scott, "The Polls—Trends: Governance and Reform of Public Education in the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1998): 79–120; Phi Delta Kappa website: <http://www.pdkintl.org>.

the failure of schools to lift up a substantial and disadvantaged proportion of society, rather than transferring their own personal dissatisfaction onto a national target. This contradicts a common picture of the typical citizen as narrowly self-interested and unconcerned with the collective welfare, but there is plenty of precedent for this view in the academic literature.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, it is difficult to know where manipulation leaves off and genuine concern begins. But, in a sense, it doesn't matter. The point is that the public may see current educational problems, despite predominantly affecting others at present, as compromising the traditional role of American education as a vehicle for economic opportunity and

upward mobility. And that disturbs them, particularly in an era when education is becoming more and more important to an individual's economic success. Not only do parents see that the system is failing for a substantial portion of American youth, thereby dooming them to be left behind economically, but how can these parents be sure their own children will not suffer the same fate later? After all, a system that fails for some may be on the verge of failing for others. Can they be sure that a school performing on a B level—the typical grade given by parents to their children's school—is truly adequate to the demands of the “new economy”? And can they really be sure current performance will not deteriorate, as the system is dragged down by its weakest links? In this way, concern for students currently being failed by the public schools merges into an enlightened self-interest for one's own children. As we shall see, this interpretation is consistent with other aspects of public opinion of public schools.

### Support for Public Schools

Despite the public's negative feelings about the public school system as a whole—and consistent with relatively positive personal experiences—support for the institution of public schools remains strong. For example, in the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll, more than seven in ten respondents (71 percent) said that educational improvements should focus on reforming the existing public school system rather than finding an alternative to it.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in a June 1999 Penn, Schoen, and Berland/Democratic Leadership Council (PSB/DLC) poll, 71 percent of the public endorsed using all available resources to improve public schools, compared to just 24 percent who preferred helping people go to private schools. Even more impressive, a staggering 98 percent say they favor continuing the guarantee of a free public education, and 96 percent say it is important that public schools be strengthened.<sup>7</sup> And the priority accorded improving the system has ranked at or near the top of the public's wish list for quite some time. Indeed, a June 1999 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll found that improving public education outranks such hardy perennials as guaranteeing the financial stability of Social Security, promoting strong moral values, and cutting taxes. Thus, general support for reforming and strengthening the public schools seems quite strong.

## STANDARDS

One of the clearest public sentiments about school reform is the desire for higher standards, as well as the willingness to tolerate fairly strict guidelines and testing regimes to accomplish this goal. There is some evidence that support for standards today is substantially higher than it has been in the past. For example, a question dating back to the late 1950s (see Table 8.4) asks whether students should have to pass a standard, nationwide academic examination to graduate from high school. As the table shows, the public was split on the question through the mid-1960s, but by the mid-1970s (the next time the question was asked) a strong consensus had evolved: by more than two to one, people favored having such an examination. And closer to the present day, support is even more lopsided: 73 percent in favor

**TABLE 8.4. SUPPORT FOR STANDARD ACADEMIC EXAMINATION TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL, 1958–96 (PERCENT)**

Should all high school students in the United States be required to pass a standard nationwide examination in order to get a high school diploma?			
DATE	YES/FAVOR	NO/OPPOSE	NO ANSWER
November 1958	50	40	11
March 1961	47	43	9
April 1965	48	43	8
September 1965	45	47	8
April 1976	65	31	4
June 1978	82	14	4
May 1984	65	29	6
April 1988	73	22	5
March 1996 <sup>a</sup>	87	11	3

<sup>a</sup> 1996 question: Thinking about some different standards that some people have proposed—please listen as I read each one and tell me if you favor or oppose setting the standard. . . . Having students pass an academic examination in order to graduate from high school . . . [Prompt:] Do you favor or oppose this?

*Polls:* Gallup, 1958–65; Gallup for Kettering Foundation, 1976; CBS, 1978; Gallup for Phi Delta Kappa, 1984–88; Tarrance Group and Mellman/Lake/Lazarus for *U.S. News and World Report*, 1996.

*Source:* Jennifer Hochschild and Bridget Scott, “The Polls—Trends: Governance and Reform of Public Education in the United States,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1998): 79–120.

and 22 percent against in 1988, and an incredible 87 to 11 percent in 1996.<sup>8</sup>

While a nationwide examination for high school graduates is a specific and limited idea, other polling data show that the public has a broad and strong interest in the concept of national testing standards. For example, from 1970 to 1992 Gallup asked one form or another of a general question on using standardized national tests to measure and compare local student achievement, and support never dropped below 69 percent.<sup>9</sup> More recent polls tell the same story. A 1998 Gallup/PDK poll found that 71 percent of the public endorse a voluntary national program (as proposed by the Clinton administration) to measure the performance of public schools by testing fourth- and eighth-graders. The 1999 PSB/DLC poll found 69 percent supported a single, agreed-upon set of national standards, compared to just 27 percent who opposed it. Finally, a June 1999 National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation (NPR/KFF) survey recorded 94 percent support for making students meet adequate academic standards to be promoted or graduated and 87 percent support for using standardized tests to ensure that students meet national academic standards. Note that these high levels of support for national standards occur in a public opinion environment where, to this day, there is strong public preference for local, rather than state or national, control of curricular content.

