

By Deborah Wadsworth

# Readin', Ritin' and Reform

*Deborah Wadsworth is president, Public Agenda.*

This summer, while school was out, Congress struggled to produce an education bill that both Republicans and Democrats could live with. The thrust of the proposed legislation was to hold schools responsible for the performance of their students by tying federal aid to students' success or failure in meeting academic standards. Standardized tests would be

used to determine which schools were—or were not—making the grade.

Now that the nation's youngsters have begun a new fall semester, it's fair to ask how well this legislative debate actually tracked with the values and concerns of average Americans. Recent news coverage seemed to suggest the public was sharply divided over



©2001 www.arttoday.com



©2001 www.arttoday.com

this “standards and accountability” approach to educational reform, and that the debate was unmindful of their apprehensions. Were the nation’s legislators out of touch with public concerns regarding the fairness, wisdom, and effectiveness of this strategy? Recent surveys conducted by Public Agenda indicate they were not.

There have been many surveys about attitudes toward standards and accountability. Public Agenda has probed these issues and the role of testing a number of times over the past year alone, building on a base of over a decade of interviews with many thousands of teachers, parents, youngsters, and members of the general public on all aspects of education reform. The data are unambiguous.

The public’s take on education reform is quite basic, commonsensical, and personal. In focus groups, parents talk not about public education’s systemic problems or the complexities of high-stakes assessments. Instead, they relate how their own children are doing, and, from their personal perspective, express their opinions on what youngsters need if they are having difficulty. Most believe their children could be working harder; that it’s essential for teachers to pay personal attention to their kids and want them to succeed; and that teachers ought to be informing parents when there are problems.

On standards, polling data reveal a virtual consensus: if you ask for more,

most youngsters will merely do enough to get by.)

From the public’s perspective, an “A” grade should signify “A” work, and high school diplomas should mean something. A motif found throughout Public Agenda’s research is that of the young person encountered in daily life who seems unable to complete even the most basic of tasks—the clerk who’s unable to make correct change at the check-out counter of the local deli, or the telephone operator who’s unable to locate the number because she can’t spell “Chicago.”

Support for raising standards is strong, both because Americans believe that every child can learn more, and because they are mystified—if not appalled—that any student could spend 12 years drifting through school and emerge not able to spell, write a grammatically correct sentence, do basic computation, show up on time, or submit an assignment when it’s due.

Our studies, as well as others, have repeatedly documented—among white, African American, and Hispanic parents, and across all socioeconomic categories—the belief that higher standards will increase student learning, and that it is “absolutely essential” to have “teachers and a principal who

push students to study hard and to excel academically.” Not to do so, says the public, is quite literally to destroy a youngster’s chances for a decent life.

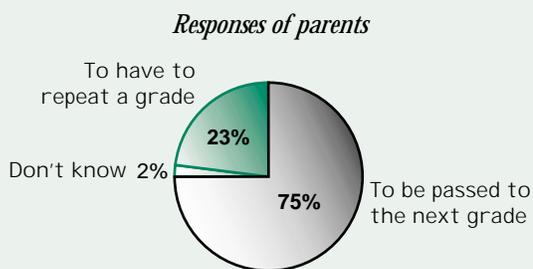
“From the public’s perspective, an ‘A’ grade should signify ‘A’ work, and high school diplomas should mean something.”

most youngsters will measure up. (And, conversely, if you ask for little,

ing, and that it is “absolutely essential” to have “teachers and a principal who

Figure 1  
**Undeserved Promotion Does Harm**

**Question:** What do you think is worse for a child who is struggling in school? To have to repeat a grade, or to be passed to the next grade and be expected to keep up with the work?



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, November 15-December 22, 2000.

Such a mindset was borne out by *Time to Move On*, a 1998 Public Agenda study in which more than eight in ten parents said students should be passed to the next grade *only* when they have mastered the knowledge and skills that were expected, not just because they have made an effort and attended class regularly.

Rejection of social promotion—the practice of moving students from grade to grade to keep them with their own age group—was ubiquitous. Every group surveyed, including students themselves, agreed it is better to hold youngsters back than to promote them when they have not learned what is expected (see Figure 1). People were adamant that doing otherwise is not doing any child a favor.

In a pointed commentary on the perceived deficiencies of education for minority students in particular, the *Time to Move On* study found that

87% of black parents and 82% of white parents believe urban schools that “pass kids along through the system” are among the chief culprits holding many minority youngsters back from academic success.

Further, 67% of black parents made clear that a chief reason schools are failing their children is low expectations. When asked why, on average, black students don’t do as well as whites on standardized achievement tests, only 28% said it was mostly because “the tests are culturally biased against black students”; 44% said the tests “measure real differences in educational achievement.”

In view of this recognition of a real achievement gap between students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, a requirement in the education bill for states to report disaggregate test results for the various subgroups in their school districts is likely to garner favor with the public.

“Seventy-eight percent of parents said it’s wrong to have a child’s fate rest solely on the results of a single test.”

requirement that reading and math be tested for every child in grades 3 through 8 and once more in high school—seems consistent with data from the Public Agenda *Reality Check* study, an annual survey which showed in 2001 that 81% of parents believe testing younger students is a good way to identify those who need help.

In addition, very few parents or teachers think students should get their diplomas without a high school exit exam. In the same survey, 84% of parents and 82% of teachers said there should be an exit exam of some kind. Most of the survey respondents (57% of parents and 56% of teachers) said that such tests should focus on basic skills, while 27% of parents and 26% of teachers said they should test at a higher level. Relatively few—just 12% of parents and 15% of teachers—said there should be no exam at all. Similar responses appeared in a Gallup poll conducted in January 2001, in which 77% of the public said students should be required to pass a standardized test in order to be promoted to the next grade.

own children were overly taxed by schoolwork or that their children’s schools or teachers were overemphasizing standardized tests to the detriment of other important learning.

