Ready for the Real World?

Americans Speak on High School Reform

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

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

Prior to conducting the surveys, Hart Research convened four focus group discussions among parents of public school children (2), and high school administrators (2). Groups were conducted in Alexandria, Virginia; and Columbus, Ohio.
COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS VIEWED AS CENTRAL TO AMERICA’S SUCCESS, BUT SCHOOL RATINGS SHOW LITTLE PROGRESS

Americans agree on the importance of a high-quality public education system: they see the country’s past commitment to public education as the leading factor contributing to its success in the world, as important as a democratic system of government, and more important than either military strength or an entrepreneurial culture. Our research shows, however, that Americans believe that the nation’s schools are falling short of the public’s high expectations for them. Fewer than one in 10 adults, for example, believe that students are being significantly challenged in high school. Half think that the secondary education system needs either major changes or a complete overhaul. And more than three-quarters of adults believe that the United States will be less competitive 25 years from now unless high schools improve.

This desire for education reform translates into strong majority support for a wide range of reform proposals, including setting high standards for student achievement; holding students, teachers, and schools accountable for performance; and measuring performance through regular assessments—precisely the principles that undergird the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) education reform initiative.

HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATORS AND THE PUBLIC DIFFER IN THEIR VIEWS OF HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

A number of important themes emerge from this year’s survey of Americans’ views on the state of public education in the United States. One theme is the apparent disconnect between the general public on one hand and high school teachers on the other on many key issues, including the overall quality of public high schools. The two groups’ diverging views may be rooted in a fundamental disagreement on how—or even whether—to set academic standards and measure performance against those standards. For example, the public and high school teachers part company in their views of NCLB, with 45% of the public holding a favorable opinion of the law, versus only 19% of high school teachers who do so.

The two groups also diverge on fundamental notions of standards, in particular whether all students should be held to the same standard of academic performance regardless of their background. Majorities of all adults (55%) and parents of K-12 students (59%) favor uniform standards, versus only 26% of teachers and school administrators who say the same. Moreover, high school teachers believe that teachers who work with disadvantaged
students should not be expected to have their students reach the same performance level as teachers working in more affluent schools. This, too, is at odds with the public’s view.

**AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS MUST CHANGE**

Although the public continues to view elementary schools as the higher priority for reform, 51% say that high schools need major changes or a complete overhaul. Majorities say that America’s high schools are coming up short or falling behind in several important areas, including preparing students to succeed in two- and four-year colleges (51%), equipping students with the training and skills they will need for the work force (63%), and tailoring the high school experience for each student’s next step in life (62%). Majorities also say that the nation’s high schools are coming up short or falling behind in teaching the basics (51%), maintaining high standards and challenging all students (64%); and supporting struggling students and preventing students from dropping out of school (69%).

And while more attention is being paid to high school reform than in the past, the public and high school educators agree that K-8 education reform is not yet “done.” Fewer than one in 10 (6%) adults, for instance, believe that K-8 reform has accomplished a great deal; slightly higher proportions of high school administrators (10%) and teachers (18%) agree. There also is a widely shared belief that K-8 schools are not preparing students for high school; the public, parents, high school teachers, and high school administrators all say that most students arrive at high school with academic preparation gaps.

In all, these and other views form a communications challenge for high school reform advocates: given limited resources, the public resists turning the focus of reform to the high schools at the expense of K-8 improvement.

**LEADING CAUSES OF HIGH SCHOOLS’ PROBLEMS SEEN AS OUTSIDE SCHOOLS’ CONTROL**

Although the public believes that the nation’s high schools are underperforming in many areas, adults nevertheless believe that some of the core problems that high schools face are beyond schools’ control. When read a series of explanations for the problems facing the nation’s public high schools, 64% of the general public and 69% of parents of high school students point to issues relating to the broader society outside school and the strain that those external problems place on teachers in the classroom. The
general public also cites insufficient funding for schools (51%) and inadequate K-8 academic preparation (50%).

Among school-related factors that are seen as central to high schools’ performance problems, two frequently arise: students not working hard enough or not taking challenging courses; and the large, impersonal nature of today’s public high schools. Administrators are more likely than are other groups to say that high schools’ sprawling, impersonal nature is a good explanation for their performance problems (52%). Administrators also more frequently cite a lack of accountability (53%) than do other groups.

More broadly, all groups acknowledge that high schools are not doing well enough at preventing students from dropping out, although the public does not view the drop-out rate as a central problem. Rather, the public recommends steps to keep students from being passed through the system without the proper skills.

**Expectations Are Not High Enough and Students Are Not Being Challenged**

Americans do not believe that high schools provide most students with a rigorous academic experience. Fewer than one in 10 (9%) adults say that expectations for student performance are high and that most students are significantly challenged in high school. The majority (57%) believes that expectations are moderate and that most students are somewhat challenged, while three in 10 (30%) say that most students face low expectations. These results are consistent with the findings of a recent survey conducted by Achieve, Inc. In that survey, only 24% of recent high school graduates said that they faced high expectations and were significantly challenged by their course work.

**Using an Individualized Approach to Build Core Knowledge**

Americans want an education system that takes into account each student’s needs, interests, and abilities. However, they also believe that certain classes should be part of a core curriculum for all students. As for what that core curriculum should include, respondents resist making college preparatory classes standard for all high school students; 76% of the public believes that some students are better off without a college preparatory education and instead should receive training for specific job skills. Despite this strong support for vocational or technical education for some students, the public’s definition of a rigorous course of study for all high school students sounds
a lot like a college prep curriculum: four years of English (85%), three years of history and civics (81%), four years of mathematics (73%), at least three years of science (69%), and two years of a foreign language (63%). Ninety-five percent also support including one year of computer science in that core curriculum. The public also supports requiring all students to take advanced courses. Although they acknowledge that not all students head to college, people expect students to receive a broad and deep education that prepares them for whatever challenges await.

In a variety of ways, the survey findings show that the public believes that high schools can be fashioned both to offer a more individualized learning experience and also hold all students to high standards of achievement in a rigorous set of core skills and knowledge.

