



**GETTING BY:  
WHAT AMERICAN TEENAGERS  
REALLY THINK ABOUT  
THEIR SCHOOLS**

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**A REPORT FROM PUBLIC AGENDA**

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## **ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA**

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Founded over two decades ago 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 average 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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# INTRODUCTION

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“Students will. . .” — the classic phraseology of so many standards manuals — suggests that if educators set clear standards and support these standards with effective teaching, most students will accomplish the goals adults set for them. But this classic formulation makes an assumption about what young people will do. The question we address here, in this national survey of American teenagers, is, “Will they?”

For the last decade, educators, elected officials, business and community leaders, and members of the general public have conducted an intense debate on how to raise and enforce higher standards and improve education generally. But much of the discussion omits a critical element — the motivation and behavior of the students themselves. Will youngsters take up the challenge to learn more in school? How will they respond to more rigorous standards? And what, in their view, can schools do to help them learn?

## Examining Education From Varied Perspectives

*Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools* is the fourth in a series of national opinion studies on education conducted by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization. Public Agenda has examined the views of the general public, parents, and leaders in two earlier studies — *First Things First: What Americans Expect from The Public Schools* (1994) and *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* (1995). Public Agenda has also looked at the views of public school teachers in a 1996 study called *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today*. These studies are referenced from time to time in the text that follows.

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*Will youngsters take up the challenge to learn more in school? How will they respond to more rigorous standards?*

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In addition to these national surveys, Public Agenda has completed regional opinion studies in the city of St. Louis and the states of Missouri and Connecticut. It has also examined more narrow issues such as standards, professional development, and school-to-work programs in smaller scale studies (See Related Publications, page 53). In completing this research, Public Agenda has conducted over 120 focus groups with parents, teachers, principals and administrators, students, employers, college admissions officials, and members of the general public — in each case probing views on education and the public schools.

Enriching Public Agenda’s formal research on education are a variety of citizen engagement projects now underway throughout the country. Public Agenda has worked with dozens of communities to stimulate more constructive and inclusive discussions of local education issues. These projects, planned in cooperation with the Institute for Educational Leadership, provide regular communication with school officials and concerned community and parent groups nationwide.

## How This Study Was Conducted

The current study is based on a nationwide, random sample telephone survey of over 1,300 high school students that included: 1,000 public high school students with “oversamples” of African-American and Hispanic youngsters, plus a survey of 250 students in private schools. (Full details on how the study was conducted are discussed in the Methodology, page 50.) Public Agenda also conducted focus groups with youngsters from rural Alabama, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and Westchester County in New York. Although this study covers many of the same issues Public Agenda has explored with adults, questions were often reworded — and extensively pretested — to make certain they were understandable to a broad range of high school students.

## Special Studies: Kentucky And San Francisco

In connection with this national research effort, Public Agenda also conducted two local studies that will be used by education reform and community groups in their own areas. With support from The San Francisco Foundation, Public Agenda sampled the views of students in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to providing general support for the study, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation funded a special study of the views of middle school students in Jefferson County, Kentucky. Summaries of the results appear on page 37. More detailed reports on these regional studies are available from Public Agenda.

### Is It All A Pose?

Opinion research with adolescents often prompts a certain amount of skepticism: Are the youngsters adopting a pose — exaggerating an “I don’t care” attitude for the benefit of adults — or, alternatively, are they giving answers they think adults want to hear?

Although such misgivings typically arise in research with younger respondents, similar issues exist in surveys with adults. Some adult respondents may use a survey to “vent” their anger on a particular issue, overstating their outrage to increase the effect. Others may hide what they really think behind a more socially acceptable answer. Experienced opinion researchers accept the fact that some individuals in any study cloak their genuine feelings. Most people, however, do not.

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*This study emphasized questions that explore the youngsters’ actual daily experiences with teachers and classmates.*

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In this study, most focus groups included either a “wise guy” — eager to flirt with the girls, impress other teens, or shock the adults — or a “wallflower” who was shy and uncomfortable in new surroundings. But such youngsters were the exception, not the rule. Most teenagers we talked to were relaxed, engaged, and forthright about their thoughts, whether these thoughts reflected well on them or not. Very few seemed intimidated or overly nonchalant. Moreover, the survey contains that comforting blend of good and bad news — from the

adult perspective, at least — which suggests that it has indeed captured some important seeds of truth.

### Do They Know Enough To Answer?

Readers may also wonder whether these youngsters actually know enough about the world, and what lies in store for them, to have truly useful opinions. But again, this question is also applicable to surveys with adults. Every random sample survey includes the opinions of people who are ill-informed — sometimes shockingly so — about the issue at hand.

This study emphasized questions that explore the youngsters’ actual daily experiences with teachers and classmates rather than political topics such as vouchers or privatization or the level of school funding. Nonetheless, adults concerned about these questions will find some provocative food for thought.

As in our previous studies, *Getting By* was designed, conducted, and analyzed by Public Agenda, which, as they say in broadcasting, assumes sole responsibility for its contents. At the same time, Public Agenda is indebted to many people and institutions who have offered encouragement over the years. Some, such as the funders for this study (listed on the report’s inside cover) have provided much-needed financial support. Others have offered intellectual sustenance and challenge. Still others have honored Public Agenda by taking the research findings seriously — even when the news was less than welcome — and using the information with energy and good will in their own thinking and endeavors.

This report captures the perspectives of the young people who are the *raison d’être* for any effort to improve education. For that reason, it may be the most important study of all.

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## FINDING ONE:

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### A Shared Objective

Most teenagers believe that “getting an education” is important to their lives. Contrary to popular belief, they would like to do well in school, and youngsters across the board — white, African-American, and Hispanic — say they admire, rather than look down on, classmates who make good grades. Like most adults, they express some skepticism about people who are “highly educated,” but they clearly recognize the value society places on a college degree. Most say they plan to continue their education beyond high school; few see any alternative path to an acceptable future.

Ask a group of American adults what they think of today’s teenagers, and you are likely to get a look of despair. A recent Public Agenda study for The Advertising Council, for example, shows that over three-quarters of adults choose a word with highly negative connotations when asked to describe today’s teenagers.<sup>1</sup> They characterize teenagers as discourteous, ill-spoken, irresponsible, disrespectful, materialistic, and maybe even dangerous. And teenagers, many firmly believe, have no interest in anything adults have to say.

### Education: The Key To Success

But this nationwide study — probing the views of over 1,300 American teenagers (white, African-American, and Hispanic) in grades 9 through 12 in both public and private schools — suggests a somewhat different picture. Those expecting to find the stereotypical alienated teen — turned off by school and contemptuous of education and adults in general — will find some modestly encouraging news. Public Agenda’s research suggests that the vast majority of American teenagers accept — at least at an intellectual level — what so many adults have long told them, that “getting an education” is critical to their future.

To be sure, today’s students show the expected signs of teenage normalcy.\* Eighty-five percent of high school students say they can’t wait for the school day to end. A roughly equal number (82%) say the best thing about going to school is being with their friends. And, as shown in subsequent pages, many of these teenagers make some very disturbing judgments about their courses, their teachers, and the level of discipline in their schools. Most view their high school careers as an exercise in the art of “getting by” — doing as little as possible to get the grades they need. And, while they accept society’s judgment that “getting an education” is essential to their future, they express minimal interest in — and virtually no sense of curiosity about — the subjects they study in school.

Even so, the picture overall is not one of outright indifference or hostility to education or school. Nine in 10 youngsters (88%) think highly-educated people get a lot of respect in American society (Table 1). Ninety-six percent say it is important to go to college. And despite broad concern among educators and others about lagging student interest in school, an astonishing 96% of public high school students say doing well in school makes them feel good about themselves — a finding that is equally valid among white (96%), African-American (97%), and Hispanic (96%) teenagers (Table 2). In focus groups for this project, youngsters from all parts of the country and all economic groups voiced aspirations and goals based on getting a good education. In one focus group of youngsters from rural Alabama, for example, teens described their particular individual goals — to become a reporter, a child psychologist, a computer technician, an architect, a pediatrician, and a state trooper.

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*Most view their high school careers as an exercise in the art of “getting by” — doing as little as possible to get the grades they need.*

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\* Throughout this report, references to high school students, teenagers, or youngsters indicate the general population of youngsters in public school. Attitudes held by youngsters in private schools are specifically identified.

## **“A” Students: Nerds Or Role Models?**

Teachers and other adults interviewed for earlier Public Agenda studies have voiced concerns that many of today’s teenagers don’t actually want to do well in school: Doing well in school is not “cool,” the thinking goes, and students who work hard to get good grades are “nerds.” The adults who raise these concerns are often fearful that African-American teens, especially, may see succeeding in school as “acting white” — something to be shunned, avoided, and repudiated, often at incalculable cost to their own futures. Just how prevalent are these attitudes?

In this study, 19% of teens say their friends “look down on” someone who gets good grades — a large enough number to prompt concern. But there are no significant differences among white, African-American, or Hispanic teenagers; nor is this viewpoint any more prevalent among youngsters living in inner-city or urban areas.<sup>2</sup> To the contrary, two-thirds of teenagers from all racial and economic groups say their friends “look up” to classmates who do well in school. It is a tragedy in the making that *any* teenager would take such a disdainful view of school and education, but it is also important to emphasize that this is far from the prevailing view among the country’s high school students.

## **“You’ll Still Be Living With Your Parents. . .”**

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*“Like [if I] had straight A’s, and somebody was dissing on me, [I would say] ‘Where am I going to be in 15 years? Where are you going to be? . . . You’ll be still living with your parents, and I’ll be in a mansion.’”*

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Of course, young people in focus groups recounted instances in which teens were ridiculed for getting good grades. But academic prowess seemed to be just one of many traits — including ill-chosen clothes or haircuts, shyness, or physical attributes — that might attract derogatory comments. Better students seemed unfazed. “I make A’s,” said one Alabama teenager, “and I don’t think I am a geek. They tease me a bit, but I am tutoring most of them.” Even students who were not themselves superstars acknowledged the long-term benefits of doing well in school. “Most people are just jealous,” said one young man. “Deep down inside they wish they could. . . make good grades. Like [if I] had straight A’s, and somebody was dissing on me, [I would say,] ‘Where am I going to be in 15 years? Where are you going to be?

What are you going to be driving? You’ll be still living with your parents, and I’ll be in a mansion.”

In fact, focus groups suggest that teenagers have a more subtle formula for evaluating their peers, one not dissimilar from that adults might apply. Good students who are friendly, open, and have time for other activities such as sports or music can be popular — and even lionized. Good students who are withdrawn, single-minded, and socially clumsy earn the epithet of the nerd. A young man from Sunnyvale, CA was typical: “If they have good grades and a good personality, then that’s fine. If they get good grades, and don’t talk to anybody, and freak out if they get an A-minus [rather than an A], then. . .” Thus, teenagers — like adults — seem to value those individuals who operate effectively and with finesse on several fronts.

## **The Expectations Are Great**

Policy experts routinely point out the pivotal distinction between those who “make it” in American society and those who don’t. People with education and skills face good prospects while the under-educated face a disheartening economic treadmill of low wages and lagging standards of living.

Here, the message from adults to teens — that a college degree is important — has been crystal clear. Eighty-two percent of teens believe they need a college degree to get a good job, and the majority seem determined to make college a part of their future. Even when pressed about their plans, 7 in 10 (72%) say they are “definitely planning” to go to college, as opposed to only “thinking about going to college.” These high expectations hold for both white (75%) and African-American (71%) teens. Fewer Hispanic students (59%) say they are “definitely” planning to attend college.

## But Are They Realistic?

While the teens' widespread interest in attending college is a comforting demonstration of their confidence in the benefits of education, this finding also poses a problem. If current statistics are a guide, only half of these youngsters will actually get to college, and only a quarter will obtain an undergraduate degree.<sup>3</sup> The rest are likely to be disappointed, and, based on focus groups for this study, genuinely "clueless" about how to organize their futures in any other way. Few youngsters we spoke with could envision any other next step in their lives. Even youngsters who clearly rankled at having to listen to lectures, read texts, and write term papers in high school professed their intention to go to college. As one young woman put it: "I can't wait to graduate and go to college, get a good job, get rich."

## They've Been Listening

While the vast majority of teens say they plan to continue their education, the question naturally arises: Do they want to go to college to learn more, or do they want the degree only to show prospective employers?

Here again, teenagers echo the views of adults. Earlier Public Agenda studies picked up a surprising degree of ambivalence among parents, teachers, and the general public about the intrinsic value of education. Most adults consider the diploma itself more important than what's learned.<sup>4</sup> And for many Americans, advanced education — particularly the idea of being "highly educated" — carries baggage of its own.

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*Most teenagers are not as hostile or indifferent to education as many adults fear.*

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Teenagers have absorbed some of their elders' attitudes, although as a group they are slightly less critical of the highly-educated than are adults. Whereas 71% of adults say that many highly-educated people are "book smart and lack common sense," 59% of public school teens hold this view. Two-thirds of adults (66%), versus 58% of teenagers, say highly educated people often think they are better than others. And, as noted earlier, the vast majority of teenagers (88%) think highly educated people are widely-admired and respected in society (Table 1).

