



Keeping Our Edge: Americans Speak on Education and Competitiveness

Conducted for
ETS

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&
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*Listening.
Learning.
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From May 22 to June 8, 2006, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., and The Winston Group conducted a national survey among 1,215 adults, including 512 parents of K-12 students (301 parents of high school students), and among 231 public high school students, 150 high school administrators (superintendents, school board members, principals and vice principals), 150 high school teachers, 151 college faculty, and 151 opinion leaders (persons in business, association/advocacy, and state/local government). At the 95% confidence level, the data's margin of error is ± 3.1 percentage points among all adults, and larger among the subsamples of parents of K-12 students (± 4.3), parents of high school students (± 5.7), high school students (± 6.5), high school administrators (± 8.0), high school teachers (± 8.0), college faculty (± 8.0), and opinion leaders (± 8.0).

Prior to conducting the surveys, Hart Research and The Winston Group convened seven focus groups: two groups in Richmond, Va.; two in Encino, Calif.; one in Rosemont, Ill.; and two in Atlanta, Ga. One group each was conducted among male high school students, female high school students, parents of middle and/or high school students, high school teachers, high school administrators, college professors, and business leaders/HR professionals. In addition, seven in-depth interviews were conducted among leading competitiveness experts.

Key Findings

The American people recognize the important role that public schools play in contributing to our nation's achievements, and they are concerned about our ability to remain globally competitive unless our schools improve and challenge students more. Despite major reform efforts at the national and state levels, public ratings for the nation's schools have not changed over the past six years of this survey series. The public feels strongly that America's schools must do a better job when it comes to preventing dropouts and raising standards, particularly in math and science, to ensure that high school graduates are prepared for college and for the increasingly technical jobs in the modern economy. A majority of the public expects that if changes are not made in our schools, negative effects on the economy will be felt within the next 10 years.

The public — including parents of public school students, business leaders, teachers, administrators, and even high school students — agrees that standards and expectations must be higher. And all these groups are candid in assessing that their own group, as well as the other groups, is not putting in maximum effort to help students get the most out of their school experience. This, and the fact that majorities of all groups endorse nearly every element in a long list of potential reforms, make it clear that the public is yearning for leadership that will make the right education policy choices and inspire parents, teachers and students to make the most of our public schools.

Math and Science are Crucial

Math and science are viewed as vital to America's ability to maintain an edge in the global economy and remain competitive with nations such as China, India, and Japan.

- The general public (40%) and opinion leaders (61%) identify math, science, and technology skills as the most important ingredients in America's ability to compete in the global economy.
- More than two-thirds (72%) of Americans – and majorities of high school teachers and administrators, college faculty, and opinion leaders – believe that it is very important for students to take the most advanced math and science classes they are eligible to take, every year of high school.
- After hearing arguments stressing the importance of math and science, the proportion of the public believing it is important for students to take advanced classes increases to 76%. The strongest arguments stress the need to qualify for technical jobs in the modern economy and the need to respond to international competition.

A Call to Action

While the public views math and science as vital to America's ability to maintain its edge in the global economy, Americans do not believe that our public schools are providing students with the skills they will need to compete for highly technical scientific and engineering jobs.

- A 71% majority of Americans believe that our nation's public high schools are coming up short or falling behind in efforts to put students on the path to compete for highly technical scientific and engineering jobs with their counterparts from other countries.
- A 58% majority of Americans feel our nation's public schools are coming up short or falling behind in efforts to give students who want to go into the work force the training and skills they need to secure and succeed in a job.
- More than three-quarters (76%) of Americans believe that if America's next generation does not work to improve its skills in math, science, and engineering, it risks becoming the first generation of Americans who are worse off economically than their parents.
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Americans believe that if we fail to take action and reform our education system, our ability to remain globally competitive will be compromised within the next decade.

- And 73% of the public believes that if we fail to take action during the next 25 years, our complacency will negatively impact America's ability to compete worldwide.

“Good Enough” is Not Good Enough

Americans rate their communities' public schools as somewhat better than average, but they are not complacent about this. All groups in the survey call for higher academic standards and endorse a wide range of potential reforms.

- When asked to assess America's public schools as a whole, the public rates them as average (a grade-point average of 2.1, for a C grade). This number has barely budged over the six years of this survey.
- The assessment improves when parents, students, teachers, and administrators are asked to grade the schools in their community or their own school (grade-point averages ranging from 2.8 to 3.0, for a B grade), but this number, too, has hardly changed.
- Americans speak of reform in the future tense, saying that they believe public school reforms are absolutely vital to our ability to sustain a healthy, globally competitive economy. More than half (53%) of the public believes that major changes to or a complete overhaul of our public schools are needed — a proportion that almost matches the level in 2002.
- Only 11% of Americans feel that academic expectations are set high and that high school students are being significantly challenged in school.