The Public Endorses Teacher Quality and Real-World Learning

Education is so central a concern for Americans, and the public’s desire for school improvement is so great, that people strongly support a wide range of proposed solutions, even when those solutions seem contradictory. Indeed, when given a list of specific proposals to improve the quality of the nation’s public high schools, majorities support each. Reflecting a concern over teacher quality, the highest proportion of the public (74%) strongly favors making sure that teachers are experts in the subjects they are teaching. As for real-world learning, 64% of the public strongly favors work-study programs, community service, and vocational courses. Fifty-seven percent strongly favor a change in the basic approach to the senior year of high school; this group would give students an option to spend less time in class and more time in a qualified work-study program, working toward industry certification, or taking college classes. A majority (72% favor, 43% strongly) also supports proposals to make the high school experience more individualized by allowing students to develop their own plans of study and pursue their own goals. A majority (71% favor, 39% strongly) supports giving students more choices about the type of high school they attend; this group favors creating different types of high schools within the same school system and giving students more choices about which to attend.

At the same time that the public would put greater emphasis on an individualized education, it also favors reforms that raise standards and hold both schools and students accountable for meeting those standards. Fully 80% favor (53% strongly, 27% somewhat) requiring students to pass a statewide
graduation test before they receive a diploma. Seven in 10 favor (42% strongly, 30% somewhat) extending No Child Left Behind reforms to high school to raise standards and hold schools accountable for student performance.

The public also approves of developing more academically rigorous standards and of placing greater emphasis on honors and Advanced Placement classes (36% strongly favor). Some opposition to this proposal exists, however, especially among adults who are worried about tougher standards prompting some students to drop out. The public wants to raise standards, but it wants students to have the option to pursue higher standards in a way that makes sense for each individual.

Most Americans (73%) also favor increased funding for the public high schools—even at the expense of higher taxes—as long as the additional funding actually improves student achievement. As for what to spend the additional money on, a majority (51%) strongly favors raising teacher salaries to hire and retain more highly qualified teachers, again reflecting the concern with teacher quality.

**Reform Needed for Global Competitiveness**

Underlying the survey results is the belief that the stakes in education reform could not be higher. Americans not only tie the nation’s success in the world to the quality of the public education system, but they also say that continued improvement and reform are essential to maintaining U.S. global competitiveness. Three-quarters (76%) of all adults say that America’s ability to compete in the world would be weakened if 25 years from now high schools have not improved.

In all, the survey findings make clear that Americans strongly believe the nation’s high schools must be improved. Americans believe that high school students must take more rigorous, challenging courses that accomplish two things: promote a higher standard of learning and skills development, and prepare high school students for the next stages of their lives. The public’s strong support for such a wide range of reform proposals gives education leaders latitude to set forth a reform agenda that offers the chance for meaningful improvement in the nation’s public high schools.
Public Education is Central to America’s Success

Asked to explain America’s success in the world, survey respondents most frequently cite the nation’s commitment to its public education system. A third (33%) of the public ties the country’s success to a public education system that offers everyone a chance to learn, a plurality that narrowly edges out a democratic system of government (31%) as the most frequently cited reason. An entrepreneurial, risk-taking culture follows at 13%; military strength and international presence at 11%; and geography and natural resources at 7%.

Just as Americans view education as a foundation of national success, most also believe that the United States will have difficulty maintaining its global competitiveness unless it reforms its public high schools.

The vast majority (76%) says that if in 25 years high schools operate as they do today, America’s ability to compete in the world will be weakened.

Public Education Responsible For America’s Success
Which one of these factors is most responsible for America’s success in the world?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>All adults</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public education system that offers everyone a chance to learn</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic system of government</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk taking and entrepreneurial culture</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military strength and international presence</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography and natural resources</td>
<td>7%</td>
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Americans’ Views of Schools Have Changed Little Since the Current Education Reform Initiative Began

Despite the enactment of national education reform legislation four years ago, the proportion of Americans who say that K-12 public schools must change remains much the same as in previous “Americans Speak” surveys. The public and parents of K-12 students continue to have divided opinions on the need to reform the education system, as they have since 2001. Half (50%) of all adults favor keeping the current system largely as is; 11% say that K-12 public schools are working pretty well, and 39% favor minor adjustments. Nearly as many (48%) say that K-12 schools need major changes or a complete overhaul, a slight increase from last year and 2001, when 45% cited a need for major changes or a complete overhaul.

High school administrators and high school teachers view the current K-12 public education system more favorably than do adults in general and parents of K-12 students. Most administrators (77%) and teachers (69%) say that the schools work pretty well now or need only minor changes, versus
only 22% of administrators and 30% of teachers who say that the schools need major changes or a complete overhaul.

Just as adults’ views on the need for reform have remained generally consistent from year to year, so have their views of schools’ overall performance. Asked to assign a grade-point average, parents as a group give their children’s school a 2.9 GPA, for a letter grade of B. In terms of letter grades, 30% of parents give their children’s school an A, reflecting a six-percentage-point increase from last year and a three-point increase from 2001; 42% give a B, and 20% a C. Non-parents continue to grade more severely, giving their community’s schools a 2.3 GPA, the same as in each year since 2001. In letter grades, 10% of non-parents give their community’s K-12 schools an A, and 31% give a B.

Reflecting a well-established pattern, the public grades the nation’s schools as a whole more severely than parents grade their children’s schools, and more severely than non-parents grade their community’s schools. The public continues to give the nation’s schools a 2.1 GPA (a letter grade of C), a slight increase from 2001 (2.0 GPA). Within this group, 3% give the nation’s schools as a whole an A, and 23% give a B. Parents assign similar grades to the nation’s schools, giving them a 2.2 GPA, versus 2.3 in 2001.
INCREASED AWARENESS, DIVIDED VIEWS OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Perceptions of school quality and the need for education reform have changed little in four years, despite growing awareness of the No Child Left Behind Act, considered the most sweeping education reform initiative in decades. In 2001, 31% of the public had heard a great deal (7%) or fair amount (24%) about the NCLB initiative. In this year’s survey, 61% of adults report having heard either a great deal (34%) or fair amount (27%) about the law. Parents of K-12 students (66% heard a great deal/fair amount) are only slightly more likely than are all adults to have heard of NCLB. The proportion of all adults who have heard of the law increased seven percentage points since last year, when 54% had heard a great deal or fair amount about NCLB.