Surprisingly, the country's high school students are more likely than their teachers to consider academic accomplishments the primary path to success. The survey asked students to choose the most important ingredient in a successful career among four possibilities — having inner drive, having a strong academic background, knowing how to deal well with others, or knowing the "right people" and having connections. Thirty-two percent of teenagers say "getting an excellent academic education" is the most important ingredient; roughly as many (30%) choose "having inner drive and not giving up" (Table 3).

Teachers, however, rank both inner drive (42%) and dealing well with others (32%) as more important than a strong academic background. Only 21% of teachers say a strong academic background is the chief ingredient in success, versus 32% of teens.<sup>5</sup>

## Going Through The Motions

Public Agenda's research suggests that most teenagers are not as hostile or indifferent to education as many adults fear. To the contrary, most echo beliefs about education that are widely held by adults. Most teenagers are not "turned off and tuned out." They readily acknowledge that their dreams and aspirations depend on becoming an educated person. Thus, most students interviewed for this project have a reasonably clear picture of the goal line.

But seeing the goal is not the same as winning the game, and a closer look at what teens really think about schools and learning is not nearly as positive and reassuring as their overall views about "getting an education." As shown in subsequent findings, most teens view the academic side of school as little more than "going through the motions" — a monotonous and meaningless series of exercises that teachers and parents expect them to complete. And there is precious little evidence that schools, teachers, and parents routinely do what's needed to help these youngsters turn their aspirations into achievements.

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## FINDING TWO:

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### Mixed Reviews

Most teenagers do not actively dislike their schools or their teachers. They are less concerned about drugs and violence in school than most adults, and, like their teachers, they are more confident about the value of a high school diploma. But large numbers say there are too many disruptive students in their classes, and roughly half complain about crowded classes, and a lack of discipline and challenge in the schools they attend. Students in private school are much less likely to identify with these problems.

Most adults give public schools in their own communities reasonably good ratings when survey-takers first ask about them. But scores plummet when questions get specific. Local public schools, adults complain, are troubled by “too much drugs and violence” (72%), low academic standards (61%), and too little emphasis on basic skills (60%) (Table 4). Almost half the adults surveyed by Public Agenda say that getting a diploma from a local public high school does not guarantee that a youngster has mastered even basic skills. Adults believe that private schools, while certainly not superior in every respect, do a better job in these areas.<sup>6</sup>

### Where Teens Agree With Teachers

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*Half of the teenagers surveyed (48%), compared to 72% of the general public, say that drugs and violence are serious problems in their schools.*

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Most teens initially give their schools even higher positive scores than do adults. Seven in 10 teenagers (71%) — compared to 55% of adults — say their own schools are good or excellent.<sup>7</sup> Even given the option of keeping the friends they now have — a perennial concern of adolescents — 79% of teens say they would rather stay in the school they now attend than attend another school in their area.

Students generally are less concerned about some of the issues that trouble many adults. Half of the teenagers surveyed (48%), compared to 72% of the general public, say that drugs and violence are serious problems in their schools. Only 35% of teens say their schools put too little emphasis on basic skills (Table 4). More than two-thirds (67%)

say a diploma from their own school *does* mean a student has at least learned the basics.

In these areas — safety and basics — the youngsters’ views are closer to those of their teachers than to the public at large. Like the teens, only half of public school teachers (47%) say drugs and violence are serious problems where they teach. Just 34% of teachers say public schools in their area put too little emphasis on the basics. Teachers, like their students, are largely convinced that a diploma guarantees mastery of basic skills (67%).<sup>8</sup>

Whether these findings are good news or bad may be in the eye of the beholder. On the one hand, the public may have exaggerated the problems of violence and lack of attention to basics. After all, teachers and students are inside the schools daily and may have a more accurate picture of what goes on. On the other hand, it is hardly good news that half the nation’s teachers and students consider drugs and violence as serious problems in their schools. Nor is it reassuring that over a third say public schools aren’t covering the basics.

### And Where They Don’t

Teachers generally give public schools much higher ratings than the general public — 86% say local schools are good or excellent — and they are more likely to attribute shortcomings to a lack of adequate funds. Eight in 10 teachers say public schools do not get enough money to do a good job; 65% say classes are too crowded.<sup>9</sup>

Teenagers are less worried about these issues, although again, readers will have to judge for themselves whether these findings are troublesome. Asked about a dozen different challenges their schools might face, teenagers do not put “resource” issues — crowded classes, old books, dilapidated buildings — at the top of the list. Nonetheless, 48% of the youngsters surveyed say their textbooks are out-of-date; 45% say classes are too crowded, and 33% say their building is “old and run-down” (Table 4).

In any event, it is clear that most teens do not dislike their schools — 78% actually say they look forward to going to school each day (Table 2). Nor do most teenagers seem to think that their schools are particularly shabby, neglected, or overcrowded. In focus groups, teenagers rarely mentioned problems about facilities, supplies, equipment, computers, textbooks, services, or similar issues. Most teens focus on a different set of problems.

### **A Big Problem For Teens: Disruptive Students**

Seven in 10 public school youngsters say there are too many disruptive students in their classes, and, not unexpectedly, 82% say these unruly youngsters should be removed from regular classes so that other students can learn. Here, students, teachers, and the general public (73%) show a substantial level of agreement. Eighty-eight percent of teachers, 73% of the public, along with 82% of the nation’s public high school students, say removing these troublesome students would improve learning for others (53% of teens say this would help them learn “a lot more;” another 29% say it would help them learn “a little more.” See Table 5).

Teens in focus groups reiterated the problem from their own perspective. “Some of my classes are really rowdy,” said a student from Seattle, “and it’s hard to concentrate.” “They just are loud and disrupting the whole class,” said a student from Chicago about some of her classmates. “The teacher is not able to teach. This is the real ignorant people.”

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*“You can just glide through. You can copy somebody’s homework at the beginning of the period. I mean you can do whatever you want. . . . They practically hand you a diploma.”*

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### **Gliding Through School**

Many teenagers see other problems as well — problems covered in greater detail later in this report. Half of the teenagers surveyed say that too many kids in their schools get away with being late and not doing their work. Half say their schools don’t challenge them to do their best (Table 4). And 4 in 10 (42%) say that too many of the teachers in their school do “a bad job.”

Focus groups provide abundant examples of youngsters who seem to skirt the rules, drifting through classes with minimal effort and — based on their accounts — little intervention from their teachers. “I got a 3.8 my freshman year,” said a youngster from Sunnyvale, CA in a very typical comment, “and I was never there. I did a few homeworks once in a while.”

A Seattle teen put it this way: “You can just glide through. You can copy somebody’s homework at the beginning of the period. I mean you can do whatever you want. . . . They practically hand you a diploma. . . . If you had to work harder for it, then you would be actually learning something, rather than just staying there for 180 school days a year. I mean, that’s all the diploma really says. . . . that you stayed there, and that’s pretty stupid.”

### **Is It Better In Private Schools?**

For the past several years, educators and policymakers have conducted a heated debate over the benefits of private versus public education. Fueled by academic studies reaching starkly different conclusions, this debate is intricate and complex, and opinion research — which measures perceptions, not facts — provides only one small piece of evidence.

Surveys suggest that most adults think private schools do a better job of providing safety, order, discipline, standards, and small classes — all of which, they believe, promote academic success. Teachers in public schools largely reject the notion that private schools do a better

job, although they do credit them with better policies concerning unruly students, overall discipline and order, and maintaining smaller class size.<sup>10</sup> But what about the students themselves? What perspectives do they bring to this debate?

In this study, Public Agenda researchers asked public and private school students to rate *the schools they themselves attend* in a variety of categories. Some of the differences are striking. Public school teens, for example, are three times as likely as private school teens to say their classes are crowded — 45% compared to 14% — and twice as likely to say their schools have too much drugs and violence — 48% compared to 22% (Table 4).

Almost twice as many public school students (42% compared to 22%) complain about too many teachers doing a bad job. While half the teens in public school say too many of their classmates are allowed to be late and duck their work, only 35% of private school students lodge this complaint. And, while 50% of public school students say they are not challenged to do their best, only 1 in 5 students in private school (19%) believes this to be the case (Table 4).

In focus groups, private school students repeatedly talked about the high expectations and clear rules their schools set for them. A parochial school student from Westchester County, NY talked about the reasons her parents sent her to Catholic school: “If I didn’t go to Catholic school [my parents] probably would have made me take some sort of religion course, but it is more the school system that they wanted — the education and the discipline.”

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*“Our school is just public. . . . It’s like, ‘Oh, never mind.’ People come here because they are made to by law. They get picked up by the police, and dropped off in front.”*

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Another private school student talked about “transition” problems that transferring students from public schools often faced: “There are a lot of rules. . . . You can’t speak up in class without raising your hand — something that they’re not used to — and they always get into trouble for doing things they were used to doing.”

#### **“Our School Is Just Public”**

Even youngsters in public school sometimes credited private schools with having better policies and higher expectations. One girl from Sunnyvale, CA said: “You notice schools like [Name of Local Private School]. They have higher standards. You look at kids going there, and they’re doing really good. They have higher standards and they’re working hard. . . . And they don’t kick out a lot of the bad people; they work with them. . . . They’re doing fine.”

A boy in the same group offered a more devastating comparison: “I think it’s more expectations. I mean, private schools, you think about smart people. . . and scholarships and all that, and people pay to get in. [But] I think it’s more they’re expected to do better. Our school is just public. . . . It’s like, ‘Oh, never mind.’ People come here because they are made to by law. They get picked up by the police, and dropped off in front.”

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## FINDING THREE:

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### Unsung Academics

Adults and teenagers agree that schools need to teach basic skills and values such as honesty and tolerance. Adults and teens both say studying computers is essential. But teenagers see very little reason to study academic subjects such as history, science, and literature. They view most of what they learn in their classes — apart from “the basics” — as tedious and irrelevant.

In previous Public Agenda studies, adults set out clear priorities for what young people should learn in school. Teachers, parents, leaders, and the general public — at levels of 85% and above — agree that certain fundamentals are absolutely essential for every child. Basic skills, character traits like honesty and working hard, and computers top the list. Beyond these fundamentals, adults identify a second tier of academic subjects such as science and American history as essential for all youngsters to learn. The history and geography of Europe or Asia, and works of classic writers such as Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Hemingway, languish near the bottom of the list (Table 6).

### Alas, Poor Shakespeare

These findings from Public Agenda’s 1995 study of public attitudes, *Assignment Incomplete*, and its 1996 survey of teachers, *Given the Circumstances*, prompted extraordinary comment in the media. From editorial boards to Shakespeare buffs, lovers of literature and the liberal arts bemoaned what they saw as a widespread lack of support for classic learning. Particularly disturbing to many was the fact that English teachers are only slightly more likely than the general public to think that studying Shakespeare is essential. And while social studies teachers broadly endorse teaching American history and geography to every youngster, most do not believe the history and geography of other countries warrant the same treatment.<sup>11</sup>

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*No academic subject, other than the basics, appears in the top half of the students’ list.*

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What adults believe about the curriculum has permeated the minds of today’s high school students — and then some. In a comparable battery of 16 areas schools might teach, teenagers name basics (94%), values like hard work (81%) and honesty (78%), and computers (75%) as the most important areas to study. But no academic subject, other than the basics, appears in the top half of the students’ list (Table 6).

Biology and advanced math, rated as very important by 44% and 41% of the youngsters respectively, do best. Thirty-eight percent of students say American history and geography are very important, while 32% put the history and geography of places such as Europe and Asia in this category. Like their parents and teachers, teenagers put Shakespeare and Steinbeck at the bottom of their “important to learn” list. (African-American teens give many of these academic subjects somewhat higher ratings, as we discuss more fully in Finding 8.)

### Don’t Care Much About History

Focus group discussions suggest, sometimes painfully, how irrelevant and meaningless these subjects appear to many teenagers. Some youngsters consider subjects like math and science useful only for those planning careers in such fields. One young man in Westchester County appeared baffled that college entrance requirements include some knowledge of math. “Like if you become somebody big — like a physicist or something — I could understand. But all I want to know is how to add and subtract. I don’t have to know right angles and stuff like that. . . though I have to take it to get into college, and I will.”

Studying history seemed especially nonsensical to many of these students. One Westchester teen made a typical comment: "What is the past going to help us with the future? I don't understand it. They say we need to get into a good college [to] help us out with our future. And here we are learning about the past. It's not helping." An Alabama teen held a similar view: "The worst part of the day is going to social studies. It's not that it's hard. It's just real boring. American history. . . I've been hearing it forever, and I don't really care about what happened in the past."

A Seattle student was equally certain that he would never put history to any use: "They should just teach you, like, what you want to do in your life. Like history. I'll never use that for my job. [Moderator: 'Do you know what your job will be?'] Nope, but I'm not going to use history."

Most youngsters do think schools could help them learn about other areas of life. Almost three-quarters of the teens surveyed say it is very important for schools to help them deal with social problems like drugs and family breakups. Sixty-five percent say teaching citizenship is important — an area the teens consider more important than American history, which the youngsters put in twelfth place out of the list of 16. Fifty-nine percent say schools should teach practical skills for the office or industry (Table 6).