What leads people to override their basic preference for local control? Simply, they believe such standards will raise student achievement, something they apparently value more than the abstract principle of local control. For example, in a 1997 Gallup/PDK poll, 77 percent of the public said that national standards for the academic performance of public schools would help individual students either “a great deal” or “quite a lot.” Similarly, 78 percent of respondents in a 1998 Zogby poll said that national testing standards would be very or somewhat effective in improving education.

So the public’s preferences for higher standards are clear. But what about *flexibility* of standards: do they believe “one size fits all,” or do they believe flexibility should be shown for students whose disadvantaged backgrounds provide barriers to achievement? The answer here is a clear no to the idea of flexibility in standards. By almost three to one (66 to 23 percent), parents believe inner-city students—the prototypical disadvantaged students—should be held to the same standards as kids from wealthier backgrounds.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, support for this view is

apparently stronger among blacks and Latinos than among whites: a 1998 Peter Harris/RNT poll found 79 percent of Latinos and 71 percent of blacks agreeing with the proposition that most children should be required to meet the same set of academic standards, compared to 68 percent of whites.

It is worth stressing that teachers overall share this view about the uniformity of standards (71 percent in favor and 27 percent opposed). However, data are not available on how teachers who actually teach these disadvantaged students—for example, in high-poverty neighborhoods—feel about this issue. It is possible that their views on standards are not as strict as teachers as a whole.

### CHARTER SCHOOLS/PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE AND INTEGRATION

At this point, there are about 1,200 charter schools serving some 300,000 students. However, given that there are 88,000 schools and some 46 million students nationwide, it is perhaps not surprising that, until very recently, there has been very little polling data on public views about charter schools. One early exception was a question asked by Penn, Schoen, and Berland for the Democratic Leadership Council in July 1997 which suggested public support for an expansion of the charter school program (67 percent in favor to 26 percent opposed). Results from 1999 polls confirm this general picture, recording support levels of 68 percent (Public Agenda), 63 percent (PSB/DLC), and 62 percent (NPR/KFF) for the general concept of charter schools. Note, however, that each of these polls found that the majority of the public knows little to nothing about charter schools and is therefore expressing support for a concept, not a working reality. But as a concept it is appealing, and both the Public Agenda and PSB/DLC polls found that a majority of the public would at least consider sending their children to a charter school.

A more thoroughly tested proposition is public school choice. As shown in Table 8.5 (page 260), a variety of question wordings on this issue, reasonably neutral in all cases, have been used since 1987, and they all return strong evidence of public support—from a low of 60 percent (two to one) to a high of 82 percent (four to one) in favor of public school choice.<sup>11</sup> There is also some indication of increasing support from 1989 onwards. In terms of demographics, results from the 1997 survey indicate

that support is stronger for this approach at lower education and income levels, which is not surprising given that the most affluent areas tend to have the best neighborhood schools. But even among the affluent, support is still strong—just not as strong as among the less privileged.

**TABLE 8.5. SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE, 1987–97 (PERCENT)**

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live?

DATE	FAVOR	OPPOSE	DON'T KNOW/ NO ANSWER
April 1987 <sup>a</sup>	71	20	9
May 1989	60	31	9
1990	62	31	7
1991	62	33	5
August 1992 <sup>b</sup>	69	29	2
1993	65	33	2
May 1995 <sup>c</sup>	69	28	3
December 1996 <sup>d</sup>	82	16	2
March 1997 <sup>e</sup>	73	25	2

<sup>a</sup> 1987 question: Do you think that parents in this community should or should not have the right to choose which local schools their children attend?

<sup>b</sup> 1992 question: I'd like to read you a series of statements about public school education in this country (United States). Tell me whether you agree or disagree with each statement. . . . Children should be able to attend the public school of their choice including one outside of their district with government money going to the school they attend.

<sup>c</sup> 1995 question: Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in the community the students attend, regardless of where they live?

<sup>d</sup> 1996 question: I'm going to read you two education proposals, and for each one, please tell me whether you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose that proposal. . . . Giving parents choices in determining which public school their children will attend.

<sup>e</sup> 1997 question: I'm going to read you two education proposals, and for each one, please tell me whether you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose that proposal. . . . Allowing parents to send their children to any public school in their local school district.

*Polks:* Gallup for Phi Delta Kappa 1987–91, 1993–95; Harris/*Business Week*, 1992; NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, 1996–97.

*Sources:* Jennifer Hochschild and Bridget Scott, "The Polls—Trends: Governance and Reform of Public Education in the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1998): 79–120; Stanley Elam, *How America Views Its Schools: The PDK/Gallup Polls, 1969–1994* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1995).

Can this apparently strong support for charter schools and, especially, public school choice be harnessed to further long-standing goals of integration, either by race, class, or both? Little beyond general public support or opposition to these proposals has been tested by pollsters, so we have no specific data on how people might react to linking either charter schools or public school choice to the goal of integration. We do know, however, that integration itself, as a general objective, is quite popular. Indeed, public support for the goal of integration by race has never been higher. On the most basic level, support is now consistently over 90 percent for the idea that whites and blacks should attend the same schools, which was certainly *not* true in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More significantly, the proportion of the public willing to send their children to a school where not just a few but half or even a majority of the students are of another race has continued to increase gradually over the past two decades (see Table 8.6, page 262).<sup>12</sup> As the most recent data in the table show, the public is almost unanimous in its lack of objection to sending its children to schools where a few students are of another race, and not far from that—an amazing 84 percent—in not objecting to sending its children to schools where half the student body is of another race. Finally, about two-thirds (65 percent) say they would not object to sending their children to a school where a majority of children were of another race.