Half of those surveyed were asked about their attitudes toward NCLB without first hearing a description of the law. Among this unaided group, a plurality (45%) says that they view it favorably, versus 38% who view it unfavorably. Another 17% volunteer that they have not heard enough to form an opinion or are neutral. Among parents of K-12 students, 46% hold favorable views of NCLB, 39% hold unfavorable views, and 15% say that they don’t know enough or feel neutral about it.

Respondents also split along partisan lines, with 57% of Republicans holding favorable views of NCLB, versus 34% of Democrats who say the same. Mothers (53%) of K-12 students also are more likely than are fathers (38%) to view NCLB favorably. Among other groups, 50% of rural parents and 47% of parents of public high school students view NCLB favorably, as do 46% of Whites, 43% of African Americans, and 46% of Hispanics. Among college graduates, however, 40% view NCLB unfavorably, as do 35% of suburban parents.

The other half of surveyed adults were read the following statement regarding NCLB:

*The No Child Left Behind Act provides federal funds for school districts and requires states to set standards for education and to test students each year to determine whether the standards are being met.*

Two in five (41%) of this group say that they view NCLB favorably, 37% unfavorably, and 22% either have not heard enough to form an opinion or feel neutral.
Opinion has not dramatically shifted since this question was asked last year, when 39% viewed NCLB favorably, 38% unfavorably, and 23% didn’t know enough or were neutral.

Although NCLB currently applies primarily to K-8, most high school teachers (75%) nonetheless view it unfavorably, as half of this group has a very unfavorable impression of the law. Only one in five (19%) feels favorable toward NCLB. Forty-eight percent of high school administrators, on the other hand, view NCLB favorably, though only 8% feel very favorable toward it; 43% view it unfavorably. Administrators who have been in education longer than 20 years (58%) are much more likely to view NCLB favorably than are administrators who have been in education 20 years or less (35%).

**Public Support for Standards**

The difference of opinion between the public in general and high school teachers regarding No Child Left Behind may be rooted in a fundamental disagreement about how—and whether—to set academic standards and measure performance against those standards. A core principle of NCLB is that all students, teachers, and schools should be held to the same standard. Fifty-five percent of the public agrees with this principle, believing that it is wrong to have lower expectations for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Most (60%) high school teachers, however, disagree with the public on this point. They believe that because students enter school with different backgrounds and levels of academic preparation, teachers who work with disadvantaged students should not be expected to bring those students up to the same academic level as students from more affluent backgrounds. Among administrators, a plurality (37%) believes that not all students should be held to the same standard, versus 26% who say that they should be held to uniform standards.
Public support for uniform standards cuts across different groups. By partisan affiliation, 52% of Democrats and 60% of Republicans back common standards. Majorities of African Americans (59%), Hispanics (58%), and Whites (54%) all support one standard. Support for a common standard, however, does not extend to those who view NCLB unfavorably. Among adults opposed to NCLB, only 39% say that all students, teachers, and schools should be held to one standard, compared with 64% of adults who support NCLB who say the same.

Measure Student Achievement or Progress?

The public sometimes believes that it is being offered false choices on education reform. For example, respondents were asked whether an accountability system should be based on student achievement or on student progress. Achievement was defined as student performance against an established standard; progress was defined as the change in test scores over the course of a marking period to determine whether students had reached an acceptable level of performance growth in the subject, regardless of whether they meet an established proficiency standard.

When initially asked
Progress AND Achievement Should Be Taken Into Account

*On which should school accountability be based?*

- Student achievement, measured by the student’s performance in comparison to an established standard, for example, seeing whether test scores demonstrate that the student met the state’s expectation for a proficient level of performance in a subject.

- Student progress, measured by comparing student’s test scores at the end of a period to scores at the start of the period to see whether the student achieved an acceptable level of growth in performance in the subject area, regardless of whether a student meets a standard of proficiency.

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<th>All adults</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Both (volunteered)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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To choose between the two, a majority of the public prefers progress (53%) over achievement (32%). Among specific groups, 59% of parents of high school students choose progress, as do 74% of teachers and 35% of administrators.

When asked to choose between their original response or a combination of progress and achievement, 72% of the public say that it is practical and desirable to measure both achievement and progress rather than one or the other; 8% prefer just achievement, and 11% prefer just progress. High school teachers (63%) and administrators (74%) agree that a system that measures both is practical and desirable. Eight percent of high school administrators prefer to measure just achievement, and 13% prefer to measure just progress. Among high school teachers, 20% would measure just progress, and 2% would measure achievement.

**WE MUST SIGNIFICANTLY CHANGE HIGH SCHOOLS**

Most of the public believes that given limited resources, elementary schools should be the first priority for reform. Nevertheless, a majority (51%) says that public high schools need major changes (34%) or a complete overhaul (17%). Forty-five percent favor the current high school system with some changes, including 5% who say that high schools work pretty well right now. Parents of high school students feel somewhat more positive: 61% say that high schools work pretty well or should be kept the same, versus 37% who call for major changes or an overhaul.

African Americans (62%) and Hispanics (58%) are more likely than is the public in general to say that high schools need major changes or a complete overhaul, as are parents of children in private schools (67%).
One-quarter (25%) of parents with children in high school gives their children’s high school an A. Parents of high school students in a college preparatory course of study are much more likely to give their child’s high school an A (31%) than are parents of students in a general or vocational course of study (13%). Fewer than one in 10 (8%) non-parents give the high schools in their community an A.