### **A Stunning Lack Of Curiosity**

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*"It's not that it's hard. It's just real boring. American history. . . I've been hearing it forever, and I don't really care about what happened in the past."*

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About half the teens surveyed (52%) say it is very important for schools to teach curiosity and a love of learning, suggesting that at least some youngsters believe these are desirable human qualities. Most focus groups included one teenager who seemed excited by science or history, who loved books, and who was eager to explore. But the vast majority of youngsters showed little curiosity or sense of wonder about the subjects they studied in school. Most understood the value society places on "being educated," but they interpret this almost exclusively as "getting a college degree."

A few youngsters said they had enjoyed a math or history course, but they attributed their interest to the skills of a particular teacher rather than the subject itself. Few acquired any innate interest in the subject, and their enthusiasm waned after they completed a particular course. What was most disconcerting about these discussions was the inability of most teens to form any connection between their academic courses in school and the broader, presumably more interesting, questions that lie behind them: How does the world work? How did we get here? How do other people think? What's actually out there?

Instead, the youngsters slogged through their academic courses, clearing the hurdles adults put in their way, but viewing them as utterly inconsequential to their current or future lives. They found adult insistence that they study them — usually in the form of graduation or college entrance requirements — altogether mystifying.

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## FINDING FOUR:

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### Just Enough To Get By

Teenagers support the nationwide call for higher academic standards, which they think all students should have to meet. They concede that it's possible today to get good or adequate grades without much effort, and most youngsters in public high schools admit that they do not put as much effort into their studies as they could. The great majority of students say that having to meet higher standards would make them work harder in school and would prompt them and their classmates to learn more.

There is a broad and somewhat remarkable consensus among knowledgeable adults on the need to raise and enforce tougher academic standards in the nation's schools. High standards in core academic subjects are watchwords these days, as states and school districts adopt content standards spelling out what students should know and be able to do and performance standards raising the bar for expected achievement.

What effect will these higher standards have on the nation's youngsters? As a group, American high schoolers say they want and need "an education." But apart from "the basics," they show minimal interest in the academic subjects likely to be covered by the standards. While almost all teenagers (96%) say they enjoy doing well in school, most (65%) readily admit that they could do much better if they tried.

This study asked a number of questions about standards, and students consistently expressed support for a much tougher set of such standards. Like adults, students support standards even when questions are asked in different ways — generally a sign of greater reliability and stability in opinion research. And as with adults, support for standards is strong across all the demographic categories — among white, African-American, and Hispanic youngsters.

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*Support for standards is strong across all the demographic categories — among white, African-American, and Hispanic youngsters.*

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### On Standards, Teenagers And Adults Agree

The level of support for higher standards among students in the nation's public high schools is significant and noteworthy. Three-quarters of teenagers (76%) say students should not be allowed to graduate unless they demonstrate a good command of the English language. Seventy-four percent say schools should only pass students to the next grade when they have learned what's expected of them (Table 7). More than 7 in 10 say most youngsters will pay more attention to their school work (75%) and actually learn more (73%) if standards are raised and consistently enforced (Table 8).

Most teens maintain their support for enforcing standards even when the trade-off is emphasized: Students who don't meet the standards will fail, even though they may have tried their best. The survey presented teens with this choice: Should a youngster be promoted only when he has learned the required material or should a youngster who has tried hard and attended class regularly be permitted to pass? Six in 10 of the teens (61%) support enforcing the standard — passing students only if they have learned the required material.

Public Agenda has asked this question of adults in previous studies, and teenagers are not quite as "pro-standards" as adults. Eight in 10 adults (81%) say a youngster should only be promoted when he has mastered the material.<sup>12</sup> But for many adults who have completed their own schooling and don't have school age children, this question is theoretical. For the teens themselves, it undoubtedly hits closer to home. Thus, the relative agreement seems significant.

Nor do students think standards should be eased for youngsters with disadvantages. Eighty-four percent say schools should set the same standards for students from inner-city areas as they do for middle-class students. On this and other standards items, there are no significant differences among racial or demographic categories. White, African-American, and Hispanic teenagers hold the same views (Table 8).

### Grades As Floating Currency

Much of the debate over standards today really relates to accountability. How will higher standards be enforced? What will happen to students who don't meet them? Standards proponents have discussed a number of ways of setting and enforcing standards — notably raising standards for high school graduation and/or developing tests that must be passed at key points in a student's academic career. But students talk about standards — or the lack of them — by using terms and concepts they themselves understand. What must they do to graduate? What must they do to pass the course? What must they do to get a good grade?

For most students, grades are the primary means of determining whether they have met the prevailing standards. Students routinely admitted — some with bravado and some with chagrin — that they calibrate their efforts, often meticulously, to do only as much as it takes to get the grade they can live with. For youngsters aiming for private colleges or elite public universities, this concept of “getting by” implies a certain grade-point average. In fact, for youngsters in this group, college admission requirements seem to function as the penultimate standard. Other youngsters, in contrast, seem satisfied with any passing grade.

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*“You can lie to them to get the grades you want. You just tell them you couldn't get it in, and they believe you. It's really easy.”*

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#### **“There's Just Lots Of Ways To Get Around It. . .”**

In a focus group of mostly college-bound youngsters in Sunnyvale, CA, the teenagers conducted an extended discussion of the fine art of getting by, describing the apparent ease with which they garnered good grades. “I didn't do one piece of homework last year in math,” said one young man. “I just took the tests. I'd get A's on the tests, not do the homework, and I got a B in the class. There's just lots of ways to get around it. . . .”

Another young man offered a different formula: “I remember being in honors chemistry, and I would get C's on tests. But I turned in all my homework, and I got an A in the class. I mean, it's very easy to get an A. The teacher didn't even give a final.” One young woman, a senior, adopted an even more manipulative approach: “You can lie to them [teachers] to get the grades you want. You just tell them you couldn't get it in, and they believe you. It's really easy.”

### Discretionary Effort

The stories from Sunnyvale are not unusual. In focus groups for this study, students from across the country repeatedly said that they could “earn” acceptable grades, pass their courses, and receive a diploma, all while investing minimal effort in their school work. As noted earlier, almost two-thirds of teens across the country (65%) say they could do better in school if they tried harder.

In the early 1980s, social scientist (and Public Agenda president) Daniel Yankelovich coined the term “discretionary effort” to describe the difference between the fairly minimal effort employees need to invest to avoid being fired versus the far more substantial effort most could put in if they wanted. As any adult in the work force knows, the difference can be enormous. The country's high school students, this study strongly indicates, possess an enormous reservoir of discretionary effort that could be applied to their studies. And the youngsters themselves say that raising standards is one way of tapping it. A Westchester County teen summed it up: “Right now, it's so easy just to go through my school, and you

can get like really good grades without doing anything. I mean it's not hard at all. It's so dumb. You don't even have to try in my school. So I think if they did raise the standards, I probably would be a harder worker."

### **The Hard-Core Disengaged**

Like adults, students expect some casualties if standards are raised. Over half of the teenagers surveyed (55%) think more students will drop out while 53% think some youngsters will dislike school more (Table 8). Not surprisingly, youngsters who are particularly disengaged or alienated from school and learning are far less positive about standards. Among teens who express particularly negative views about school, 61% say higher standards will lead to more drop-outs, compared to 52% of other teens (Table 9).

Based on this study, however, some commonly-held assumptions about which teens are likely to be disengaged are open to question. White teens, for example, are more likely to express highly negative views about school than minority teens. Low-income teens, as a group, do not seem more likely to be disengaged. Nor are teenagers in inner-city schools or in single parent households more likely to express these negative views.<sup>13</sup>

While socio-economic measures may not predict which students are disengaged — and are therefore unlikely to be motivated by higher standards alone — parental attitudes seem to play a significant role. Roughly a third of the disengaged group says their parents do not know how they are doing in school (31%) or what they are studying in their courses (34%). Only 1 in 5 of the non-disengaged teens say this is the case with their parents or guardians (Table 9).

### **"We're Really Smarter Than They Think!"**

Although some teenagers present a special challenge for educators and others working to set and enforce higher standards, the overall receptivity is surprisingly positive. Teenagers, like adults, endorse higher standards and believe they will have beneficial results. Some teens in focus groups did grouse about the "unfairness" of raising standards for them now, when they were nearing the end of their school careers. But many other youngsters seemed, at least implicitly, to be calling for adults to take a stand. One of the Sunnyvale teenagers put it this way: "I think they don't take us seriously enough. We're really smarter than they think. It's how far and how they push us. . . . I think a lot of kids — even [those] getting D's and stuff — can do a lot better."

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*"It's how far and how they push us. . . . I think a lot of kids — even [those] getting D's and stuff — can do a lot better."*

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## FINDING FIVE:

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### Someone To Watch Over Me

Most youngsters say higher standards will make them work harder, and they expect to learn more as a result. But to get them to do their best — to spark any genuine commitment to excellence — may take more than periodic testing or tougher graduation requirements. To really help them learn, youngsters say, they need the close and careful attention of the classroom teacher. Parents, the teens add, can and do monitor their school work, but the teacher is most influential in getting them to learn.

While the nation's high school students will put more effort into their schoolwork if higher standards are set and enforced, adults should not assume that standards alone will create the commitment to knowledge and excellence most reformers say they want. The key to unlocking their full potential, youngsters tell us clearly and unequivocally in focus group after focus group, is the classroom teacher. With only the slightest of prompting, teenagers launched into spirited and often detailed analyses of the teaching staff at their schools. Even normally reticent youngsters perked up noticeably when moderators asked for their views on teachers. This is territory they know and where they are confident of their views. Teachers, from the teenagers point-of-view, are the most important variable in whether they learn or not.

#### It's What Happens In Class, Stupid!

Educators and others have proposed a number of traditional and not-so-traditional ideas to enhance student learning, and Public Agenda tested a number of these ideas in this study (Table 5). Teenagers were asked not whether they "liked" the ideas but whether the ideas would help them learn more in school.

Only a few proposals are dismissed outright. For example, about a third of the teenagers (32%) say that getting a reward of "something they like" from their parents would help them learn a lot more. And a majority reject the idea of heterogeneous grouping, with 85% saying

that they learn better in classes where most of the kids are at a common skill level.

Most proposals — including internships, closer scrutiny of diplomas by employers, and more reliance on essay than on multiple choice tests — are viewed as helpful by at least half the youngsters surveyed. But when students are pressed to name *the one change* that would be most important in helping them learn more, "having more good teachers" easily tops the list. Over 6 in 10 teens (63%) say this would be very helpful, and over a quarter of the teens (26%) single this idea out as the one change that would help them most. Following in close order are: Having a teacher check class work regularly and making students redo their work until it is correct (19% say this would help them most); removing disruptive youngsters from regular classes (14%); and using essay rather than multiple choice exams (13%).

#### "He Wouldn't Let You Run Him Over"

The impact of a good teacher in a well-run, serious-minded class was reiterated repeatedly in focus groups. Many youngsters seemed to thrive in classes with teachers who are demanding. A teenager in Westchester County described a teacher who combined standards with a sense of humor: "My typing teacher was the best teacher I had because he made sure you got your work done, but he also made sure you had fun. He made jokes — made everybody laugh — but he wouldn't let you run him over. You had to do your work in his class."

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*When students are pressed to name the one change that would be most important in helping them learn more, "having more good teachers" easily tops the list.*

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Even less flamboyant teachers had strong advocates when students saw some purpose in their demands. Another Westchester County teen told this story: “I had a math teacher for two years, and she was like a drill sergeant. She was nice, but she was really strict. Now I don’t have her this year, and looking back, I learned so much, because math isn’t one of my best subjects. . . . I really learned a lot. She didn’t demand respect, but you respected her. Now my math teacher is really easy going, and I’m not used to that.”

Survey results echo a yearning for higher expectations and closer, almost relentless, monitoring by schools and teachers. Almost 8 in 10 teens (79%) say most students would learn more if schools routinely assure that kids are on time and complete their homework. In fact, 4 in 10 teenagers consider this an “excellent” idea. Similarly, students seek an immediate and no-nonsense response for youngsters who are doing poorly. Seventy-one percent say schools should require after-school classes for youngsters who get D’s and F’s in major subjects, again with almost 4 in 10 youngsters (38%) calling it an “excellent” idea (Table 7).

Once more, focus groups provide numerous examples of what young people want. A Sunnyside, CA teenager talked about the need for clarity and follow-through from the teacher: “I think what would get a student to work harder is if he knows the consequences if he doesn’t do it. Like if the teacher makes it real clear that if you don’t do this assignment, then you’re probably not going to pass the class.”

### **School And Work**

About half the teens say that more job internships (54%) and closer scrutiny of high school diplomas by employers (50%) would help them learn a lot more (Table 5). Many experts think that forging a closer link between high school and the work place will spur motivation among teens — especially those who are not bound for college — and convince more of them just how important their schooling is. These ideas are generally well-received by teenagers overall, but they are no more important to non-college-bound teens than to those with plans for college — 47% of non-college-bound youngsters say an internship would help them learn; 46% say that employers looking at transcripts would be important to them. Even among this group of youngsters, “having more good teachers” is still the top motivator. Focus groups suggest that although teens find it helpful to have a clearer, more precise long term goal, it is the day-to-day events at school, the consistent messages from their teachers, that are most influential.