These figures are largely traceable to the marked shift in American public opinion in the past several decades toward racial tolerance and respect for diversity. In most walks of life, including the public schools, Americans now tend to see diversity as a positive experience that, all else being equal, is a genuine benefit.

That said, the most widely used mechanism to enhance integration in the public schools is quite unpopular. Surveys in the 1990s have continued to show strong opposition to busing schoolchildren to achieve racial balance, chiefly among whites.<sup>13</sup> This is considerably less than the higher levels of opposition in the 1970s and 1980s, but it is clear that busing remains an unpopular policy mechanism, even though it is connected to the goal of integration that is, in and of itself, popular. Indeed, Public Agenda posed an explicitly integration-oriented question in April 1998: “Now I’m going to read you a way to achieve integrated schools and ask you if you favor or oppose it. How about busing children to achieve a better racial balance in the schools? Do you favor or oppose this?” The response was negative from three-quarters of whites.

**TABLE 8.6. VIEWS ON LEVELS OF SCHOOL INTEGRATION, 1978–96 (PERCENT)**

Would you have any objection to sending your children to a school where (a few/half/a majority) of the children are (black/white)?

DATE	FEW			HALF			MAJORITY		
	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
April 1978	5	94	1	18	79	3	36	59	5
April 1982	6	93	1	17	80	3	37	57	6
April 1983	5	94	1	18	80	2	43	52	5
April 1985	4	95	1	16	82	2	40	56	5
April 1986	5	94	1	18	80	2	42	55	4
April 1988	4	95	1	16	82	2	37	58	6
April 1990	3	96	< 1	16	81	3	40	54	7
April 1991	3	96	1	15	83	2	34	60	6
April 1993	4	95	1	14	83	3	36	59	6
May 1994	4	96	1	12	86	2	35	60	5
May 1996	3	97	1	15	84	2	29	65	6

*Note:* Blacks were asked about whites; whites were asked about blacks.

*Polls:* All data from General Social Survey conducted by National Opinion Research Center.

*Source:* Jennifer Hochschild and Bridget Scott, "The Polls—Trends: Governance and Reform of Public Education in the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1998): 79–120.

There is much debate on why this opposition exists. Some commentators tend to interpret it as evidence of covert racism; that is, whites say they like diversity, but in truth they still dislike blacks and try to avoid them wherever possible.<sup>14</sup> A simpler interpretation is that whites genuinely support integration but consider the costs associated with busing (sending their children to a different school with a typically more disadvantaged and lower-achieving student population, as well as longer commutes and fewer neighborhood friends) not worth the associated benefit.

Given the persistence of these not-irrational views, and given the demise of increasing numbers of desegregative busing plans in the 1990s, it seems fair to say that busing is on its way out as a method of promoting school integration. The broadly popular goal of integration therefore

will have to be obtained in some other way, probably through linkage to some other broadly popular goal. Giving parents more choices within the public school system is a logical candidate.

Of course, providing choices requires that some restrictions be put on which choices parents can make so that the proper integrative effect can be obtained.<sup>15</sup> It may also be necessary, given the evolving legal climate, to base integration on class rather than racial criteria. And we simply do not know how these modifications of pure public school choice—particularly the idea of controlling choices—will play with parents. But since the public starts with general biases in favor of both integration and public school choice, there are some reasonable grounds for optimism. Consistent with this optimism, the 1998 Public Agenda poll found that 61 percent of white parents and 65 percent of black parents support the idea of “letting parents choose their top 3 schools, while the district makes the final choice, with an eye to racial balance.” This contrasts with the current system for promoting integration, where there seems little possibility for the development of a solid popular support base (the same poll found that 76 percent of white parents oppose “busing children to achieve a better racial balance in the schools”).

## TEACHERS

Recent research suggests that teacher quality may be more important to student achievement than previously thought, particularly in terms of the relative achievement levels of black and white students. The public agrees that teacher quality is important and sees improving teacher quality as central to the project of improving the public schools.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in a March 1997 NBC/ *Wall Street Journal* poll, the proposal to “recruit and retain better teachers” easily topped a comprehensive list of school reforms presented to the public. More than four-fifths said that better teachers would produce a “big improvement” in public schools, eleven percentage points above the next most popular reform (improving computer equipment and training). Similarly, in the 1998 Peter Harris/RNT poll, 90 percent of the public said that “ensuring a well-qualified teacher in every classroom” was very important to lifting student achievement, higher than any other proposed measure in a long list except “keeping schools safe from violence.”

But how can this goal of better teachers be accomplished? One approach the public favors is competency testing for teachers. In the 1998 Peter Harris/RNT poll, two-thirds of respondents said that requiring teachers to pass a competency test each year would be a big improvement. Consistent with this result, 72 percent of the respondents in a March 1998 Princeton Survey Research poll endorsed federally sponsored, national standardized tests to measure teacher competence. In addition, two 1999 polls showed very high support for some kind of teacher competency testing: 94 percent support in the PSB/DLC poll and 89 percent in the NPR/KFF poll. Related to this, there is support for some version of teacher accountability where, for example, teacher licensing standards are linked to student performance in classes they have taught (endorsed by 71 percent in the Peter Harris/RNT poll).<sup>17</sup> Finally, 97 percent of respondents in the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll said new teachers should be required to prove their knowledge in the subjects they will teach if they are hired.