Among high school educators, administrators and teachers are much less likely than is the public to say that high schools need major changes or a complete overhaul, 20% and 31% respectively. One-third (33%) of administrators gives the high schools they oversee an A, while 35% give a B. One-fifth (21%) of high school teachers gives the school in which they teach an A, while almost half (48%) give their school a B. Teachers (31%) and administrators (43%) who work in suburban schools, along with administrators who have been in education for more than 20 years (49%), are more likely to give their high schools an A.

**HIGH SCHOOLS COME UP SHORT OR FALL BEHIND ON MANY COUNTS**

Majorities of the public perceive high schools as not doing well enough on nearly every key measure, including preparing students to be successful in two- and four-year colleges (51%), giving students going into the work force the training and skills they will need (63%), and tailoring the high school experience to each student’s next step in life (62%). Majorities also say that high schools are coming up short or falling behind in teaching the basics (51%), maintaining high standards and challenging all students (64%), and supporting struggling students and preventing students from dropping out (69%).

The public feels more positive about the job high schools are doing at challenging and pushing the best students to make the most of their abilities (50% doing very well/well enough), giving students a chance to choose classes and learning opportunities that meet their individual needs (50%), and offering a diversity of classes and a well-rounded education (53%). Even in these areas, however, just one in six adults (16%, 13%, and 15%, respectively) says that high schools are doing very well in these areas.
Parents of high school students are more optimistic about high schools’ performance in several areas. For instance, they say that high schools are doing well at preparing students to succeed in college (55% doing very well/well enough) and in teaching the basics (52%).

A serious disconnect exists between the public’s perception of high schools’ performance and administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions. Although high school administrators rarely rate high schools as doing very well, majorities believe that the high schools do well enough on each measure, except supporting struggling students and preventing students from dropping out (65% coming up short/falling behind). A particular gap exists between administrators’ perceptions of how well high schools are teaching students the basics such as math, science, and writing (16% coming up short/falling behind) and the public’s view (51%). Similarly, 25% of administrators (versus 51% of the public) say that high schools are coming up short or falling behind on preparing students to succeed in two- and four-year colleges. High school teachers agree that schools are not doing well enough at supporting struggling students and preventing dropouts (63%). They also agree with the public that high schools are not doing well enough at giving students who are going into the workforce the proper training (59%) or maintaining high standards and challenging all students (52%).

“What we really need to look at are the students who are failing and repeating classes two and three times. We can’t keep feeding them the same thing the same way and expect different results. We have to be able to take a look and say, ‘This isn’t working. What are we going to do about it?’ And then we need the support up the ladder to allow us to do that.”

— Alexandria administrator

“There has been, I think, a declining concentration on real academics, really teaching kids to learn, to study, to expand their minds, to actually get facts in their heads and to know things. Kids aren’t really expected to know anything anymore.”

— Alexandria parent

“One of the areas of concern is the vocational job training. I think because of the standards, everything changing, after you go through the required courses, there is very little opportunity to pursue the other areas. Not all kids go to college. A high percentage—more than 50%—in a lot of districts do, but a lot don’t. Those kids don’t have the programs that are best for them.”

— Columbus administrator
All groups believe that high schools are doing poorly at preventing dropouts. This is true even though a majority of the public underestimates the severity of the dropout problem. Most experts say that about one-third of students drop out of high school nationwide each year, yet 60% of the public and 66% of parents of high school students put the figure at 20% or less. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the public does not believe that the number of dropouts is central to the problems facing the high schools, and it recommends directing attention to the middle of the student bell curve.

**Report Card for Nation’s High Schools**

*Differential: doing very well/well enough minus coming up short/falling behind*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All adults</th>
<th>HS parents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of classes/well-rounded education</td>
<td>+11</td>
<td>+36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of classes to meet individual needs</td>
<td>+6</td>
<td>+22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge/push best students</td>
<td>+4</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach basics: math, science, writing</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare students for college</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>+13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure schools to ensure students learning</td>
<td>-19</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training/skills to enter workforce</td>
<td>-29</td>
<td>-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit experience to each student’s next step in life</td>
<td>-31</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain high standards/challenge all students</td>
<td>-34</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support struggling students/prevent dropouts</td>
<td>-44</td>
<td>-30</td>
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**K-8 Reform Is Not Done**

Although the public believes that high schools must change, it rejects the idea that K-8 reform is done. In fact, only 6% believe that a great deal has been accomplished in making needed reforms to public elementary and middle schools. A large proportion (45%) believes that some improvements have been made, while 43% say that very little or nothing has been accomplished in K-8 reform. Only 6% of parents of K-12 students say that a great deal has been done; 51% say that some improvement has been accomplished, versus 38% who say that very little or nothing has been accomplished.

Adults from cities (45%) are less likely to say that a great deal or some improvement has been done to improve K-8 education than are adults from suburbs (59%) or adults from small towns and rural areas (56%). African Americans (44%) and Hispanics (42%) are less likely than are Whites (55%), and Democrats (45%) are less likely than are Republicans (63%), to say
that a great deal or some improvement has been accomplished.

Even among those who view NCLB favorably, only 6% say that a great deal has been done to reform K-8 education. More than half (57%) of adults who view NCLB favorably say that some improvement has been achieved, while 33% say that very little or nothing has been done. By comparison, 5% of adults who view NCLB unfavorably say that a great deal has been done, and 36% say that some has been done, while 55% say that very little or nothing has been done.

High school administrators (67%) and high school teachers (52%) agree that some improvement has been achieved in K-8 education. Only 10% of administrators say that a great deal has been done. Nearly one in five (18%) teachers believes that a great deal has been done, while 19% say that very little or nothing has been done.

Even if policymakers are ready to turn their attention to secondary school reform, the public’s first priority continues to be elementary school reform. When asked which should be the highest priority for new attention, new approaches, and major reforms, 50% of the public cites elementary schools, versus 16% who cite middle schools. One in five (20%) believes that high schools should be the highest priority for reform. Parents of high school students also believe that elementary schools should be the first priority for reform (47%)

Adults who have heard a great deal or a fair amount about NCLB are even more likely than is the public in general to say that elementary schools should be the first priority for reform (54%). Administrators (30%) and teachers (49%) also are most likely to want to focus reform efforts on...
elementary schools, compared with 14% of administrators and 20% of teachers who want to focus on high schools.