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*“I had a math teacher for two years, and she was like a drill sergeant. She was nice, but she was really strict. Now I don’t have her this year, and looking back, I learned so much, because math isn’t one of my best subjects.”*

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### **So Where Are Their Parents?**

In present-day society, schools and teachers take the primary responsibility for teaching youngsters skills and passing along to them the academic knowledge they will need to be effective adults. But it is axiomatic that parents also play an enormously important role in helping their children succeed in school. The public, in fact, believes that a youngster with a stable and supportive family who attends a poor school has a better chance in life than a youngster who attends a good school but comes from a troubled family.<sup>14</sup>

This study focused primarily on teenagers’ views about schools and teachers — and their experiences with them. But it also questioned teenagers about their parents’ role (Table 10). Seventy-eight percent of youngsters surveyed say their parents or guardians know what they are studying in school, and almost as many (70%) say their parents “pressure” them to get good grades. Just over half the teens surveyed (56%) say that their parents know the name of their favorite teacher, a finding that seems surprisingly low given the eagerness of teens in focus groups to talk extensively — to moderators and each other — about their teachers’ good and bad points.

## With F's They Go Ballistic

But further conversation in focus groups suggests one reason parents may not know such particulars as a favorite teacher's name. For many teens, parental involvement focuses chiefly on grades and report cards — an intermittent, and sometimes contentious, form of “checking up.” “My parents pay attention a little bit,” said one Alabama teen, “but they don't care if I make a C. But F's they really do care about. D's they kind of get on to me. But F's, they go ballistic.”

Even youngsters who were more successful in school say their parents focus mainly on grades. “It's very important,” one student said, “because my mom, she didn't graduate from college, and my dad, he's like a computer geek genius. He's really intelligent, and he's really hard on me and my brother to get good grades. I'm the kind of person where I don't want to fail because I know if I fail, they're going to look down on me. . . . I guess. . . he wants me to be like him. . . .” Few teens said they talked regularly with their families about what happens daily in their classes or what the youngsters are actually learning.

## Left To Their Own Devices

There is a paradox in what teens say about teachers and parents. On the one hand, most admit they don't put as much effort into their studies as they could. Some brag about “getting by” with as little effort as possible. Many chafe at their parents' preoccupation with grades. Left to their own devices, they meander along. But youngsters also call for a more demanding school environment with higher expectations and teachers who keep them focused on their school work. “Help me out,” the youngsters seem to say. “Give me less room to maneuver.” But, as seen in the next section, the youngsters also want a pay-off — an opportunity to learn and to derive satisfaction from their efforts.

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*Few teens said they talked regularly with their families about what happens daily in their classes or what the youngsters are actually learning.*

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## FINDING SIX:

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### Mr. Chips In The 90s

Youngsters make clear yet subtle distinctions between “good” and “bad” teachers. Their expectations of an ideal teacher are very high: They want interesting, engaging teachers who care about them personally and have a special knack for getting them to do their best. But they also voice respect for teachers who are demanding and consistent, whether or not they qualify as “entertainers of the year.” Private school students are considerably more positive about their teachers than students in public school.

About 4 out of 10 public school teenagers surveyed (42%) complain that their schools have too many teachers who do a “bad job.” They say that “having more good teachers” is, by far, the most important element in helping them learn. But what exactly do young people mean when they talk about “good” and “bad” teachers?

This study explored this question in some depth, presenting students with a list of 11 items which describe different kinds of teachers — teachers who are “enthusiastic and excited” about their subjects; teachers who give students “a lot of individual help;” teachers who emphasize “hands-on projects and class discussion;” and so on. As in earlier questions, the survey focused on which teachers would help students learn more rather than those they might like the most. The study also asked students to rate teachers at their own schools in each of these categories: Do most of the teachers display these qualities, some of them, or only a few of them?

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*About two-thirds say they respond well to a teacher who challenges them to do better and learn more.*

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Students report that a number of different approaches can be effective. Not surprisingly, 78% of the youngsters say they would learn “a lot more” from a teacher who tries to give “fun and interesting lessons.” Seven in 10 say they would learn a lot more from a teacher who is “enthusiastic and excited” about his subject (71%) or who knows his subject very well (also 71%). Sixty-seven percent say a teacher who uses “hands-on learning and class discussion” will also be effective (Table 11). Given the choice between taking a class from a teacher who is fun and interesting but demands a lot of work and a teacher who is dull but doesn’t ask students to do much, the result is unequivocal. Over 8 in 10 youngsters (81%) say they would rather go with the interesting teacher who demands more work. Clearly, youngsters value teachers who are very good at what they do and who run interesting, engaging classes with a considerable degree of style and creativity.

### Effort Counts

But a teacher’s initiative and compassion are also important. Sixty-nine percent of these teens say they would learn “a lot more” from a teacher who treats them with respect or takes the time to provide individual help. About two-thirds say they respond well to a teacher who challenges them to do better and learn more (66%); explains lessons very carefully (66%); or cares personally about them (64%).

Only 14% of the teens say they learn “a lot more” from teachers who teach mainly by lecturing. This is hardly a surprise, nor may it be an especially important issue. Fewer than a quarter of the youngsters say that most teachers in their school teach this way, and over 4 in 10 say very few of their teachers fall into this category. Teaching by lecturing — the bane of so many education experts — seems not to be as prevalent as reformers fear.

## Bread And Circuses Too

Few would blame teachers if, on reading these results, they experienced a sudden wave of exhaustion. The youngsters' list of ideal qualifications is daunting, and it is clearly unrealistic to expect all teachers to be such education superstars — planning “fun and interesting lessons” and developing new “hands-on” approaches; being consistently enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their subjects day-in and day-out, year-after-year; and at the same time remaining keenly attuned to the individual needs of every student.

Moreover, focus groups from prior Public Agenda studies indicate that teachers and parents often complain that today's youngsters — raised on television, blockbuster films, and computer games — expect to be entertained and diverted in ways that are not reasonable, nor compatible with learning.

## The Teacher — “Best Man In The World”

Fortunately, the recent focus groups provide some comfort in this regard. As noted earlier, many teens voice great respect and affection for teachers who take a different tack. Rather than putting on a show, these teachers impress youngsters with their seriousness about the task at hand.

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*Half the teens surveyed (52%) say they have had teachers who were popular but not very good teachers. Eight in 10 (81%) say they have encountered teachers who were unpopular but turned out to be good teachers after all.*

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A young woman from Alabama, struggling in school, offered one more example: “Right now, I'm not doing well in anything because I don't do anything, because I don't go home and study like I should. . . . Last year I took Algebra II, and I did pretty good in that because I tried. [Moderator: Why was that?] The teacher — best man in the world. He lectured us all the time. He said: ‘Would you want a doctor to operate on you if he only knew halfway what he was doing?’. . . . He gave examples. If we only did half of our work, we wouldn't know the other half, and nobody would probably want us to work for them.”

What's more, youngsters say that popularity among the student body is not, for them, the primary indicator of a good teacher. Half the teens surveyed (52%) say they have had teachers who were popular

but not very good teachers. Eight in 10 (81%) say they have encountered teachers who were unpopular but turned out to be good teachers after all.

## The “Bad” Teacher

If teenagers have a clear, and surprisingly flexible, notion of what makes a good teacher, they also have very distinct ideas about what makes a teacher, in their words, “bad.” As suggested earlier, being strict or demanding is not what teens resent most. Instead, youngsters complain about pointless and toothless threats, meaningless or tedious assignments, and perhaps worst of all from their perspective, the message that, “You can't learn, and you don't matter.” Most of the teens could tell at least one story about a teacher they considered bad.

“I had a biology teacher who was the worst teacher I ever had,” said a Westchester County teenager. “She would say, ‘If I hear one more sound out of this class, all of you are staying after school.’ She didn't keep us once. She was always talking about her pop quizzes — that we had to study for them — and not one of them counted toward our final grades. We took 8 make-up tests in the first semester, but if someone didn't do well. . . .she just gave you a second chance — and she gave you the exact same test. So if you know, ‘If I don't do my homework, she'll give me another chance. If I don't do well on my test, she'll give me another chance. . . .’ You're not going to work, because what's the point? And then we took the biology Regents [a New York State exam], and 4 kids in the class passed out of 35.”

A teenager in Birmingham gave this example: “I had a chemistry teacher, and when I was doing so bad in chemistry, and I asked for help, she was like, ‘Well, if you don't want to learn, I don't want to teach you. I can put you out in the hall, or I can put you in another

class like study hall. . . . I can get you out of here if you don't want to be in here.' She would try to help me get out of class instead of trying to help me stay in. . . like, she don't want me in there."

Another Birmingham youngster told a similar, equally painful, story: "I mean, I've been in classes where I was getting a D, and the teacher didn't care. I was falling behind, and I couldn't pull myself up, and I'd ask what I could do to help, and she'd say 'Do your work.'"

The youngsters' anecdotes about bad teachers are jarring, and it is important to keep them in perspective. Most teenagers told stories about both good teachers and bad ones. Most readers of this report can undoubtedly recall both wonderful and less-than-wonderful teachers from their own academic careers. Overall, fewer than 10% of public school teenagers say that most of their teachers are so bad they shouldn't be teaching.

### **The Exception Or The Rule?**

It is also true, however, that as a group public school teachers do not earn rave reviews from their students — especially when public school students' views are compared to those of youngsters in private school. Private school students give their teachers higher ratings — with double-digit differences — in every category students consider valuable (Table 11).

Sixty-three percent of private school students say that most of their teachers know their subject well, compared to fewer than half the students in public school (46%). Fifty-eight percent of the private school youngsters say most of their teachers care personally about them, compared to just 30% of public school students — a difference of 28 points. Fifty-one percent of the private school students say most of their teachers provide individual help and challenge them to do better, compared to about a third of public students (31% and 33% respectively).

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*Fifty-eight percent of the private school youngsters say most of their teachers care personally about them, compared to just 30% of public school students.*

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Even in the more difficult "entertainment" categories — presenting enjoyable and interesting lessons and conveying excitement and enthusiasm about subject matter — private school teachers appear to do significantly better with their students. Four in 10 private school students — compared to just 29% of public school students — say most of their teachers are excited about their subjects. Almost as many (39%) say they plan fun and interesting lessons.

It is not clear from this study what accounts for these differences. Some experts have raised questions about teacher tenure and other policies that they believe insulate poor teachers in the public schools. The public, queried on this issue in earlier Public Agenda studies, sees relatively few differences between teachers in public and private schools.<sup>15</sup> They explain their judgment that private schools generally do better on policies such as removing disruptive students from regular classes and setting — and enforcing — higher expectations for student behavior, as well as academics. But as we see in the next finding, there is a disturbing chemistry between many teachers and students in the public schools, one that warrants more analysis.

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# FINDING SEVEN:

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## The Issue Of Respect

Both students and teachers complain of a lack of respect and civility in the public schools. Earlier Public Agenda studies showed that teachers are concerned about lack of order and problems with particularly disruptive students. For their part, students describe a rough-and-tumble teen culture that they themselves see as destructive. An obsession with clothes and looks, along with widespread cheating, add to the seemingly noxious school environment.

Respect is an issue raised by both teachers and students in the public schools. Public Agenda's 1996 survey of teachers, *Given the Circumstances*, reported high levels of concern about disruptive students and a lack of discipline and order in public schools. Teachers interviewed for that study spoke, often with great anguish, about the difficulty of handling youngsters who showed minimal interest in their work and routinely violated the most basic rules of classroom decorum.

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*"I definitely think we're worse than we used to be. I mean, if I was an adult, I would be, you know, against teenagers too."*

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Teenagers acknowledge this problem. As reported earlier, 7 in 10 teens say there are too many disruptive students in their school. Only 13% of public high school students — versus 43% of youngsters in private school — say their classmates are "very respectful" of the teachers, although an additional 67% say their classmates are "somewhat respectful."

### "They Talk To You Like You're Four Years Old"

But the issue cuts both ways, with students in focus groups often turning the tables and complaining that teachers were disrespectful of them. While they do not indict their teachers broadly for this failure, only 4 in 10 public school students (41%) say *most* of their teachers treat them with respect.

In focus groups, students offered a number of examples of what bothered them. One Westchester County girl described the situation in her school: "I'd have to say on the whole, most teachers in my school know what they're doing, but we have student teachers come in, and you can tell who will be a good teacher, and who won't. Some come in and yell at you and talk to you like you're four years old, and they don't give you any respect. So you don't give them respect."

Another Westchester student, a young man, described his skirmishes with some teachers this way: "I've had teachers in the past who acted frustrated when they were teaching, and there's nothing more annoying than that. They say, 'How can you not get this? This is so easy.' Then they'd be yelling at you, and then you don't work in their class."