Competency tests are one approach. Another, potentially complementary approach is to pay teachers more money, based on the market theory that if you are willing to pay a higher price, you will get a better “product.” This is particularly apropos in an era where there is a serious teacher shortage, a shortage that can only be made worse by the push for smaller class size and the subsequent need for even more teachers. The public appears supportive of such an approach, reflecting their belief that teacher salaries are too low.<sup>18</sup> In the 1998 Peter Harris/RNT poll, for example, over three-quarters of respondents endorsed raising teacher salaries as a measure to deal with the teacher shortage. Similarly, 77 percent in the 1999 NPR/KFF survey favored paying teachers more as a way of improving public schools in their community. And, melding the accountability and higher pay approaches, 90 percent in the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll favored increased pay for teachers who demonstrate high performance as a method of attracting and retaining good public school teachers.

One of the key issues in teacher quality, of course, is its correlation with class and race; that is, the more disadvantaged the student body, the poorer the quality of teachers is likely to be. As mentioned above, this issue appears to loom large in the low achievement levels in high-poverty schools. The provision of higher salaries for teachers in these schools to attract higher-quality teachers might improve this situation. Does public support for improving teacher quality and increasing teacher salaries extend to a provision of such extra funds?

Apparently so. Consider the findings from the 1998 Gallup/PDK poll: 86 percent of respondents said it was “very important” to improve the nation’s inner-city schools, and 66 percent said they would be willing to pay more in taxes to provide the requisite funds to improve these schools. (The latter finding reflects a long-standing public interest in spending more money on the public schools, even if that means higher taxes, providing the money is specifically targeted toward an educational goal they support.)<sup>19</sup>

Even more specifically, 68 percent of respondents in the 1998 Peter Harris/RNT poll said they favored providing tax credits for teachers who work in high-poverty areas as a measure to ease the teacher shortage. And an impressive 83 percent said they agreed *strongly* with the proposition that “we should ensure that all children, including those who are economically disadvantaged, have teachers who are fully qualified, even if that means spending more money to achieve that.” Evidently, the public is quite willing to entertain the notion that teacher salaries should be raised more where such raises might be needed most: in failing inner-city public schools.

## DISCIPLINE

Discipline and discipline-related issues in schools are very much in the front of the public mind—as they have generally been for the past three decades.<sup>20</sup> For example, in the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll, the most frequently mentioned problem afflicting schools in respondents’ local communities was lack of discipline/more control (18 percent), followed by fighting/violence/gangs (11 percent). Similarly, 25 percent of respondents to a 1999 CBS poll put discipline/lack of discipline at the top of their list of biggest problems in schools today, followed by violence (14 percent) in second place.

Clearly, a safe, controlled learning environment in schools is a central educational priority for the public. Note, however, that when taken out of the realm of problems and put in the context of *solutions* for public schools, discipline does not necessarily top the list. For example, in a 1998 Peter Hart/Shell Oil poll, many more respondents selected “mak[ing] sure all elementary school students have mastered reading, writing and math” (55 percent) as an effective idea for educational improvement than selected “tak[ing] tough steps to improve discipline and safety in schools” (24

percent). This suggests that increased discipline is viewed as a means as much as an end—that is, lack of discipline hurts learning, so enhanced discipline is a necessary means to achieve high student achievement (rather than just being an end in and of itself.)<sup>21</sup>

Another striking feature of public opinion about discipline in the schools is the strong support for a hard-line approach toward disruptive students, up to and including a “zero tolerance” policy. In the April 1998 Public Agenda poll, parents overwhelmingly supported taking persistent troublemakers out of class and permanently removing youths caught with drugs or weapons from school grounds. Moreover, this support was almost equally strong among both white and black parents. For both removing troublemakers and suspending children caught with guns or weapons, 86 percent of white parents were in favor. And nearly as many black parents—81 and 78 percent, respectively—favored the same.

Nor is the public less supportive when an automatic suspension or “zero-tolerance” policy is described for drug, alcohol, or weapons violations in the schools. Indeed, it is more so. Support levels in recent Gallup/PDK polls were 90 percent for zero tolerance of drug/alcohol violations (1999) and 93 percent for zero tolerance of weapons violations (1997).

Linked to this strict position on removing discipline problems from the regular school system is support for alternative schools for such discipline problems. For example, in the 1997 Gallup/PDK poll, three-quarters of the public thought moving persistent troublemakers into alternative schools would help public school academic achievement “a great deal” or “quite a lot,” just behind support levels for placing a computer in every classroom (81 percent) and establishing national standards for academic performance (77 percent). More recently, 64 percent of the public in the April 1999 CBS News poll expressed support for alternative schools for chronic behavioral problems.

Of course, these discipline problems tend to be worse in poorer schools and worst of all in high-poverty, inner-city schools. To what extent are Americans aware of this, and how does it influence their views toward poor and minority students?

A result from the 1997 Gallup/PDK poll indicates that the public acknowledges that discipline problems are found more often among poor and minority students. Participants were asked whether public schools in urban areas—where higher concentrations of poor and minority students are found—face more or less serious problems than

nonurban schools; 69 percent said more serious, and 40 percent of those said much more serious. And this is among the same respondents whose views of school problems are dominated by discipline-related issues.