**Most Students Arrive at High School with Preparation Gaps**

One reason people continue to place a priority on improving K-8 public schools is a belief that better preparation at the K-8 level would pay off at the secondary level. Americans believe that students arrive at high school unprepared and that high schools can do little to help them catch up. Only 16% believe that students are extremely or very well prepared to do the work expected of them in high school. Four in five (81%) think that most students have preparation gaps, including 26% who say the gaps are large. Parents of high school students (22%) are slightly more likely to say that most students arrive at high school extremely or very well prepared.

High school administrators and high school teachers offer equally harsh assessments of students’ preparation for high school work. Only 19% of administrators feel that students arrive at high school extremely or very well prepared, as do 16% of teachers. Majorities of both teachers (82%) and administrators (80%) cite at least some preparation gaps, while 27% of high school teachers and 18% of administrators report seeing large preparation gaps.

Adults who believe that most students arrive at high school well prepared for what they will face are slightly more likely to prioritize reforming high school (26%), compared with 18% of adults who say that most students have gaps in their preparation.

“People who focus on high school know that there is a limited amount that you can do once you get them in ninth grade.”
- Alexandria administrator

“When you get to high school, it’s almost too late. You don’t want to completely forget about those kids, but this is the last year or two years to make a difference. I don’t know if you can change it. I think you have to start very early on.”
- Columbus parent
The public believes that high schools’ shortcomings are often due to factors outside a school’s control. When read a series of explanations for the problems facing the nation’s high schools, the broader society generates the greatest response (64% say that it is a good explanation for the problems in our nation’s schools), followed by a lack of resources (51%), and the shortcomings of the elementary and middle schools (50%). Among parents of high school students, 69% say that the central problem for high schools is that they are called on to address too many problems beyond just teaching academic subjects. Eighty-eight percent of high school teachers and 51% of high school administrators also cite issues relating to the broader society as the central problem for high schools.

A majority of the public (51%) also says that lack of resources is an important problem for high schools. Schools, they say, do not get the funding they need to hire enough good teachers or for the materials and facilities needed to give students a quality education. Partisan affiliation is a strong indicator of likelihood for citing inadequate resources and funding. Democrats (62%)
are more likely than are Republicans (41%) to
cite this as a good explanation. Eighteen- to
34-year-olds are more likely than is the public
generally to cite lack of funding and resources
(56% versus 51%), as are African Americans and
Hispanics (57% each). Among educators, 46% of
high school administrators and 65% of high
school teachers cite lack of resources.

Half (50%) of the public also cites inadequate
academic preparation prior to high school as a
good explanation for the problems facing high
schools. Parents of K-12 students (46%) and par-
ents of high school students (44%) agree with the
public that a good explanation for high schools’
problems is inadequate academic preparation. On the other hand, 23% of
parents of high school students say that this is not a good explanation at all.
And 36% of high school administrators and 38% of high school teachers are
less inclined to view inadequate preparation as a central problem for the high
schools; 37% say that this is not a good explanation at all, as do 23% of high
school teachers.

In the next tier, each with more than 40% of the public citing each as a
good explanation for high schools’ problems, are problems endemic to high
schools that often come up in high school reform discussions. Forty-five
percent, for example, cite low academic standards, or students not working
hard enough or not taking challenging courses. Similar proportions of par-
ents of K-12 students (42% good explanation) and parents of high school stu-
dents (41%) agree. High school students’ fathers (50%) and mothers (33%)
have a difference of opinion on this issue. Perceptions of the academic rigor
of high school dramatically affect whether someone cites low standards as a
good explanation for high schools’ problems: 61% of adults who believe that
expectations are low in high school also believe that low standards explain
high schools’ problems, whereas only 42% who believe expectations are
moderate also point to low standards.

Among other explanations for poorly performing high schools, 45% of the
public cites large and impersonal high schools and the inadequacy of the
traditional high school in meeting the individual needs of today’s students.
Fifty-two percent of administrators, 47% parents of K-12 students, and 38% of
high school teachers agree.
Groups Who Say That Each Statement Is a Good Explanation of the Problems in High Schools Today (proportion rating each a “7-10” on a 10-point scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Statement</th>
<th>All Adults (%)</th>
<th>Hs Parents (%)</th>
<th>Hs Administrators (%)</th>
<th>Hs Teachers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The problem is in the broader society. High schools are having to address too many problems beyond just teaching academic subjects.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is lack of resources. Schools do not get the funding that they need to hire enough good teachers and have the materials and facilities they need to provide students a quality education.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is in the grade schools and middle schools. By the time students get to high school, they are already far behind because grade schools and middle schools are not adequately preparing them.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is low academic standards. Students are not working hard enough or taking challenging courses because the standards are not high enough, and it is too easy to slide by and still get a high school diploma.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is high schools that are too large and impersonal. The traditional high school of the past is not able to meet the individual needs of today’s students.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is accountability. High schools get funding whether or not students learn, so they lack incentives to ensure that students really learn what they are supposed to know to earn a diploma.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is teacher quality. Students are not learning because there are too many teachers who lack teaching skills or are teaching outside their area of knowledge.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem is too many students are dropping out. High schools are frustrating or boring and students are leaving school.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two in five (41%) Americans believe that the problem with high schools involves accountability—that high schools get funding regardless of whether students learn. Republicans (48%) are more likely than are Democrats (36%) to cite accountability as a good explanation for high schools’ problems. Although 53% of administrators cite accountability, only 11% of high school teachers do so.

Fewer adults (36%), high school teachers (16%), and administrators (15%) believe that the quality of teaching is the problem. As for the dropout rate, 29% of adults in general, 34% of administrators, and 19% of teachers cite this as a good explanation for high schools’ problems.