Although many troublesome relationships in contemporary America have strong racial undercurrents, the issue of respect seems to transcend racial and ethnic boundaries. White teens are no more likely than African-American students to believe teachers treat them with respect. Only 42% of white teens — compared to a statistically equivalent 37% of African-American teens — say "most" of their teachers respect them. Half of Hispanic students (50%) say most of their teachers are respectful.

### Short Fuses And Routine Clashes?

This recurring theme — a concern about respect voiced by teachers and students — suggests a problem that was not fully explored in this study. Conversations with teachers and students indicate that both sense a general coarsening of the atmosphere. Short fuses and routine clashes create a downward spiral: Students believe that many teachers resent or dislike them, and teachers think that too many students don't care.

Given the broad societal concern about a lack of civility and social cohesion, and declining moral values, it should not surprise us that these issues emerge at school. And, although students often describe a lack of respect between teachers and students, they saved some of their harshest criticism for selected classmates. Many teens described a rough-edged and threatening environment — with problems ranging from cliques to guns to drugs.

### Peer Review

One Seattle teen talked about youngsters in her school: “People at my school, they don’t have respect for anybody. They have their own little groups, and you can’t be in that group unless you’re just like them. You can’t hang with them unless you’re just like them. They’re just disrespectful to you and your stuff, your property and stuff.”

An Alabama teen painted an even more malevolent picture of his environment: “I come in, and I see guys pulling up their shirts showing me guns. And then I go to the movies, and there’s someone on the corner selling weed, and I try to stay away from that stuff.” Another teen in the same group agreed: “I think it’s harder today because there’s more stuff to do wrong. They didn’t have as many people killing each other, and people fighting as much, at least I don’t think so from what I’ve heard. There’s just more stuff to get into. There wasn’t as much damage to be done.”

A Westchester County teen indicted her entire generation, herself included: “I definitely think we’re worse than we used to be. I mean, if I was an adult, I would be, you know, against teenagers too — with what I know of what teenagers are like and how rude they are. That’s me too, because I’m rude to them, and I’m horrible to people sometimes.”

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*“I come in, and I see guys pulling up their shirts showing me guns. And then I go to the movies, and there’s someone on the corner selling weed, and I try to stay away from that stuff.”*

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Survey findings from this study reinforce the picture of a malignant undertow to teenage culture in public schools. For example, three-quarters of teenagers overall — and 81% of African-American teens — say that students in their schools pay “too much attention to what they are wearing and what they look like.” Seven in 10 teens (68%) say cheating on assignments and tests is a serious problem where they go to school. In fact, these two problems — an obsession with dress and cheating, along with disruptive students — top the list of teenagers’ concerns about the schools they attend (Table 4).

### In Their Own Words

Once again, focus group conversations confirm just how common these problems are and how much they infect youngsters’ lives. One teenager from rural Alabama described the emphasis on fashion at her school: “At my school, it’s a popularity contest. If you don’t wear Tommy Hilfiger shirts and Calvin Klein jeans, you don’t fit in.” A girl from California considered cheating ubiquitous at her school: “Everyone cheats. I wouldn’t believe anyone who says they don’t cheat. . . .” In the same group, one young man agreed that cheating was widespread, but sounded a bit wistful, when he added: “It feels better if you don’t cheat though. I have to admit that.”

The young man’s wistfulness about his misdemeanors may not be an isolated event. While teenagers agree that cheating in school is rampant, 96% say schools should teach values such as honesty. And more than three-quarters of the youngsters surveyed (78%) described this need as “extremely important” (Table 6).

### Can Schools Go It Alone?

Educators and others often raise important and legitimate questions about the degree to which schools can “go it alone.” Schools, they fairly point out, need parental support and continual reinforcement from the “outside” world in order to instruct and guide teenagers to responsible adulthood.

This study shows that schools and teachers have enormous potential to get more out of today's youngsters. Indeed, many youngsters cry out for more challenge and structure — for someone to take them seriously enough to demand that they do their best. At the same time, the study also reveals a dark and disturbing undertow to teenage culture that the youngsters themselves fear: The cliques, the clothes, the teasing, the cheating, the lure of dangerous drugs and weapons just blocks away — even in the best of neighborhoods. Schools, teachers, parents — and anyone else concerned about these students' futures — face a long and difficult struggle for these youngsters' minds — one that may require more than raising academic standards and administering new tests.

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*"It feels better if you  
don't cheat though. I  
have to admit that."*

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## FINDING EIGHT:

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### Aspirations Ill-Served?

Minority youngsters — and particularly African-American teens — are more likely to consider a lack of order and discipline, along with poor teaching, as serious problems in their schools. And contrary to some conventional wisdom, minority youngsters are less dismissive of traditional academic course work than their white counterparts. In fact, African-American teens are more likely than white students to say that subjects such as history, science, and math are important to learn. What's more, minority teens — both African-American and Hispanic — are more likely than white students to consider a strong academic background as the chief component of future career success.

Like other teenagers, African-American and Hispanic high school students believe that education is important to their future and solidly support higher academic standards. Seven in 10 teens — white (74%), black (70%), and Hispanic (75%) — say that schools should promote students to the next grade only when they have learned everything they need to know. Solid majorities of all groups say that a strong command of English should be required for a high school diploma. Seventy-one percent of Hispanic teens, 79% of white teens, and 68% of African-American teens share this belief (Table 7).

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*Solid majorities of all groups say that a strong command of English should be required for a high school diploma.*

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Most teenagers, ranging from 78% of Hispanics to 86% of whites, say that academic standards should be the same for all youngsters — whether they come from privileged or deprived backgrounds. More than 7 in 10 white teenagers and 8 in 10 African-American and Hispanic teens say most kids would pay more attention to their work and would study harder if they were required to pass a test for high school graduation (Table 8).

### An Environment For Learning?

Despite this similarity of opinion, there are important differences in the views of minority teenagers. Hispanic and African-American teens are considerably more likely than their white counterparts to see their own schools as troubled and inferior. While all groups complain about disruptive students, minority youngsters are significantly more likely to consider this problem as “very serious” (as opposed to “somewhat serious”) at their school. Minority youngsters are also more likely to consider drugs and violence as very serious problems at their school. In this respect, the teenagers’ views are similar to those of African-American parents surveyed in earlier Public Agenda studies.<sup>16</sup>

### Problems Viewed As More Serious

Specifically, 41% of African-American teens and 36% of Hispanic teens — compared to just 27% of white students — say disruptive students are a “very serious” problem at their school. Not surprisingly perhaps, minority youngsters are more likely than white students to advocate the removal of persistent troublemakers from regular classrooms. Two-thirds of black (66%) and 58% of Hispanic teens — compared to 50% of whites — express strong support for such measures.

While nearly half of all teenagers (48%) consider drugs and violence to be serious concerns at their schools, African-American students again are more likely to describe these problems as “very serious” — 26% compared to 19% for both whites and Hispanics. And once again, minority youngsters strongly support tough counter measures. Three-quarters of both African-American (77%) and Hispanic (74%) teenagers say students who bring drugs or guns to school should be “permanently removed.” Two-thirds of white teens (66%) concur (Table 7).

It should be noted that the particular concerns of minority teens are not confined to the behavior of some of their classmates. Minority youngsters express significantly more dissatisfaction with their schools and teachers than do their white counterparts. Half of the black teens surveyed, and 4 in 10 Hispanic teens (41%), say their schools do not put enough emphasis on basic skills such as reading, writing, and math. Only 30% of white teens make this judgment about the school they attend. Similarly, 56% of African-American and 45% of Hispanic teens say too many teachers are doing a bad job in their own school — a judgment shared by just 36% of white teens. Almost 6 in 10 African-American teens (58%), compared to 49% of whites and 50% of Hispanics, say students at their school routinely get away with being late and not doing their work (Table 4).

### **A Plea For Firmness**

Given these judgments, African-American and Hispanic youngsters seem to display a special yearning for greater structure, firmness, and consistency. Almost three-quarters of black teens (74%) and 69% of Hispanic teens say that having a teacher regularly check their work and make them “redo it until it is right” would help them learn a lot more. White teens — at a somewhat lower level (58%) — say this approach would benefit them also. Similarly, 84% of black and 76% of Hispanic teenagers say schools should “require” special after-school classes for students with D’s or F’s in major subjects (Table 7).

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*Minority youngsters express significantly more dissatisfaction with their schools and teachers than do their white counterparts.*

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### **Among Blacks, More Support For Academics**

A number of educators (among others) have suggested that traditional academic subjects may not seem “relevant” to minority youngsters — particularly inner-city black teens. But according to this study, African-American teens are much more likely than whites to say that studying American history, world history, biology, chemistry, and advanced math is extremely important. (The views of Hispanic teens vary by subject. See Table 6).

Well over half of black teens say it is “extremely important” to study American history (59%); biology, chemistry, and physics (62%); and advanced math such as calculus (57%). In contrast, only a quarter of white teens consider American history extremely important, with just slightly higher numbers for the sciences (39%) and math (34%). While only a quarter of white teens rate studying “the history and geography of places such as Europe and Asia” as extremely important, 43% of black teens consider these subjects crucial. And finally, black teens are considerably more likely than white teens — by a 65% to 49% margin — to think it is extremely important to develop “curiosity and love of learning” (Table 6).

As noted in Finding One, minority teenagers are no more likely than white youngsters to deride classmates who do well in school. Majorities of all groups aim for college, and strong majorities of black, white, and Hispanic youngsters agree that doing well in school brings satisfaction and pride. But when it comes to making their way in the world, black and Hispanic teenagers believe even more strongly than white teens in the advantages of a sound academic education.

African-American (42%) and Hispanic (37%) teens are more likely than white teens (30%) to consider academics the most important factor in success, more important than dealing well with people or knowing “the right people” — and even more important than “not giving up” (Table 3).

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## FINDING NINE:

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### Worlds Apart — Views From Public And Private Schools

Private school youngsters give their schools, and their school experience, outstanding ratings. Cheating, disruptive classmates, and an excessive focus on clothes and looks are significantly less severe problems in private schools than in public schools. Private school students also report that drugs and violence, social promotion, and lack of challenge are relatively rare. Private school teens are particularly positive about their teachers, and students and teachers alike seem to share a mutual respect and affection.

The educational experiences of teenagers in private schools — as seen through their own eyes — differ substantially from those of teenagers in public schools. Educators and other experts will undoubtedly debate the reasons behind these differences of opinion, and it is important to keep some key factors in mind.

For example, private schools can more easily expel unruly or uncooperative students, and private school students often enjoy greater parental involvement and support. In this study, for example, 7 in 10 private school teens say their parents can name their favorite teacher, compared to just over half (56%) of public school youngsters. Several studies have shown that students in private school tend to have higher family incomes and are less likely to live in single parent households than their public school counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

But which factors account for the sometimes dramatic differences we find? Are they due primarily to family background? Do they stem from private school policies and practices that would be inappropriate in public institutions? Do they mean that more families should receive public funds to help send their children to private schools? Or do they suggest that there are some features of private school education that should be adopted by public schools? These and other such questions are for adults to resolve.

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*Three-quarters (74%) of private school teens say “the teachers and principal at [their] school treat most of the students as if they are headed for college.” Only 4 in 10 public school students (41%) believe this.*

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### Resounding Endorsements

This study shows that teenagers nationwide — in public and private schools — have more positive views about education than conventional wisdom suggests. For private school students, however, the numbers are truly astounding. Nine in 10 private school students (92%) think their own school is good or excellent, and 81% of these students are convinced that private schools in their community offer a better education than do the public schools.

Private school students are also more positive than public school students about the benefits of education. Ninety-four percent of private school students say that highly-educated people are well-respected in society. And even though these youngsters are not immune to American society’s misgiving about advanced academic education, they are less likely to consider it a minus. While 6 in 10 public school students (59%) say that highly educated people are often “book smart and lack common sense,” fewer than half (46%) of the private school students surveyed share this view (Table 1).

Like other teenagers, private school youngsters aim to go to college. Eighty-five percent of America’s private school students — compared to 72% of public school youngsters — say they are definitely planning on college. Perhaps more significant is that three-quarters (74%) of private school teens say “the teachers and principal at [their] school treat most of the students as if they are headed for college.” Only 4 in 10 public school students (41%) — and only a third of African-American teens in public school — believe this to be true.

## Teen Culture In Retreat

While such problems as cheating, obsession with clothes and looks, and disruptive students exist in private schools, they appear less frequent and less serious than in public schools. While 68% of public school students say that cheating is serious at their school, 49% of private school students consider cheating a major problem among their classmates. And while more than 7 in 10 public school students say that "too much attention to clothes" (75%) and students who routinely disrupt classes (71%) are serious problems at their school, only 42% of private students agree (Table 4).

Indeed, some problems which concern significant numbers of public school students — drugs and violence, lack of challenge, and widespread social promotion, for example — seem to be relatively rare in private schools. Eight in 10 private school students say that teachers passing students who "should be held back" (81%) and classes that "fail to challenge students to do their best" (80%) are *not* very serious problems at their schools. Seventy-seven percent say that drugs and violence are *not* serious concerns.