Might this perception be an influence on middle-class—particularly middle-class white—flight from schools that experience an influx of poor and minority students? Almost certainly. About half of white parents that venture an opinion explicitly say that the influx of a large number of black students into a white school will bring increased social problems in its wake. Conversely, more than four-fifths of white parents say they would not care about the race of students in their children's schools, provided they come from "good, hard-working families," a common euphemism for kids that do not pose discipline problems.<sup>22</sup> Finally, firm, well-maintained student discipline ranked second of twelve factors people would consider when choosing a school, if given free choice.<sup>23</sup> Clearly then, the perceived linkage between poor and minority students on the one hand, and discipline problems on the other, must reduce the desirability of schools with these students in the eyes of middle-class and white parents.

## SOCIAL PROMOTION/SUMMER SCHOOL

To say Americans are merely supportive of ending social promotion is to understate the case considerably; they might fairly be characterized as adamant. For example, in a 1997 Wirthlin Worldwide poll, 93 percent of the public favored requiring students to meet basic standards before they can pass to the next grade, including 81 percent who strongly favored such a policy.<sup>24</sup> Consistent with this finding, in a November 1998 Public Agenda poll 81 percent of parents said it would be worse to pass a struggling student to the next grade and expect him or her to keep up than to have the student repeat a grade. Finally, 72 percent of respondents in the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll said they favored stricter standards for social promotion, even if significantly more students would be held back as a result.

Nor is there much difference between black and white parents on this issue. An August 1994 Public Agenda poll asked whether public schools should pass students to the next grade if they make an effort by attending classes regularly and working hard, or only pass them if they show they have gained the requisite knowledge and skills. Eighty percent

of white parents and 77 percent of black parents rejected the social promotion option in favor of a results-based system of promotion.

So, the experts may not be clear on the merits of social promotion, but, for better or worse, the public is. As far as the public is concerned, student promotion should be merit based, period. But this view of the public runs headfirst into the considerable empirical evidence that holding back low-performing students by itself does little good academically, and may even do harm (by increasing dropout rates, and so on).

One way of satisfying the public's desire for ending social promotion, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of simply holding students back, is to make remedial summer school mandatory for these low-performing students. They can then acquire the skills needed to function at the next grade level without having to endure the social and other difficulties of being left behind their classmates (or at least so the theory goes).

At this point there is little polling data on the public opinion of the link between ending social promotion and mandatory summer school (that is, do people support the latter as a way of accomplishing the former?). Indeed, data are spotty, in general, on issues around school year extension. One of the only time series studies of summer school does show increasing support for a universal extended school year of 210 days over ten months, however. When the question was first asked by Gallup/PDK in 1982, the public opposed this proposition by a 53 to 37 percent margin. By the last time it was asked, in 1992, public opinion had almost exactly reversed; that is, it was favored by 55 to 35 percent.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, questions asked since then have typically conflated lengthening the school year and the school day and thus tell us little about how the specific idea of a 210-day school year may currently be faring in the court of public opinion.

And of course, such questions tell us nothing about the very specific idea of targeting summer school to low-performing students who otherwise could not or should not be promoted to the next grade. Since Americans are adamant about ending social promotion and apparently open to a general expansion of the school year into the summer, it would be unlikely that they would object to a specific extension of the school year designed to end social promotion. But we do not know for sure.

Likewise, we do not know whether the public would support "enrichment" summer school for disadvantaged children who are eligible for promotion without remedial work. It seems probable that such a

measure would meet with public sympathy, but we have no specific measures with which to gauge these sympathies or to compare them with public support for mandatory summer school for low achievers. Here is an area where more public opinion research is genuinely needed.

## SPENDING

One area where public opinion data are more available is in measuring support for spending on public education. And that support is overwhelming. As Table 8.7 (page 270) shows, Americans for the past quarter century have felt that too little rather than too much money is being spent on improving the nation's education system. Moreover, that sentiment has strengthened over time, so that support levels in the 1990s were generally higher than in the 1980s and much higher than in the 1970s.

The last survey in that series, conducted in 1998, well illustrates the current strength of support for education spending. Almost three-quarters of the public in that survey thought the government was spending too little on education, compared to a microscopic 7 percent who thought too much was being spent. This works out to a "net" spending figure (too little minus too much) of +66 percent—a very impressive support level indeed, and a full twenty-four percentage points higher than that recorded by the survey series in 1973.

So public support for increased education spending looks solid. But how solid is it really? Would Americans feel the same way about education spending if their taxes were to go up as a result?

They claim that they would. That is, when increased education spending has been linked specifically to higher taxes in survey questions, support for more spending has remained at a very high level.<sup>26</sup> In one test of this sentiment, respondents to the March 1997 *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll were asked if they would be willing to pay more in taxes if the additional money was used specifically for education. The result: 70 percent said they would, compared to just 23 percent who would not. More recently, 84 percent of the public said they would be willing to pay from \$100 to \$500 more in taxes to support a package of reforms including increasing teacher salaries, placing more computers in classrooms, reducing class sizes, fixing run-down schools, and improving school security.<sup>27</sup>

**TABLE 8.7. VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT SPENDING TO IMPROVE THE NATION'S EDUCATION SYSTEM, 1973-98**

We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on . . . improving the nation's education system?<sup>a</sup>

	TOO LITTLE (%)	ABOUT RIGHT (%)	TOO MUCH (%)	NET SCORE <sup>b</sup>
1973	51	39	9	+42
1974	54	38	8	+46
1975	52	37	12	+40
1976	53	38	9	+43
1977	50	40	10	+41
1978	53	35	12	+42
1980	56	34	10	+46
1982	57	34	9	+48
1983	62	32	6	+56
1984	64	31	5	+59
1985	65	29	6	+59
1986	65	30	5	+60
1987	65	29	6	+60
1988	69	28	4	+65
1989	71	26	3	+68
1990	75	23	3	+72
1991	71	25	5	+66
1993	71	23	6	+66
1994	73	22	6	+68
1996	73	22	6	+68
1998	73	21	7	+66

<sup>a</sup> From 1984-98, some respondents were asked an alternative wording of the question, in which the last phrase was changed to "on . . . education." Data for those years combine results from original wording and alternative wording.