The American public clearly sees room for improvement in the amount of effort that all parties — students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community at large — exert toward ensuring that students get the most out of their school experience. The public does not feel that any one particular group is putting a substantial amount of effort into students' school experiences; yet they often characterize public schools as doing “well enough” along several dimensions.

- The public rates teachers and students as putting in more effort than any other groups, yet they only rate teachers and students as putting forth a little more effort than “just enough to get by.” Only 14% of Americans feel that teachers are putting in as much effort as they can, and only 5% feel that students are putting forth maximum effort.

- Even when groups rate themselves (e.g., teachers rating teachers' efforts), they assess their group's effort as higher than other groups, yet no group rates themselves as exerting as much effort as they can.
- Americans are pretty evenly split on whether the nation's public high schools are challenging and pushing the best students to make the most of their abilities — half believe that schools are doing at least well enough, and 46% feel that they are coming up short or falling behind in this area.
- College faculty (69% coming up short/falling behind) and opinion leaders (52%) are particularly concerned about how public high schools serve their brightest students.
- Americans also are split on whether the nation's public high schools are preparing students to succeed in two- and four-year colleges. Forty-five percent believe that they are doing at least well enough, and 49% believe they are coming up short or falling behind.
- Forty-three percent of Americans feel that the nation's public high schools are doing at least well enough at teaching the basics of math, science, and writing, while 55% believe that public high schools are coming up short or falling behind.
- Americans are of one mind when it comes to their assessment of how successful public schools are at supporting struggling students and preventing dropouts. Nearly three-quarters (73%) believe that they are coming up short or falling behind in these efforts.

The Need for Inspirational Leadership

The public is eager for someone to take the reins, to step up and assume a leadership position, and ask all Americans — students, parents, teachers, administrators, employers, the entire community — to help transform our public schools. Americans are not in denial about the fact that they must do better by public school students. Rather, the public has a sense that America is failing its students.

- An 80% majority of adults and 84% of high school parents identify as a big problem a belief that students are getting passed through the public high school system without the skills they need for college or work.
- More than three-quarters of the public (76%) and high school administrators (86%) identify students' dropping out of high school as at least a fairly big problem.

- Somewhat fewer, although still a majority (64%), Americans and 84% of college faculty and opinion leaders identify as a big problem a belief that gifted students are not being sufficiently challenged so that they are ready to compete against the best-educated scientists and engineers in the world.

Americans understand that we must take on the difficult challenge of reforming our schools so that they best serve America's youth as they prepare to enter the work force and take on the responsibility of ensuring American global competitiveness, and therefore American security, into the future. The public is willing to make sacrifices and understands that it is time to make substantive changes to the way that classes and curriculum are structured; the way teachers are recruited, hired, and rewarded; and the way funding and resources are allocated to the public school systems.

The public is very receptive to reform proposals. Even when presented with the tradeoff of a significant increase in their own taxes, the public overwhelmingly supports a wide variety of reform proposals, delineated below.

Raising standards

- increase expectations for parental involvement with their children's education (93% favor)
- challenge and inspire students at high risk of dropping out by increasing resources, lowering class sizes, and raising expectations (88% favor)
- develop more academically rigorous standards for high schools with greater emphasis on college preparatory classes (87% favor)
- increase the number of students pursuing careers in math and science by attracting more math and science teachers through a variety of financial and in-kind incentives, such as loan forgiveness and housing vouchers (85% favor)
- require students to pass statewide graduation tests ensuring they have mastered the core subject areas (81% favor)

Giving students more options

- place greater emphasis on real-world learning for students, such as work-study programs and vocational training (92% favor)
- expand after-school programs and lower the class size in elementary schools, even if this increases the per-pupil cost by thousands of dollars (81% favor)
- make more college course work and apprenticeships available to high school students, even if this takes away from time students spend on the core curriculum (75% favor)

Improving teaching

- improve the quality of teachers by ensuring they are experts in the subjects they teach, including providing more training and requiring certification (92% favor)
- overhaul teacher-hiring practices to ensure that passionate and talented teachers are hired; and create a “master teacher” ladder to reward teaching as a career (91% favor)
- increase investments in low-income schools to improve their infrastructure and materials and to recruit and retain the most-gifted teachers, even if this entails shifting funds from middle- and high-income areas (77% favor)
- dramatically increase teachers’ salaries to attract more well-qualified teachers, even if this entails a significant increase in taxes (73% favor)

The public understands that America’s future success in the global economy rests upon improving our public education system so that America’s youth can compete with students from around the world for highly technical scientific and engineering jobs. Americans believe that it is time for everyone — students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community as a whole — to dramatically increase our efforts to ensure that students get the most out of their public education. The public is eager to embrace a variety of reforms and is demanding that policymakers and education experts step up and lead by identifying which reform approaches will be most effective at improving our public schools.