## Too Good To Be True?

Although private school youngsters are more positive about many aspects of school and education, they are hardly alien beings. Like other teenagers — probably throughout time — the vast majority of private school students (87%) say they can't wait for the school day to end. Eight in 10 say the best thing about school for them is "being with their friends." Apart from a stronger endorsement for American history — 50% say this subject is extremely important, compared to 38% of public school teens — private school students do not show significantly greater interest in academic courses (Table 6).

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*Forty-three percent of private school students, compared to just 13% of public school students, describe their classmates as "very respectful" of their teachers.*

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## Teachers And Students: A Different Chemistry

One area of important difference between public and private school students is their attitude towards teachers. Whether the criteria is planning "fun and interesting" lessons, knowing their subject matter, challenging students to do their best, or providing individual help, private school teachers receive significantly higher ratings from their students (Table 11). Particularly significant may be the fact that almost twice as many private school students (58%) as public school students (30%) are convinced that most of their teachers care about them personally.

This respect and admiration between teacher and student seems to be mutual. Almost two-thirds of private school students say that most of their teachers appear "to love their jobs," compared to only about half (48%) of public school teens. Forty-three percent of private school students, compared to just 13% of public school students, describe their classmates as "very respectful" of their teachers. And the private school students seem to reap what they sow in the respect category. Sixty-three percent of private school students, compared to 41% of teens in public school, believe that "most" of their teachers respect them.

One private school student participating in a focus group made the point when she claimed that the teachers at her school wouldn't want jobs in a public school. When the moderator pointed out that private school teachers are generally paid less than public school teachers, she didn't miss a beat. "Yeah," she agreed, "but they're treated better."

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## AFTERWORD

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“We have met the enemy,” said Pogo, “and it is us!” It is difficult to read this latest Public Agenda study without hearing — behind the teenagers’ words — some all-too-familiar adult thinking. In many ways, the teenagers whose views are captured in *Getting By* present a mirror image of adult society. They reflect messages they absorb from adults around them. They echo themes from the popular media. They do what we expect, but little more.

I am reminded by the teens’ words of quotes and phrases from earlier Public Agenda research which revealed the ambivalence many adults and teachers voice about rigorous education and academic learning. If teenagers take a “just let me get through this” attitude toward what they learn in school, there is little mystery about where these views were spawned.

At the same time, the news from *Getting By* is not uniformly bleak. The teenagers have hopes and dreams, and they have gotten the word that “getting an education” will open the door to their futures. Few are apathetic; only a handful have been ensnared by hopelessness and anger. These youngsters are not irretrievably lost to the world of learning and knowledge, but they are calling for help — and help of a particular kind.

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*They hunger for structure, discipline, and more rigorous standards. They complain bitterly about lax instructors and unenforced rules.*

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### What They Want

*A yearning for order.* Like teachers, parents, and the public at large, these youngsters sense that schools could function much better than they do. They are unhappy in classrooms where disruptive students hold sway. They hunger for structure, discipline, and more rigorous standards. They complain bitterly about lax instructors and unenforced rules. Many feel insulted at the minimal demands placed upon them. They state unequivocally that they would work harder if more were expected of them.

*A yearning for structure.* These teens have little difficulty envisioning long-term educational goals — going to college, pursuing a particular career — but they can have enormous difficulty summoning the self-discipline and persistence that will help them meet those goals. They are, after all, kids. Nonetheless, teenagers yearn for closer monitoring and watchfulness from teachers. These teens — in very significant numbers — want required after-school classes for youngsters who are failing. They want teachers to enforce the rules and check the homework. In focus group after focus group, teenagers voiced admiration and affection for the teacher who never lets up, who never lets go, who respects them enough to ask them to do more.

*A yearning for moral authority.* Educators and reformers — and this study itself — often focus their discussions on school improvement on issues such as standards, curriculum, accountability, resources, and teaching techniques. Teenagers care about these issues, but they also seem bedeviled by the more malignant features of their own “teen culture.” Based on their own testimony, the teens inhabit a rough and jarring world filled with teasing, cliques, cheating, and superficial values — a world that disturbs and sometimes frightens them. While they accept cheating as an educational commonplace, they want schools to teach ethical values such as honesty and hard work.

Schools, of course, are not entirely responsible for the moral tenor of today’s adolescent culture. There is plenty of blame to be shared by parents, leadership, and the media. But this is also an area where the blame can be shifted indefinitely, and where, as a consequence, little is done to help. There are few quick, easy, or non-controversial responses to this problem, but to ignore it and focus exclusively on the safer territory of standards and accountability — as important as these are — would do the country’s young people an enormous disservice.

## The Human Factor

This study also makes clear that the source of learning and achievement for these youngsters is the human being at the center of the learning process — the classroom teacher. Higher standards, more effective teaching techniques, better accountability, clearer goals — all may be necessary, but they are not likely to be sufficient. If students have teachers who care about them, expect much from them, and communicate a love of knowledge, the students will respond in kind. But all too often, the teens say, teachers appear to be uninterested, unwilling to challenge, and indifferent to the subjects they teach.

In earlier studies, we have found that many public school teachers themselves feel underappreciated, “worked over,” and defensive. As a result, many seem shaky about their mission and tentative about the importance of education itself. It should surprise no one if teachers communicate these attitudes to their students.

But if the chemistry between teachers and students in the public schools is a problem, it is also the essence of the solution. *Getting By* suggests that the battle for American education will not be won through “systemic reform” alone. As important as reform of the system may be, it will be disappointing and incomplete if we cannot find a way to reinfuse the country’s public school teachers with a renewed sense of mission and purpose.

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### Whose Agenda?

*The study contains findings offering some comfort for those who believe that the primary difficulty schools face is lack of resources. Equally powerfully, this study lends credence to those who think the real problems are low standards and minimal accountability.*

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As with Public Agenda’s earlier studies, the views of these teenagers do not match any particular political or ideological agenda for education reform. The study contains findings offering some comfort for those who believe that the primary difficulty schools face is lack of resources. Significant numbers of teens say their classes are too crowded and their textbooks too old. But equally powerfully, this study lends credence to those who think the real problems are low standards and minimal accountability.

The study also shows, powerfully, that youngsters in private schools have more positive educational experiences than those in public schools. But it leaves unanswered — and undoubtedly open to heated and continuing debate — the reasons why this is so.

### Whose Values?

America’s teenagers are calling out for help. They are telling us something we should already know — that by asking for less, we get less. If we ask for more, on the other hand, they will respond. Perhaps these teenagers are merely marking time until we adults show that we value academic achievement and civil and ethical behavior as much as we value celebrity status, athletic prowess, or financial success.



Deborah Wadsworth  
Executive Director, Public Agenda

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## **SPECIAL FOCUS:**

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### **San Francisco Bay Area And Jefferson County, KY**

To gain an “on-the-ground” perspective about what students are thinking, *Getting By* included samples of students in two locales: the San Francisco, California, Bay Area where 300 high school students were surveyed; and Jefferson County, Kentucky (the Louisville area), where 250 middle school students were questioned. Reform efforts are under way in both areas, although not all schools are participating in the reforms, and the reforms being implemented in the two areas vary substantially.<sup>18</sup>

#### **High Schoolers In The San Francisco Bay Area**

The views and attitudes of Bay Area high school students essentially mirror those of high school students nationwide. In numbers close to the national sample, most Bay Area high schoolers value the importance of education and think their schools are doing a good job. At the same time, there seem to be higher levels of concern about such problems as overcrowded classes, outdated textbooks and equipment, and poor teachers.

#### **Education As A Valued Commodity**

Like high schoolers everywhere, the thing Bay Area students most enjoy about school is their friends (78%). But, again like the national sample, they look at school as far more than a place to socialize. Identical percentages of Bay Area high schoolers and high schoolers across the nation (96%) say it is important for them to do well in school so they can get into college. In fact, 3 in 4 say they definitely plan to attend college (77% Bay Area, 72% nationally).

Moreover, doing well in school seems to be an important goal in and of itself. Large majorities admire classmates who get good grades (63% Bay Area, 67% nationally) and say they feel good about themselves when they do well in school (82% Bay Area, 77% nationally). When forced to choose the most important thing about school, approximately half of Bay Area high schoolers (52%) and half of the national sample (49%) say it is “learning as much as you can;” only 8% and 10%, respectively, say it is being with friends.

#### **Satisfaction, But Some Magnified Concerns**

Ask high school students in the Bay Area if they think their school is doing a good or excellent job and at least 2 out of 3 will say yes (67% Bay Area, 71% nationally). Most will also say that earning a high school diploma in their schools means a student has at least learned the basics (66% Bay Area, 67% nationally).

Students in the Bay Area do respond more critically when talking about some specific areas. For example, about 6 in 10 (61%) say classes are too crowded, compared with 45% of the national sample. A like percentage (59%) also complain about out-of-date textbooks and equipment, compared with 48% of the national sample. Finally, by a 51% to 42% margin, Bay Area students are more likely than high schoolers across the nation to say too many of their teachers do a bad job. Perhaps this explains why more Bay Area high schoolers view private schools in their area as better than the public schools (38% vs. 26% of the national sample).

These magnified concerns may be driven by the fact that 53% of Bay Area high schoolers attend schools in city or inner-city neighborhoods, and almost two-thirds attend schools with more than 1,000 students. Nationally, only 38% of high schoolers reported their schools were based in a city or inner-city neighborhood and only 47% attended schools with more than 1,000 students.

High school students in the Bay Area essentially mirror students nationally in playing down the importance of learning such subjects as history, science, and literature. Fewer than half believe they will need to know what their school is teaching them when they enter the real world (58% Bay Area, 55% across the U. S.). Nevertheless, large majorities of students consider some subjects to be extremely important. On the academic side, these include basic reading, writing, and math skills (95% Bay Area, 94% nationally) and computer skills (78% Bay Area, 75% nationally).

### **How To Tap Discretionary Effort**

In the Bay Area — and across the nation — more than 6 in 10 high school students admit they could do better in school than they are doing now (63% and 65%, respectively). And, also like their national peers, they say that higher standards could push them in this direction.

Bay Area high schoolers agree with the nationwide sample that most kids would pay more attention to their school work and study harder if schools tested them and required them to do more before allowing them to graduate (73% Bay Area, 75% nationally). Similarly, 69% (versus 73% nationally) say most kids would actually learn more under these circumstances. Other standards-like proposals are supported as well. Sixty-eight percent of high school students in the Bay Area (and 74% of the national sample) say promoting students only when they learn everything that is expected of them is a good or excellent idea. About 7 in 10 (69%) high schoolers in the Bay Area — and 76% across the nation — would delay graduation until students clearly demonstrate mastery of English.

In addition, few Bay Area high school students (16%) believe that schools should reduce demands on inner-city kids because they come from poor backgrounds, while a sizable 81% would apply the same standards to all kids. Nationally, responses are essentially the same.

### **It's The Teachers**

High school students in the Bay Area and across the nation point to teachers as the most important factor influencing their learning. They prefer teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their subjects, give students individual help, and treat them with respect. They say that most of their teachers do not exhibit these characteristics. Only about 1 in 4 students in the Bay Area and across the country say “most” of their teachers are enthusiastic and excited about the subject they teach; personally care about their students; keep order in the classroom; try to make lessons fun and interesting; give students a lot of individual help; explain lessons very carefully; or challenge students to constantly do better and learn more. Instead, majorities say that only “some” or “very few” of their teachers treat students with respect (57% Bay Area vs. 59% U. S.). Bay Area high school students say “having more good teachers” is one component that would get them to learn “a lot more” (73% Bay Area vs. 63% nationally).

### **Middle School Students In Jefferson County, Kentucky**

The attitudes of Jefferson County's middle school students mostly mirror those of high school students in the rest of the country, with some interesting exceptions. Like kids across the nation, these students (82%) say the best thing about school is that they get to be with their friends. But they also have a strong appreciation of the value of education — overwhelming majorities say it is important for them to do well in school so they can get into college (98%) and that highly educated people get a lot of respect in our society (89%). Underlying this understanding are their plans for the future: 7 in 10 (72%) say they definitely plan to attend college. About half (49%) of these middle-schoolers believe that an excellent education is the most important factor in doing well in a job or career. Nationally, far fewer high school students agree (32%).

### **Positive About Their Schools And Teachers**

Jefferson County students are generally positive about the quality of their schools and their instructors. About 7 in 10 (72%) say their schools are doing a good or excellent job, and 83% look forward to going to school each day. The Kentucky students appear to be less critical of their teachers than high school students nationwide: 71% say that too many teachers doing a bad job is not too serious a problem in their school, compared to 58% of high school students. Only small proportions of Jefferson County students say drugs and violence, disruptive students, social promotion, and crowded classrooms are “very serious” problems in their schools.

Jefferson County middle school students express considerably more positive feelings about their teachers than do high school students nationwide. Two-thirds (66%) say most of their teachers over the past three years seem to love their job, compared to 48% of the national high school sample. While roughly 3 in 10 high school students would describe “most” of their teachers in the following ways, at least 4 in 10 Jefferson County middle school students say “most” of their teachers are: enthusiastic and excited about the subjects they teach; personally care about their students; make lessons fun and interesting; explain lessons very carefully; or challenge students to constantly do better and learn more.