<sup>b</sup> Net score is calculated by subtracting the percentage responding "too much" from the percentage responding "too little." Subtractions were made prior to rounding.

*Polls:* All data from National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, 1973-98.

*Source:* Tom W. Smith, "Trends in National Spending Priorities, 1973-1998," National Opinion Research Center, Chicago, 1999, p. 51.

The public's views also work the other way in the current budget surplus environment: Americans would rather see more money spent on the public schools than receive a tax cut. This has been shown by numerous national polls in 1998 and 1999 and extends to public views on the disposition of state surpluses. For example, in the 1998 Gallup/PDK poll, the public expressed a strong preference for spending state budget surpluses on public schools (50 percent), rather than tax cuts (31 percent) or saving the money in a "rainy day" fund (14 percent).

It is important to stress, however, that these positive views on education spending do not amount to a blank check from the public to the government. Far from it. The public has doubts about the efficacy of simply spending money to solve educational problems. This is shown by a series of polls over the years that show tepid faith in the effectiveness of a general increase in education funding, as compared to other education reform proposals. For example, in the 1997 NBC/ *Wall Street Journal* poll, public support for a proposal to "spend more money on education" ranked only in the middle of the pack, behind nine other education reform items.

What these other proposals shed light on what the public means when it expresses support for increased education spending. The top three were recruiting and retaining better teachers, improvement of computer equipment and training, and reduction of class sizes. Of these three, the latter two unambiguously cost money, and the other would probably be hard to achieve without additional expenditures. So what the public really wants is not just increased education spending but increased spending on reforms it deems effective. This is confirmed by the 1999 PSB/DLC poll, which showed that "more funding *to reduce class size and raise teacher salaries*" (italics added) actually draws more support as a way of improving the public schools than hugely popular items like "more parental and community involvement" and "more emphasis on discipline."

Besides the three spending-related proposals just noted, the public is also heavily in favor of a program of school modernization and construction. In the 1998 Gallup/PDK poll, a proposal on "providing funds to help repair and replace older school buildings" received support from an overwhelming 86 percent of respondents, higher even than public support for the currently fashionable idea of class-size reduction in the early primary grades (80 percent). While the Gallup/PDK question did not mention a specific amount, other polling data show similar levels of

support for proposals to spend \$22 billion<sup>28</sup> (82 percent) or \$30 billion<sup>29</sup> (74 percent) on modernization and construction efforts.

Besides supporting spending on the specific items mentioned here, would Americans support additional spending specifically designed to improve public schools for disadvantaged children? They say they would. Recall that two-thirds of respondents in the 1998 Gallup/PDK poll said they would pay higher taxes just to provide the revenues needed for such spending, and that 83 percent in the Peter Harris/RNT poll agreed strongly that, if necessary, more money should be spent to bring fully qualified teachers to the economically disadvantaged. And there is no reason to suppose that the public would not be similarly supportive of additional expenditures to bring other favored reforms (like small class size and modernized facilities) to poor children.

Indeed, the public is on record as strongly favoring equalization of funding across school districts, a measure that, in most areas, would result in significantly enhanced spending on poor children. This is even true when the survey question is framed in a zero-sum context, where equalizing spending means giving to students in poor districts by taking away from those in rich districts. For example, in the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll, 83 percent of the public said they favored equalizing the allocation of funds to students in their state, "even if it means taking funding away from some wealthy school districts and giving it to poor districts."

These data deserve some further discussion. Most obviously, how serious can the public be about its views on this subject when equalization of school funding has suffered such severe political difficulties in states like New Jersey and Texas? In New Jersey, although most districts and schools stood to gain funds under the equalization plan, it met stiff resistance and was quickly rescinded by the state legislature. In addition, then-governor Jim Florio lost his job in the next election, a defeat in which negative reaction to the school equalization plan was heavily implicated.

How can this disjuncture between public opinion and public reaction be explained? One factor was clearly public misapprehension about the plan. The New Jersey plan was complicated, involving not only redistribution of school funding but also property tax changes, pension shifts, and spending caps. This made it difficult for voters in many districts to discern their real gains from the plan, even those who probably *would* benefit overall from it. On the other hand, among those (wealthier) voters who did not stand to benefit from the plan, awareness of

the plan's negative impact was probably extremely high.<sup>30</sup> This imbalance in perceptions seriously undermined support for the plan.

The other important factor, as mentioned earlier, is that voters want more spending on education, but they do not want to give government a blank check. There was therefore considerable suspicion of what the simple provision of more money would really do for schools in poor and minority areas. And lacking adequate assurance that the additional funds would be wisely spent, many voters, predominantly whites of moderate income, turned against the plan.