Expectations Are Not High Enough and Students Are Not Challenged

The general public does not think that high schools provide a challenging experience for students. Fewer than one in 10 (9%) believe that expectations in the secondary schools are high and that most students are significantly challenged in their coursework. The majority (57%) believes that expectations are moderate and that most students are somewhat challenged; another 30% say that expectations are low and that most students are not challenged at all. Parents of high school students are slightly less likely to say that high schools have low expectations and that students slide by unchallenged. Among this group, 12% say that expectations are high, 63% feel that expectations are moderate, and 23% think that they are low. Men (34%) are more likely than are women (27%) to say that expectations are low, while 34% of African Americans and 37% of Hispanics are more likely than are Whites (29%) to say that expectations are low. Even among adults who believe that high schools are generally working well, only 12% say

“I think, a lot of times, there’s a reason—and it could be something very simple—why a kid is not encouraged or feels that they can’t achieve. They may be having a problem in math, and it takes that one person, that one thing, to make a difference to turn that whole situation around.”

– Columbus parent

Few Believe High School Students Are Challenged

Perceptions of academic expectations for students in public high school in the nation as a whole

- High expectations/ students significantly challenged
  - 12% high school parents
  - 9% high school administrators
  - 12% high school teachers

- Moderate expectations/ students somewhat challenged
  - 57%

- Low expectations/ students not challenged
  - 30%

All adults

9%
that expectations are high, versus 66% who say that expectations are moderate, and 19% who say expectations are low.

Nine percent of high school administrators say that expectations are high, as do 12% of teachers. Yet educators are much more likely to say that expectations are moderate (80% of administrators, 73% of teachers) than low (9%, 13% respectively).

**Teachers and Parents Disagree on the Purpose of a High School Education**

When it comes to deciding on the purpose of a high school education, parents of high school students are most likely to believe that the goal is to prepare their children for the next step in their education (41%). A plurality (35%) of high school teachers, on the other hand, says that their goal is to produce literate, educated citizens who participate in democracy, while 23% say that their job is to teach students how to think.

High school administrators most often believe that their job is to prepare workers who can succeed in the modern economy (32%). Few high school parents (4%), administrators (4%), or teachers (3%) believe that a high school’s job is to teach the basics in reading, writing, and math or to teach students about building strong character (8%, 3%, 2%).

**To Reform High Schools, Focus on the ‘Middle’**

A majority (53%) of the public believes that the best way to reform high schools is to focus on the middle of the student bell curve to ensure that students graduate with the skills they will need to succeed in college or the workforce. One-fifth (21%) thinks that schools should focus on the bottom by supporting students who struggle, and that they should work to make high schools relevant to students with varied interests to reduce the number of dropouts. Only 11% would focus on the top performers by challenging the best students to make the most of their talents.

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**Different Views on Purpose of High Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single top goal of a high school education</th>
<th>HS parents</th>
<th>HS teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare youth to continue education in college, technical, trade school</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce literate, educated citizens who participate in democracy</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach students to think</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare good workers who can succeed in modern economy</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach students about building strong character</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach basics in reading, writing, math</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I think we all agreed that the school system is too easy. So it should be a little harder, but you still have to take care of those C students who need other options too.”

— Columbus parent

“I think it’s way too easy to get through high school nowadays. They’ve lowered the standard trying to get everybody through to the point where a lot of kids aren’t challenged.”

— Columbus parent
Focus on the Middle

*Most important and productive focus for improving high school education*

All adults

- **The top:** Challenge top students to make the most of their talents so that those who are going on to college or high-skilled jobs are ready to compete against the best in the global economy. 11%

- **The middle:** Raise standards in high school so that a high school diploma means more than it does today and students are not getting passed through the system without the skills they will need for college and the work world. 53%

- **The bottom:** Offer support to students who are struggling, work to make high schools relevant to students with varied interests to reduce the number of students who drop out of high school prior to graduation. 21%

Nearly half (48%) of high school administrators refuse to choose a group of students on which to focus, instead volunteering that they would focus on all equally. Among administrators who would focus on one group, more would focus on the bottom (28%) than on the middle (19%). Fifty-eight percent of high school teachers agree with the public and say that reform efforts should focus on the middle.

**College Preparatory Course of Study Not Seen as Appropriate for All**

Advocates of adopting a college preparatory course of study for all students have a steep hill to climb to convince a skeptical public. College prep advocates argue that schools should prepare all students to attend college because those are the same skills that all graduates must have to succeed in the work place. But the argument for college prep for all, without a strong career and technical education component for students planning to go straight to work, does not convince the public: 76% believe that some students are better off receiving training for specific job skills.

Across groups, majorities believe that some students are better off with training for specific job skills rather than taking only college prep courses. Support for college preparatory education for all is strongest among minority parents (38%). High school administrators (23%) are more likely than are teachers (6%) to support college prep for all. While not expecting all students to go to college, the public does expect a broad and deep high school education that prepares students for whatever challenges lie ahead.

“The back rows are not being served. The great kids are getting what they need. This is the system I know. The regular kids are doing OK. But the back rows, we’re losing them.”

– Alexandria parent
Individualized Approach to Core Knowledge

Although the public is reluctant to endorse a college preparatory education for all when described in those terms, vast majorities say that the core curriculum for all students should include a rigorous series of classes. And indeed, this core curriculum resembles a college prep curriculum that includes at least one year of computer science (95%); four years of English literature and writing (85%); at least three years of history and civics (81%); four years of mathematics (73%); at least three years of science, including biology, physics and chemistry (69%); and at least two years of a foreign language (63%). High school teachers and administrators agree that these should be included in the core curriculum. It is noteworthy that the public includes computer science as
part of a core curriculum, highlighting the real-world skills that people believe should be part of a high school education.

In high school reform debates, some say that creating an education system with rigorous standards and a core curriculum for all students is at odds with a system that takes into account the unique needs of every individual. If pressed to choose, more than three in five (61%) adults say that that individualization—that is, establishing a different course of study based on each student’s needs, interests, and abilities—is a more important principle in high school reform than standardization, or establishing a core level of skills and knowledge that all students should master.