### **Ready To Up The Ante On Standards**

Jefferson County middle school students think higher academic standards could help improve their academic performance. Like high school students in general, a large majority (81%) agrees that most kids would pay added attention to school work, study harder, and learn more (76%) if schools required them to learn more and to pass a test before graduating. About half of the Jefferson County students also think that higher standards will result in more kids dropping out or disliking school. A 70% majority of Jefferson County students say standards should be the same for kids from inner-city areas as kids from middle class families, somewhat fewer than high school students nationwide (84%).

# TABLE 1

How close are each of these statements to the way you feel about school? [*Insert item*] Is that very close to how you feel, somewhat close, or not too close?<sup>1</sup>

% responding item is "very close" or "somewhat close" to how they feel	High School Students						
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School	Adults	Teachers
People who are highly educated get a lot of respect in our society	88%	90%	86%	82%	94%	NA	NA
People who are highly educated often turn out to be book smart but lack common sense <sup>2</sup>	59	57	61	60	46	71	52
People who are highly educated often think they are better than everyone else <sup>3</sup>	58	57	57	62	50	66	52

Data for adults and teachers was taken from the *Assignment Incomplete* survey (1995).

<sup>1</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "How close do the following statements come to describing your own views? [*Insert item*] Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not at all close to your own view?"

<sup>2</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "People who are highly educated often turn out to be 'book smart' but lack the common sense and understanding of regular folks."

<sup>3</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "People who are highly educated often think they are better than others."

**Note:** In all tables, all students except private school students attend public school and are in grades 9-12. All private school students are also in grades 9-12, although some attend schools that have elementary and middle-school-age children as well. Rounding may cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

Sample sizes: high school students=1,000; private school students=250; white students=669; African-American students=200; Hispanic students=200; adults from *First Things First* survey=869; adults from *Assignment Incomplete* survey=800; teachers from *Assignment Incomplete* survey=237; teachers from *Given the Circumstances* survey=800.

## TABLE 2

How close are each of these statements to the way you feel about school? [*Insert item*] Is that very close to how you feel, somewhat close, or not too close?

% responding item is "very close" or "somewhat close" to how they feel	High School Students				
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School
Doing well in school makes me feel good about myself	96%	96%	97%	96%	97%
It's important for me to do well in school so I can get into college	96	95	99	94	99
I usually can't wait for the school day to end	85	86	81	77	87
The best thing about school is that I get to be with my friends	82	87	63	73	80
I usually look forward to going to school	78	76	85	86	80
I could do better in my classes, but I would have to give up too many things I enjoy doing	61	61	59	57	56
I won't really need to know most of the things my school is teaching when I get out into the real world	55	56	45	57	50

## TABLE 3

I'm going to read four things that could decide how well you do in a job or career. Which do you think is most important?<sup>1</sup>

	High School Students						
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School	Adults	Teachers
Getting an excellent academic education	32%	30%	42%	37%	28%	27%	21%
Having inner drive and not giving up <sup>2</sup>	30	31	24	27	31	41	42
Knowing how to deal with people well	22	23	19	21	30	23	32
Knowing the right people and having the right connections	9	10	6	9	5	6	4

Results do not add up to 100% because answers of "not sure" and other volunteered responses are not shown. Data for adults was taken from the *Assignment Incomplete* survey (1995). Data for teachers was taken from the *Given the Circumstances* survey (1996).

<sup>1</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "I'm going to read four things that could determine people's success in their jobs and careers. Which do you think is generally most important?"

<sup>2</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Being persistent and having inner drive."

## TABLE 4

Here are some problems different schools could have. Please tell me how serious a problem this is in your school. [*Insert item*] Is that a very serious, somewhat serious or not too serious problem in your school?<sup>1</sup>

% responding item is "very serious" or "somewhat serious" problem in their school	High School Students					Adults	Teachers
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School		
Students pay too much attention to what they're wearing and what they look like	75%	73%	81%	79%	42%	NA	NA
Too many disruptive students	71	70	74	75	42	NA	NA
Students cheat on tests and assignments	68	68	69	67	49	NA	NA
Too many students get away with being late to class and not doing their work	50	49	58	50	35	NA	NA
The school fails to challenge students to do their best	50	48	52	52	19	NA	NA
The textbooks and equipment are out of date	48	47	49	50	27	NA	NA
Too much drugs and violence in school <sup>2</sup>	48	47	47	48	22	72	47
Classes are too crowded	45	42	52	45	14	50	65
Too many kids get passed to the next grade when they should be held back	44	41	58	49	16	NA	NA
Too many teachers are doing a bad job	42	36	56	45	22	NA	NA
Not enough emphasis on the basics, such as reading, writing and math <sup>3</sup>	35	30	49	41	16	60	34
The school building is old and run down	33	31	40	38	25	NA	NA
Academic standards are too low and kids are not expected to learn enough	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	61	51

Data for adults was taken from the *First Things First* survey (1994). Data for teachers was taken from the *Given the Circumstances* survey (1996).

<sup>1</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "Here are some problems different public schools may or may not have. Please tell me how serious a problem each is in your own community's public schools. [*Insert item*] Is that problem very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or is that not a problem at all in your community's public schools?" Percentages reflect respondents saying item was "very serious" or "somewhat serious."

<sup>2</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "There's too much drugs and violence in the schools."

<sup>3</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "There is not enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing, and math."

## TABLE 5

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 [*insert item*] will actually get you to learn more or not? [*Ask those responding "learn more": When you say it would get you to learn more, is that a lot more or a little more?*]<sup>1</sup>

% responding item would get them to learn "a lot more"	High School Students						Adults	Teachers
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School			
Having more good teachers	63%	60%	75%	69%	74%	NA	NA	
Getting your class work checked and redoing it until it's right	61	58	74	69	61	NA	NA	
Doing a job internship for school credit	54	51	63	56	49	NA	NA	
Taking essay tests instead of multiple choice exams so you really have to know the answers <sup>2</sup>	53	53	55	53	59	54	47	
Kicking constant troublemakers out of class so teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn <sup>3</sup>	53	50	66	58	50	73	88	
Knowing that more companies in your area are using high school transcripts to decide who to hire	50	48	62	49	46	NA	NA	
Knowing you'll get something you want from your parents if you do well	32	27	43	44	27	NA	NA	

Data for adults taken from the *First Things First* survey (1994). Data for teachers taken from the *Given the Circumstances* survey (1996).

<sup>1</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "Now I'm going to read you some ideas for changing the way public schools teach. For each I'd like you to tell me if you think it would improve kids' academic achievement. Use a 5 point scale where 5 means that it would improve academic achievement a great deal, and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all." Percentages reflect respondents rating the item 4 or 5.

<sup>2</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Replacing multiple choice tests with essay tests to measure what kids learn."

<sup>3</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn."

**TABLE 6**

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: [Insert item]. Is that extremely important, somewhat important, or not that important?<sup>1</sup>

% responding item is "extremely important" to learn by the time they finish high school	High School Students						
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School	Adults	Teachers
Basic reading, writing, and math skills	94%	94%	96%	90%	93%	92%	98%
Good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined	86	84	90	86	89	83	90
The value of hard work	81	80	82	84	84	78	83
Values such as honesty and tolerance of others	78	77	83	79	89	74	82
Computer skills <sup>2</sup>	75	73	77	79	73	80	72
How to deal with social problems like drugs and family breakdown	74	67	84	82	73	64	61
Habits of good citizenship such as voting and caring about the nation	65	66	69	63	70	66	77
Practical job skills for office or industry	59	50	72	68	60	57	55
Curiosity and a love of learning	52	49	65	48	58	57	76
Biology, chemistry and physics	44	39	62	40	42	59	64
Advanced math such as calculus <sup>3</sup>	41	34	57	46	33	37	36
American history and American geography	38	25	59	45	50	63	72
History and geography of such places as Europe or Asia	32	27	43	27	30	35	41
Sports and athletics	27	29	24	28	23	23	14
Classic works from such writers as Shakespeare and Plato	23	21	26	25	26	23	24
Modern American writers such as Steinbeck and Hemingway	18	19	18	15	21	22	23

**Note:** For this group of questions, the general high school student sample was split into two groups: sample A (n=654) and sample B (n=665). Sample A was asked half of the questions in the group, and sample B was asked the other half.

Data for adults taken from the *Assignment Incomplete* survey (1995). Data for teachers taken from the *Given the Circumstances* survey (1996).

<sup>1</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "Now here are some things the local public schools in your community could concentrate on teaching. Please tell me whether you think each is absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important for your local schools to be teaching." Percentages reflect respondents saying item is "absolutely essential."

<sup>2</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Computer skills and media technology."

<sup>3</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Advanced mathematics such as calculus."

## TABLE 7

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 [*Insert item*]? Is that an excellent, good, fair, or poor idea for your own school?<sup>1</sup>

% responding item is an "excellent" or "good" idea for their school	High School Students						
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School	Adults	Teachers
Building self-esteem in students and helping them feel good about themselves <sup>2</sup>	87%	87%	91%	88%	89%	81%	65%
Making sure students are on time and complete their work <sup>3</sup>	79	80	78	78	86	88	93
Not allowing kids to graduate from high school unless they show they can write and speak English well <sup>4</sup>	76	79	68	71	84	88	83
Passing students to the next grade only when they learn everything they are supposed to learn <sup>5</sup>	74	74	70	75	76	70	62
Requiring after-school classes for kids who get D's and F's in major subjects	71	68	84	76	76	NA	NA
Permanently removing from schools kids caught with drugs or with weapons <sup>6</sup>	69	66	77	74	73	76	84
Requiring students to wear school uniforms <sup>7</sup>	13	13	16	21	48	49	47

Data for adults taken from the *First Things First* survey (1994). Data for teachers taken from the *Given the Circumstances* survey (1996).

<sup>1</sup> Question wording (unless otherwise noted) for adults and teachers: "Now I'm going to read you some ideas for changing the way public schools teach. For each I'd like you to tell me if you think it would improve kids' academic achievement. Use a 5 point scale where 5 means that it would improve academic achievement a great deal, and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all." Percentages reflect respondents rating the item 4 or 5.

<sup>2</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "Now I'm going to read you some ideas about improving public school education, and for each I'd like you to tell me if you think it's an excellent, good, fair or poor idea." Percentages in table reflect respondents saying idea is "excellent" or "good." Item wording for adults and teachers: "Schools should put more emphasis on building self-esteem in [*for adults*: high school] students and helping them feel good about themselves."

<sup>3</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable, and disciplined."

<sup>4</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Not allowing kids to graduate from high school unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well."

<sup>5</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Raising the standards of promotion from grade school to junior high and only letting kids move ahead when they pass a test showing they have reached those standards."

<sup>6</sup> Item wording for adults and teachers: "Permanently removing from school grounds kids caught with drugs or with weapons."

<sup>7</sup> Question wording for adults and teachers: "Here are some policies your community's public schools might consider adopting. Would you favor or oppose [*Insert item*]?" Percentages in table reflect respondents saying they "strongly favor" or "somewhat favor" the proposal. Item wording for adults and teachers: "Requiring kids to dress in standard clothing, such as a button-down shirt and slacks for boys."

**TABLE 8**

	High School Students						
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School	Adults	Teachers
<b>% responding "yes" to item</b>							
Suppose your school required students to learn more and tested them before they were allowed to graduate: <sup>1</sup>							
Do you think that most kids would pay more attention to their school work and study harder, or not?	75%	74%	80%	82%	84%	71%	75%
Do you think that most kids would actually learn more, or not?	73	72	79	75	75	72	75
Do you think that more kids will drop out, or not?	55	54	55	53	45	45	49
Do you think that more kids will dislike education and resist learning, or not?	53	51	55	56	56	38	27
Do you think:							
Schools should expect inner-city kids to learn as much and achieve the same standards as kids from middle-class backgrounds?	84%	86%	84%	78%	89%	60%	73%
-or-							
Should schools make things easier for inner-city kids because they come from poor backgrounds? <sup>2</sup>	12	10	13	19	8	32	22

<sup>1</sup> Data for adults and teachers taken from the *Assignment Incomplete* survey (1995). Question wording for adults and teachers: "Suppose public schools set higher academic standards and they also require kids to show they achieve those standards before they graduate."

<sup>2</sup> Data for adults taken from the *Assignment Incomplete* survey (1995). Data for teachers taken from the *Given the Circumstances* survey (1996). Question wording for adults and teachers: "Should public schools expect inner-city kids to achieve academic standards that are as high as standards for kids from affluent backgrounds, or should they make some allowances because inner-city kids come from disadvantaged backgrounds?" Results do not add up to 100% because answers of "not sure" are not shown.