This suggests several lessons about attempts to equalize school funding. One is that the plan should not be zero sum, but rather should harmonize upward. That is, it should be clear to the public that equalization will take place primarily by giving new money to poorer districts to make them equal to rich districts, not by taking away money from rich districts and giving it to nonrich districts. It is probable that few survey respondents who said they supported the latter approach really saw themselves as being in the kind of rich districts that would lose funding. Even the possibility of this was enough to make New Jersey voters angry when such zero-sum equalization schemes were put into effect.

Second, equalization should be linked to popular spending items like small class size, better teachers, and school modernization, rather than simply providing more money to schools in poor and minority districts. In addition, the extra funding should be linked to educational reform and accountability measures in areas like standards and discipline, where the public tends to believe schools in poorer districts are falling woefully short. In this way, citizens can be assured that funding equalization is not harming them as individuals, and that the additional monies for poorer districts will be spent effectively instead of wasted.

## VOUCHERS

Here we come to perhaps the most contentious proposal for reforming public schools: allowing parents simply to opt out of the public school system with taxpayer support in the form of vouchers. The vouchers can then be used to attend whatever nonpublic schools parents prefer (and can successfully enroll their children in). While the monetary magnitude is ill-defined and some legal controversy persists about the

constitutionality of using vouchers to attend church-related schools, the basic concept of providing taxpayer support to parents wishing to send their children outside of the public school system is clear enough—and, by now, a familiar part of the national education debate.

The theory supporting the voucher approach is also clear enough: parents who are stuck with a poorly functioning public school will benefit by allowing their children to escape to a superior alternative, while the general ability of students to exit the public schools will provide a bracing tonic of discipline to the system and force it to improve to meet parents' expectations and the needs of their children. Opponents vigorously argue that the only certain result of this process will be to drain public schools of financial and political support, leaving them with the most difficult students to educate, while not markedly improving the educational outcomes for those students who leave the system.

The public, at this point, does not clearly endorse either side of this dispute. For example, the June 1999 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll asked respondents to choose between two positions: government should give parents more educational choices by providing taxpayer-funded vouchers to help pay for private or religious schools, or government funding should be limited to children who attend public schools. The result was a dead-even 47 percent–47 percent split. Similarly, an August 1998 *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University survey asked, “do you favor or oppose providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools?” The poll found 49 percent in favor and an identical 49 percent opposed.

Of course, not all voucher questions produce a dead-even split. But those that are reasonably fair do tend to show the public evenly divided about vouchers, with only very slight majorities for or against. More specifically, questions that emphasize taxpayer or public expense and full funding of private school tuition tend to elicit slightly negative responses, while those that deemphasize the taxpayer/public source of voucher money and allude to partial rather than full coverage of tuition tend to generate slightly positive responses. But the very weak majorities in either case indicate a public that has not made up its mind.<sup>31</sup>

Would the weight of public opinion be more decisively in one camp or the other if vouchers were means tested; that is, tilted toward low-income families who are presumably most in need of escaping bad public schools? Available data do not allow us to consider this possibility,

despite the fact that most current voucher programs are, in fact, means tested. The best we can say is that, given the existence of a voucher program, the public is opposed to having that program available only to low-income families (72 to 22 percent in the 1999 Public Agenda poll),<sup>32</sup> but mildly in favor of having the program give poor children more money than wealthier children (47 to 37 percent in a 1998 Joint Center poll). But there is no basis for concluding that making vouchers means tested would move the public away from its current ambivalence.

However, while the public may now be split about vouchers, the trend over time appears to be favorable to the voucher cause. Consider the data in Table 8.8. In 1993, when the Gallup/PDK survey first asked, “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?” the public was overwhelmingly opposed, by a 74 to 24 percent margin. But opposition to the proposal dropped between 1993 and 1999: in the latter year, opposition to the proposal was only 55 percent, compared to 41 percent actually favoring the proposal. This is quite a significant shift in a short period of time.

Not all voucher questions with consistent wording show a shift of this magnitude. But they do tend to show a shift in the same direction. For example, Table 8.9 (page 276) shows responses to a voucher question regarding allowing parents to send children to any “public, private or church-related school,” with the government picking up all or part of the tuition for nonpublic school choices. As the table shows,

**TABLE 8.8. CHOOSING A PRIVATE SCHOOL TO ATTEND AT PUBLIC EXPENSE, 1993–99 (PERCENT)**

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?			
	FAVOR	OPPOSE	DON'T KNOW
May 1993	24	74	2
June 1995	33	65	2
May 1996	36	61	3
June 1997	44	52	4
June 1998	44	50	6
June 1999	41	55	4

*Polls:* All data from Gallup polls conducted for Phi Delta Kappa.

*Source:* Phi Delta Kappa website: <http://www.pdkintl.org>.

**TABLE 8.9. VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT PAYING ALL OR PART OF NONPUBLIC SCHOOL TUITION, 1994–99 (PERCENT)**

A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?

	FAVOR	OPPOSE	DON'T KNOW
May 1994	45	54	1
May 1996	43	54	3
June 1997	49	48	3
June 1998	51	45	4
June 1999	51	47	2

*Polls:* All data from Gallup polls conducted for Phi Delta Kappa.

*Source:* Phi Delta Kappa website: <http://www.pdkintl.org>.

opposition dropped by seven points in the 1994–99 period, to the point where a slight majority (51 to 47 percent) now favors the proposal.

Similarly, a series of questions (with only minor wording variations) asked by *NBC/Wall Street Journal* on providing vouchers for sending children to private schools shows opposition dropping from 61 percent in 1994 to 52 percent in 1998. Finally, a March 1999 *CNN/Time* poll found 54 percent saying the government should only spend money on children attending public schools (as opposed to the government spending money to assist those families who want to send their children to private or religious schools), down from 64 percent in favor of such a restriction in 1992.