Parents of high school students also choose individualization as the more important principle (63%). Although Democrats (67%) and women (65%) are more likely to endorse individualization than are Republicans (53%) and men (56%), majorities of all demographic groups support it as the more important principle. The public believes in giving students the freedom to take an individual approach. Still, in the end the public also wants a set of core skills and knowledge to be part of every high school student’s experience.

"I think all kids learn differently. I think there are different ways to teach different kids, to reach them, and if part of the problem is that we aren’t making classes challenging enough, maybe this will address some of that.”
– Columbus parent

"Not all students flourish in the same environment.”
– Alexandria parent

"I think that we need to recognize that not every child is cut out to go to college. Now the expectation is that you’re in high school, you’re going to college next. I think money needs to be put toward vocational training. You know, there are plenty of jobs, plenty of things that need to be done that don’t require a college degree and we should foster that.”
– Alexandria parent

"In today’s world, the students focus too much on a specific job. I’m going to grow up to be a teacher, lawyer, doctor, plumber, whatever, versus identifying what their skill sets are. What would they be good at? What do they like doing?”
– Columbus parent

### Standardization or Individualization?

*Which is the more important principle to guide our thinking about public high school education?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>62%</th>
<th>Individualization: establish a different course of study based on each student’s needs, interests, and abilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>Standardization: establish a core level of skills and knowledge all students should master</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All adults
The public’s desire for high school reform is so strong that adults support a broad range of proposed solutions, even when those solutions seem contradictory. A majority supports every specific high school reform proposal tested in the survey, though to varying degrees. The two most highly rated reforms are making sure that teachers are experts in the subjects they teach, and creating opportunities for more real-world learning. The public also supports higher academic standards and increased accountability, as well as more individualized approaches to learning. High school administrators often offer less enthusiastic support for nearly every proposed reform, while high school teachers oppose several measures that the public supports.

Americans view quality teaching as central to a quality education. Support for making sure that teachers are experts in the subjects they teach shows that, consistent with previous surveys, the public continues to seek ways to improve the level of instruction students receive. This proposal receives the highest level of support among all groups. This would entail requiring teachers to be certified in any subject they teach. Nearly three-fourths of the public (74%) and high school parents (75%) strongly favor a certification requirement. Ninety percent of high school administrators also support the proposal. High school teachers are less enthusiastic, although a majority (54% strongly, 21% somewhat) favor the idea (24% oppose it).
In considering reforms that create more individualized approaches to education, the public emphasizes learning that takes place outside the classroom and that takes into account each student’s needs, abilities, and plans for the future. Ninety-two percent favor (64% strongly) placing greater emphasis on real-world learning by allowing students to participate in work-study programs, community service, and vocational courses. More than four in five (82%) African Americans strongly favor this approach. This idea receives greater support among adults who want to focus reform efforts on the lowest-performing students (72% strongly favor), rather than on the middle (61% strongly favor). More than nine in 10 high school administrators (92% strongly/somewhat favor) and teachers (96%) also support placing greater emphasis on real-world learning.

Similarly, many believe that the senior year of high school could be better used by letting students pursue opportunities that give them a head start on their post-graduation activities. More than four in five (85%) adults favor (57% strongly) changing the basic approach to the senior year of high school by giving students an option to spend less time in high school classes if they are in a work-study program, working toward industry certification or job training, or taking classes in a college or community college. Parents of high school students offer marginally stronger support for this proposal (63% strongly favor) than does the general public; 64% of teachers also strongly favor the idea, versus only 19% of high school administrators who strongly favor it.

Parents of high school students want students to be able to develop learning experiences that fit their unique needs, even if it means that some students meet different standards than others. A majority (78%) strongly (49%) or somewhat (29%) favors a proposal to make the high school experience more individualized by having students develop their own plan of study by working with an education counselor, and then allowing students to pursue their own goals as they demonstrate that they are meeting standards for achievement. Mothers (59%) of high school students are more likely to strongly favor individualized learning than are fathers (39%). The general public is less likely than are parents of high school students to strongly favor
favor (43%) the proposal; 25% of the public opposes the idea. The proposal receives stronger support (54% strongly favor) among adults who want to focus attention on the bottom than on the middle (38%). An individualized approach receives the support of majorities of high school teachers (78% strongly/somewhat favor) and administrators (80%).

In addition to supporting a more flexible curriculum, many people want to reinvent the high school system by giving students more choices about the type of schools they attend. This would involve creating high schools of different types and educational philosophies within the same school system, such as small high schools, magnet schools, and “virtual” or distance-learning schools. This approach is generally favored by a majority of the public (39% strongly, 32% somewhat) as well as by parents of high school students (36%, 32%), administrators (16%, 48%), and teachers (36%, 36%). One-quarter (26%) of high school teachers opposes giving students more choice about the type of high school they attend.

Although the public would put greater emphasis on an individualized education stressing real-world learning, it also supports reforms that would raise standards and hold schools, students, and teachers accountable for meeting those higher standards as measured by regular assessments. Four in five (80%) adults favor requiring students to pass a statewide graduation test before they can receive a diploma; more than half (53%) strongly favor the idea, and another quarter (27%) somewhat favor it. Requiring students to pass a test to graduate is slightly less popular among parents of high school students (42% strongly, 33% somewhat favor).

“High schools across the United States do not match the reality of life after school. They are protected environments. They look the same as they have looked for 100 years. When we think of reforming the high school, there needs to be a vision, a discussion about the fact that the high school needs to meet some future experience that the students are going to enter into, and it is going to be less about college.”

– Columbus administrator

“I think the system of having small learning communities with a focus would be great. Students often say, why am I learning this? So you could increase the relevance, you could probably increase the rigor of learning in those small communities with the different choices.”

– Columbus administrator

“I think kids need to have a fluidity of opportunity. But we have to get away from the rigid four years, and perhaps each student needs a personal learning plan sometime. If one wants to go out and sample work because they think high school’s not for them, go out and come back, and again, much more fluid opportunity to get to where the student needs to be.”