**TABLE 9**

	Hard-core Disengaged Students <sup>1</sup>	Other Students
	% responding "Yes"	
Suppose your school required students to learn more and tested them before they were allowed to graduate. Do you think that:		
Most kids would pay more attention to their school work and study harder, or not?	65%	79%
More kids will dislike education and resist learning, or not?	63	52
Most kids would actually learn more or not?	61	75
More kids will drop out, or not?	61	52
I'm going to read four things that could decide how well you do in a job or career. Which do you think is most important? <sup>2</sup>		
Knowing how to deal with people well	35%	22%
Having inner drive and not giving up	27	29
Getting an excellent academic education	18	34
Knowing the right people and having the right connections	16	7
	% responding "No"	
Do your parents or guardians always know how you're doing in your classes?	31%	19%
Would you say your parents or guardians usually know what you're studying in your courses?	34	19
	% responding "C" or less	
What was your overall grade point average last year?	39%	21%

<sup>1</sup> As defined in this report, "hard-core" disengaged students constitute approximately 9% (n=119) of the total high school sample (including oversamples of African-American, Hispanic, and private school students). Hard-core disengaged students were defined as those who gave extreme responses to each of the following questions, saying that:

- "The best thing about school is that I get to be with my friends" was "very close" to how they felt; and
- "I usually can't wait for the school day to end" was "very close" to how they felt; and
- "I usually look forward to going to school" was "not too close" to how they felt.

<sup>2</sup> Results do not add up to 100% because answers of "not sure" and other volunteered responses are not shown.

## TABLE 10

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about your parents or guardians.

% responding "yes" to item	High School Students				
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School
Do your parents or guardians always know how you're doing in your classes?	80%	79%	79%	86%	80%
Do your parents or guardians usually know what you're studying in your courses?	78	79	81	77	80
Do you think your parents or guardians would be very disappointed if you do not go to college?	74	75	72	73	84
Do your parents or guardians pressure you to get good grades?	70	68	77	63	64
Do your parents or guardians usually attend parent-teacher meetings?	62	65	60	61	81
Do your parents or guardians know the name of your favorite teacher?	56	61	51	44	70

# TABLE 11

Now I'm going to talk about different kinds of teachers and ask you if you think they lead you to learn more or not. Would [*Insert item*] lead you to learn a lot more, a little more, or would it make no difference?

And about how many of your teachers are like that now? Would you say most, some, or very few?

% responding item would lead them to learn "a lot more" % responding "most" of their teachers are like item now	High School Students				
	General	Whites	African-Americans	Hispanics	Private School
A teacher who tries to make lessons fun and interesting	78% 24%	79% 25%	76% 25%	78% 23%	84% 39%
A teacher who is enthusiastic and excited about the subject they teach	71 29	71 28	72 32	71 32	74 43
A teacher who knows a lot about the subject they teach	71 46	70 47	74 49	72 47	77 63
A teacher who treats their students with respect	69 41	68 42	75 37	68 50	73 63
A teacher who gives students a lot of individual help with their work	69 31	67 33	76 31	69 31	78 51
A teacher who uses hands-on projects and class discussion	67 22	68 23	67 31	68 19	70 33
A teacher who explains lessons very carefully	66 33	64 33	72 38	72 35	71 48
A teacher who challenges students to constantly do better and learn more	66 33	63 33	79 42	69 36	74 51
A teacher who personally cares about his students as people	64 30	62 30	68 31	66 31	71 58
A teacher who knows how to handle disruptive students	46 29	45 28	52 35	44 35	52 44
A teacher who teaches by lecturing	14 23	11 22	21 27	21 23	15 24

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# METHODOLOGY

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This report is based on a telephone survey of 1,000 randomly-selected public high school students within the continental United States, plus a series of oversamples of specific groups. In addition, twelve focus groups were conducted in sites across the country.

## The Telephone Survey

The survey instrument was designed by Public Agenda. Interviews were conducted between October 29 and November 20, 1996 and averaged approximately 24 minutes in length.

The 1,000 public high school students were selected through a standard, random-digit-dialing technique whereby every household in the continental United States had an equal chance of being contacted. The margin of error for the 1,000 students was plus or minus three percentage points; the margin of error is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

In addition to the national random sample, the following oversample interviews were conducted:

- 40 African-American public high school students, nationwide (grades 9-12)
- 80 Hispanic public high school students, nationwide (grades 9-12)
- 250 private high school students, nationwide (grades 9-12)
- 300 San Francisco Bay Area (CA) public high school students (grades 9-12)  
(Six counties included in sample: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara)
- 250 Jefferson County, KY public middle school students (grades 6-8)
- 200 public middle school students, nationwide (grades 7-8)

When the study reports results for African-American and Hispanic students, it pools the oversampled students with the African-American and Hispanic students appearing “naturally” in the national sample, for a total sample size of 200 for each group. Due to the expense of sampling low-density groups in a strictly random fashion, the African-American and Hispanic oversamples were targeted to those telephone exchanges with at least a 10% density of African-American and Hispanic households respectively. All other oversamples were randomly drawn within their geographic parameters.

Survey Sampling, Inc. supplied the sample. Interviews were conducted by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. As in all surveys, question-order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked. All interpretation of data in the report was done by Public Agenda.

## The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews.

Six focus groups with high school students were conducted for this study during September and October, 1996 in Birmingham (AL), Seattle, Westchester County (NY) (one group with

public school students, one group with private school students), and Chicago (one group with inner-city, minority public school students, one group with private school students). In addition, four focus groups were conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area with high school students and two were conducted in Louisville, KY with middle school students from Jefferson County. Local professional market research organizations recruited participants to Public Agenda's specifications, except in the Bay Area, where the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative organized the groups in cooperation with four Bay Area high schools. All focus groups were moderated by Public Agenda staff.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. National telephone survey of 2,000 adults, conducted December 3-18, 1996 by Public Agenda for an upcoming study on Americans' attitudes towards children. Open-ended question: "If you were asked to describe today's teenagers, what would be the first thing that comes to your mind?" Results: 12% cited positive characteristics; 78% cited negative characteristics or problems that teenagers face.
2. Eighteen percent of white students, 21% of African-American students and 25% of Hispanic students say their friends "look down on" someone who gets good grades. Twenty-four percent of inner-city teens and 17% of teens who live in areas that are urban but not inner-city hold the same view.
3. In 1995, 54.1% of 25-29 year-olds had completed four years of high school and some college, and 24.7% had completed four years of college or more. (Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Youth Indicators, 1996*. NCES 96-027, by Thomas Snyder and Linda Shafer. Washington, D.C., 1996, p. 70.)
4. *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (Public Agenda, 1993), p. 19.
5. *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today* (Public Agenda, 1996), p. 25.
6. *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* (Public Agenda, 1995), p. 19, p. 37.
7. *Assignment Incomplete*, p. 39.
8. From national survey of 800 public school teachers conducted for Public Agenda's *Given the Circumstances* study of 1996. Sixty-seven percent of teachers said that typical students graduating from their local public high schools have at least mastered the basics; 31% said that a high school diploma was no guarantee that the typical student had learned the basics.
9. *Given the Circumstances*, p. 11, p. 40.
10. *Given the Circumstances*, p. 39.
11. *Given the Circumstances*, p. 26.
12. *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (Public Agenda, 1994), p. 15.
13. Eleven percent of white teens are disengaged, compared to 3% of black teens and 5% of Hispanic teens. Eight percent of students who receive a free lunch at school are disengaged, compared to 10% of teens who do not receive a free lunch. Nine percent of students who attend inner-city schools are disengaged, as are similar percentages of students in urban (7%), suburban (9%), small town (10%), and rural schools (12%). Eight percent of students who live with one parent are disengaged, compared to 10% of students who live with both parents. For a definition of disengaged students see Table 9.
14. *First Things First*, p. 12.
15. *Assignment Incomplete*, p. 37.
16. *First Things First*, p. 41.
17. See *Private Schools in the U.S.: A Statistical Profile, 1990-91* (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995), p. 31, footnote 12.
18. The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, with funds from the Hewlett-Annenberg Challenge Grant, is working toward the goal of improving schools in all of the 118 school districts in the Bay Area of California. Among the Collaborative's strategies is creating a group of "leadership schools" which then share their work with others across the region. The Collaborative also seeks to support the professional development of teachers and create linkages among existing reform efforts.

The Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public School District, with funds from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, is implementing a district-wide Middle School Reform Project that aims to enable students to meet high academic standards by the end of the 8th grade. The program focuses on developing and implementing content and performance standards for middle school education, providing support for teachers, and developing ties with parents and the community.

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## RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS

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These major national studies from Public Agenda examine how the general public, teachers and economic, political, civic and educational leaders view the public schools

\* *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today*. 1996. Focuses on how public school teachers view the performance of the public schools; what children need to learn; and what schools need to be effective. A special focus on African-American and Hispanic teachers is included, along with a comparison of the views of teachers, the public, parents, and community leaders. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

\* *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*. 1995. A follow-up study to *First Things First* (1994), this report examines why public support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so focused on the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

\* *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*. 1994. Looks at how the general public, including parents of children currently in public schools, views education reform efforts as well as values issues in the schools. Included are detailed analyses of the perspectives of white and African-American public school parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

### Additional Publications From Public Agenda

\* *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda*. 1996. Prepared for the 1996 Education Summit, this assessment provides an in-depth review of Americans' attitudes toward higher standards in public schools. The report draws from Public Agenda's extensive archive of public opinion research on education — including surveys and focus group reports — and from studies by other prominent opinion analysts. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$7.50.

*Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education*. 1996. Prepared by Public Agenda for The Missouri Partnership for Outstanding Schools, this report describes how Missouri citizens feel about public education. Gaps in perspective among educators, community leaders, and the public, including a special focus on African-Americans, are outlined. Copies of the report are available from The Missouri Partnership for Outstanding Schools, 920A E. Broadway, Suite #203, Columbia, MO 65201-4858, (800) 659-4044.

\* *Attitudes Toward the St. Louis City Public Schools*. 1996. Examines the views of St. Louis residents including parents with children in the St. Louis public schools, teachers and principals. Issues including safety, order, the basics, and higher academic standards are addressed. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$7.50.

\* *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education*. 1994. Prepared by Public Agenda for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, this study describes how the citizens of Connecticut feel about public education and integration in their state and why they hold these attitudes. The gaps among educators, business leaders, and the public, including a special focus on African-Americans and Hispanics, are outlined. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$5.50.

\* *The Basics: Parents Talk About Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and the Schools*. 1995. A focus group study that explores the general public's concern with the basics. Examines differences in attitude between college and non-college educated parents. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$7.50.

\* *Professional Development for Teachers: The Public's View*. 1995. Examines the potential for both public support and disappointment with professional development for teachers. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$7.50.

\* *Accomplishing Reform with Public Engagement: A Map of the Process*. 1995. Prepared by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, this map addresses citizens and community groups who want to undertake reform but believe the general public should or needs to be their partner for real change to occur. Roadblocks a community might encounter are flagged. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$7.50.

\**Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts*. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation, this study of educators, education administrators, parents and business executives looks at the substantial in-fighting and communication gaps among these groups of education stakeholders. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

*Effective Public Engagement*. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for the New Standards Project. This focus group report explores the views of teachers, parents, high school students and members of the general public toward higher standards. Copies are available from The National Center on Education and the Economy, 700 11th Street NW, Suite 750, Washington, DC 20005. (202) 783-3668. The report is \$5.00 for New Standards Project partners, \$25.00 for non-partners.

\* *Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness*. 1991. A research report from Public Agenda and the Business-Higher Education Forum. The report describes a gap between the way leaders and the public view the issue of U.S. economic competitiveness and the associated crisis in education and work force training. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$17.50.

*Contested Values: Tug-of-War in the School Yard*. 1995. Prepared by Public Agenda for the National Issues Forum, this citizen discussion guide focuses on pros and cons in the debate over which values American children should be taught in public schools. The guide can be ordered from McGraw-Hill, Inc., (800) 338-3987. ISBN 0-07-051825-4.

*Enduring Values, Changing Concerns: What Californians Expect From Their Higher Education System*. 1997. A reassessment of the views of Californians concerning their higher education system since 1993's *The Closing Gateway* (see below). Copies of this report are available from the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, #704, San Jose, CA 95113. Fax requests to (408) 287-6709.

*Preserving the Higher Education Legacy*. 1995. A follow-up study to *The Closing Gateway*, this report is based on a series of in-depth interviews with California leaders who cite rising costs and declining access as problems for higher education. Copies of this report are available from the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, #704, San Jose, CA 95113. Fax requests to (408) 287-6709. Ask for Report #95-3.

*The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System*. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for the California Higher Education Policy Center. The study compares Californians' perceptions of the cost, accessibility, value, and opportunity in their higher education system with those of citizens in other parts of the country. Copies of this report are available from the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, #704, San Jose, CA 95113. Fax requests to (408) 287-6709. Ask for Report #93-6.

*The Westchester School-to-Work Initiative: Prospects and Challenges*. 1995. Prepared for the Westchester Education Coalition, this report probes the public's reactions to public education in Westchester, NY, and explores the possibilities for school-to-work transitions. Copies of this report are available from the Westchester Education Coalition, 222 Bloomingdale Road, White Plains, NY 10605, (914) 683-8045.

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\* Reports marked with an asterisk can be ordered by calling or writing Public Agenda at 6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016. Tel: (212) 686-6610, Fax: (212) 889-3461. Shipping and handling costs will be applied.

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