So the trend clearly favors the provoucher side of this debate,<sup>33</sup> even if the current balance of public opinion does not. And, of course, if the trend of the last six or seven years continues, that balance will shift and we *will* see a public opinion climate that is basically provoucher.

How can we explain this trend? What is making vouchers more attractive over time to an initially skeptical public? One reason is the perceived superiority of private over public schools in key areas like standards and discipline, areas that, as established earlier in this paper, are of critical importance to the public. For example, in a May 1995 *Public Agenda* poll, 53 percent of respondents said private schools in

their area were likely to have higher academic standards, compared to just 24 percent who selected public schools as having higher academic standards. Similarly, the public preferred local private schools over public schools in terms of discipline and order in the classroom 61 to 18 percent, in terms of smaller class size 67 to 13 percent, and in terms of promoting good values 54 to 17 percent.

Thus, the public not only believes that public schools have failed in certain areas outside their communities (inner cities), they also believe that, within their communities, local public schools come up short in key respects when compared to local private schools. This makes it easier to understand why the public is increasingly willing to entertain the notion of vouchers for private schools. In the public's view, private schools provide a very credible alternative, as public schools appear to be making little progress addressing their chronic problems. Indeed, so credible are private schools as an alternative that the public strongly believes public school students choosing to switch to private schools will gain academically (65 percent), rather than remain the same (28 percent) or get worse (only 4 percent).<sup>34</sup> Almost against their will, this forces the public to scrutinize the voucher alternative closely.

And it really is almost against their will. Consider this result from the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll: when asked to evaluate two different plans, improving and strengthening the existing public schools or providing vouchers for parents to use to send their children to private or church-related schools, the public overwhelmingly selected reforming the public schools over vouchers, 70 to 28 percent. Similarly, in the 1998 Peter Harris/RNT poll, 84 percent of the public chose "doing what it takes to get a fully-qualified teacher in every classroom" over "allowing parents to use money spent on their child's education in public schools for a private education" (only 14 percent). Finally, even when asked to think specifically of parents with children in low-performing schools, respondents preferred allowing these parents to send their children to the public school they think best, rather than allowing them to send their children to alternative schools, including private schools (58 to 33 percent in the 1999 PSB/DLC poll).

Clearly, the public must be dissatisfied with the pace of reform for the voucher option to be gaining strength in the face of such pro-public school sentiment. And, to underscore the seriousness of this situation, support for vouchers is strongest among those most directly served by the public schools (public school parents), those whose schools are generally

viewed as having the most problems (blacks), and those whose views will shape the future political environment (youths).<sup>35</sup> Without serious—and widely perceived—change, therefore, the public schools seem likely to face the unpredictable consequences of large-scale voucher use in the near future.

### CONCLUSION: THE PUBLIC VISION FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Americans remain supportive of the public school system, despite being very critical of the current performance of the system. They want that performance improved in a number of ways, reflecting their vision of what a good public school system should be. To begin, they want higher standards and are willing to tolerate fairly strict guidelines and testing regimes to accomplish this goal. This ranges from support for requiring students to pass a standard nationwide exam to graduate from high school, to support for current proposals to set national standards for academic achievement as a measure for public school performance.

The public also wants to see the quality of public school teachers substantially improved and believes this is central to the goal of reforming public schools. It endorses competency testing for teachers and is willing to see teacher salaries raised to counter the teacher shortage and attract better applicants.

The public is adamant about the importance of discipline in the public schools and wants to see this problem vigorously addressed. This includes overwhelming support for a zero-tolerance policy toward drug, alcohol, or weapons violations in the schools, and for putting persistent troublemakers into alternative schools.

The public also believes that the practice of promoting students from grade to grade whether or not they have learned the appropriate material must be stopped. Social promotion, in the public view, is a far worse evil than holding students back until they meet standards.

Americans also would like to see more money spent on the public schools, with the proviso that it go to reforms and programs they deem important. Topping the list of such spending priorities are smaller class size, technological infrastructure, school modernization and construction, and attracting better teachers.

In addition to these general improvements in the nation's schools, the public's vision of change includes doing something about failing

schools, particularly in troubled areas like the nation's inner cities. Americans are willing to see extra resources allocated to such schools, provided such resources are used for critically needed improvements like better teachers. They are even willing to see poor districts' funding equalized with that of rich districts—though again the public needs assurance that poor districts' additional funding will be used for reform, rather than to support the status quo and that their own school districts will not lose funding as a result.

Finally, the public wants to see more choice in the system. Given the problems that do exist in the current system, as well as the broad challenges of today's economy, the public wants the option of rejecting their traditional neighborhood school in favor of a school where the curriculum and practices suit their children's needs.

All these changes together constitute the public's vision of a reformed public school system. Implementing that vision would go far toward reestablishing the public school system as the general engine of upward mobility, a role that has been called into question by the system's widely publicized shortcomings.

Conversely, failure to implement that vision risks a crisis of confidence in the public schools. Given recent public opinion trends, that can only result in the implementation of a voucher system in place of the vision just articulated. And the result of *that* could be the end of public schools' historic role as the chief engine of upward mobility in American society. The time for change, therefore, is now. The risks of delay—especially for those who champion the cause of greater equality in American society—are simply unacceptable.