– Alexandria administrator
favor), but still only 23% oppose the idea. Support is stronger among fathers of high school students (49% strongly favor) than among mothers (36%). Majorities of high school administrators (84% strongly/somewhat favor) and teachers (57%) favor requiring a graduation exam, although 41% of high school teachers oppose the idea.

The public supports holding students accountable for academic performance, but a majority also favors giving students an incentive by using state-funded scholarships or other financial rewards to those who earn good grades or high test scores, even if it means an increase in taxes (82% strongly/somewhat favor). High school administrators (61%) and teachers (84%) also favor offering scholarships to students as a performance incentive.

The public favors measures to hold high schools accountable. Seventy-two percent favor (42% strongly) extending the No Child Left Behind reforms to high schools by requiring states to set standards for high schools and testing students to determine whether they are meeting the standards. One-quarter (25%) opposes extending NCLB to high schools. Parents of high school students and the general public are even in their support (71%). Support for extending NCLB is stronger among Republicans (80%) than among Democrats, but a majority of Democrats (68%) favors the proposal as well, as do large proportions of African Americans (80%) and Hispanics (79%). Among adults with unfavorable views of NCLB, 47% favor and 49% oppose extending the reforms. High school teachers, on the other hand, overwhelmingly oppose extending NCLB reforms to high schools (63%). One-third of high school administrators (32%) opposes the idea, versus 65% who support it.

The reform receiving the lowest level of strong support is the notion of developing more academically rigorous standards with greater emphasis on college preparatory classes, honors classes, and college-level AP courses. Still, more than seven in 10 (77%) adults favor the proposal. Support is affected by respondents’ perceptions of how rigorous high school coursework currently is; 45% of adults who say that expectations are low strongly favor developing more rigorous standards, compared with 22% among people who say expectations are high. Adults who want to focus reform efforts on the bottom performers are less likely to favor the proposal (29% strongly favor).
support) than are adults who want to focus on the middle (36%) or top (47%). Most administrators (80%) favor developing more rigorous standards, but only 13% strongly favor the idea. Three in five (59%) teachers favor and two in five (39%) oppose the idea. Advocates of raising standards for all students should know that although this measure is supported by most of the public and high school educators, it is not the highest priority on the list of reforms.

The public also supports increased funding for high schools. A majority (80%) favors increasing teachers' salaries to hire and retain more well-qualified teachers even if it means higher taxes. People also support spending more on high school education in general even if it means higher taxes (73%). Support for increased funding is somewhat higher among parents of high school students (79%) than among non-parents (75%). Support for increased funding, however, is contingent upon confidence that the additional money would result in improvement. Only 16% are very confident that more money would lead to improved high school quality, while nearly half (49%) are somewhat confident. Support for higher funding increases 35 points among adults who are very confident that it would lead to improved quality. Seven in 10 (70%) adults who are very confident that additional spending would lead to improvements in quality strongly favor it, whereas only 40% of adults who are somewhat confident and 11% who are not confident favor increasing funding.

Although skeptical, the American public believes that reforms would make a difference in the quality of high schools. If all the reforms that they favor were made, more than half (54%) of Americans believe that the quality of a high school education would improve somewhat. Another 42% believe that there would be a big improvement, and only 2% say that there would be no improvement in the quality of high school education.
• Americans view the public education system as central to America’s success in the world, and they believe that the nation’s ability to compete would be seriously weakened if in 25 years the current high school education system has not been reformed.

• Americans do not believe that high schools provide most students with a rigorous academic experience.

• Although awareness of the No Child Left Behind law continues to grow, the public gives schools in America nearly the same grades as it did prior to the law’s passage, and its desire for reform remains the same.

• A disconnect exists between the public’s views and those of high school teachers and administrators on key issues, including the overall quality of public high schools. The disconnect may be rooted in a fundamental disagreement on how and whether to set standards and measure performance against them. The public wants to hold all schools, students and teachers to the same standard; teachers and administrators say that because students come from different backgrounds, teachers working with economically disadvantaged students should not be expected to have their students reach the same performance levels as teachers working in more affluent schools.

• The public and high school educators believe that they are being offered a false choice on how to set standards and measure against them. They say that a practical and desirable system would measure both achievement and progress.

• A majority of the public says that high schools need major reforms and that public high schools are falling behind on many counts, including preparing students for both college and work.

• Although political leaders and others may be talking about high school reform, the public and high school educators are not satisfied that K-8 reform has been fully achieved. They believe that most students arrive at high school with preparation gaps.

• Although the public sees high schools as coming up short or falling behind on many counts, it says that the central issues causing these problems often are outside high schools’ control. The most commonly cited explanations relate to the broader society.
• Fewer than one in 10 Americans say that expectations for secondary school students’ academic performance are high and that most students are significantly challenged. High school teachers and administrators are nearly as likely to say that most students are not being challenged.

• Education is so central, and the public’s desire for improvement is so strong, that adults offer strong support for a broad range of specific reform policies. Americans continue to equate quality teaching with quality education, and the top-rated reform proposal is to make sure that teachers are experts in the subjects they teach.

• Americans continue to seek a balanced approach to reform; the public desires both attention to individual student learning needs as well as a rigorous system of high standards and accountability with regular assessments.

**Conclusion**

This year’s survey findings confirm what we have consistently found to be the case—that education remains one of the key issues that the American public cares about deeply. And in that, the survey holds an important finding for policymakers and educators alike: the world is changing, and the nation’s public schools need to change, too.

On setting education reform priorities, the public is sending two messages. The first is that Americans want to get K-8 right before shifting attention and energy to high school reform. But the second message is that the public accepts the need for high school reform. Clearly, there is license for policymakers to take the best path toward high school reform. In heading down that path, the public is pragmatic: people endorse what they believe will work. What people want are primary and secondary schools that prepare students to succeed at the postsecondary level and to compete in the world. In terms of the curriculum most likely to reach these goals, the public favors a rigorous, broad course of study that includes computer and physical sciences, writing, and math, taught by educators prepared for the challenges of the classroom and qualified to teach their subjects. And they are willing to pay for and invest in real, substantive, and achievable education reform.