Only 9% of parents said that teachers were putting too much academic pressure on their children (see Figure 2); 11% said their children’s schools required them to take too many standardized tests; 12% said that the standardized tests their children take ask “questions so difficult or unfair that students cannot be expected to answer them;” and 18%, fewer than one in five, said that teachers in their children’s schools “focus so much on preparing for standardized tests that real learning is neglected.”

Between 80% and 90% of the students themselves said in the survey that they take standardized tests seriously, are not overwhelmed by them, and think the test questions are fair. Only 5% said they get so nervous that they can’t handle taking such a test (see Figure 3).

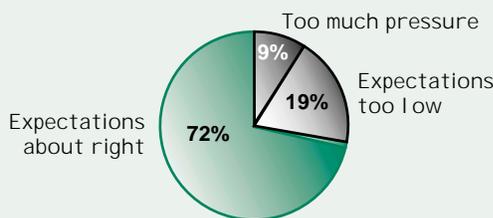
Despite this quite considerable consensus, equally significant data indicate some very commonsensical limits to standardized testing in the public’s mind. For instance, while most parents favored the high school exit exam, 78% also said it’s wrong to have a child’s fate rest solely on the results of a single test. An equally large majority of parents (78%) in *Reality Check 2001* agreed that standardized test scores should be used in conjunction with teacher evaluations to determine promotion or graduation.

Figure 2

### Pressure Not a Problem

**Question:** In terms of academic achievement, would you say that your own child’s teachers are putting too much pressure on your child, are their expectations too low, or are their expectations about right?

*Responses of parents*



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, November 15-December 22, 2000.

Anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that parents have misgivings about the pressures raised standards and increased testing might exert on students, but relatively few parents reported in *Reality Check 2001* that their

As to the usefulness of testing in general as a tool for reform, the education bill—with its re-

That said, it's also true that of parents who know their school districts are implementing higher standards, more than eight in ten (82%) said they believe their schools had, in fact, been "careful and reasonable" in putting the new standards in place—a finding that held true among parents even in such large urban districts as Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, where the impact of testing had begun to be felt. Virtually no one—1% of parents and less than 1% of teachers—said that local schools should discontinue current efforts.

This past winter, for the first time since its inception in 1998, the *Reality Check* survey revealed a set of incremental changes in the experiences and expectations of students, parents and teachers which indicate that the standards movement may finally be developing some real traction. Teachers reported that social promotion has, in fact, declined and that summer school attendance is up, and students and teachers agreed that summer school is being taken more seriously.

There has also been a modest increase in respect for the job the public schools are doing. Four years ago just one parent out of five said their local public schools had higher standards than local private schools; today this figure has jumped to 34%, while the proportion giving private schools the edge on standards has dropped from 42% to about one in three. Survey data from many sources have consistently revealed broad support for public education among parents and non-parents alike.

As for the early decision among policymakers to eliminate vouchers in whatever education bill emerges, that may well reflect, in part, an acknowledgement by lawmakers of how mixed the public's response to vouchers as an antidote to underper-

forming public schools has been to date. In Public Agenda's own research, 63% of the general public acknowledged in the 1999 *On Thin Ice* survey that they knew "very little" or "nothing"

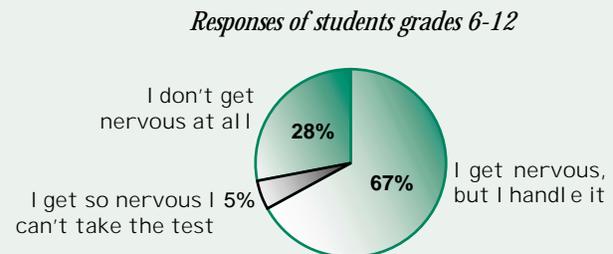
about vouchers. Even in Milwaukee and Cleveland, where vouchers were in use, 60% were uninformed. And, when pushed to consider whether vouchers might be a good idea, 67% said yes, but that they did not think vouchers could solve the nation's education problems. Academic standards and accountability seem more in tune with what the public views as effective means for education reform.

Of course, standards and accountability are not all the public wants. Most Americans remain deeply troubled about the behavioral standards of kids—violence, use of drugs and alcohol, lack of discipline, and sexual promiscuity among teens—problems they believe are pervasive in many public schools, including those in the more affluent communities of America's suburbs. Few would see an exclusive focus on academic standards as a cure-all for such problems.

There is also the matter of fairness, a value deeply ingrained in the American culture. Any actions that take parents unawares—draconian decisions that have not been previously or adequately explained—could swiftly derail the current positive momentum.

Figure 3  
**Test Anxiety is Manageable**

**Question:** Which best describes how nervous you get when you take a standardized test?... I don't get nervous at all; I get nervous but I can handle it; I get so nervous I can't take the test.



**Source:** Survey by Public Agenda, November 15-December 22, 2000.

The current standards activity may well turn out to be one of the most significant reforms in the history of public education in America, as long as decisions and legislative actions continue to adhere to the fundamental values of the American public. The goal of achieving higher standards through accountability and testing makes sense to the vast majority, who in no way want to return to "business as usual." Most Americans believe that most youngsters can do more than they are presently doing, and that we must do more to hold them—and their schools—accountable.

While remaining sensitive to the opposition to testing being voiced by some special interest groups and clusters of parents in particular places, policymakers on both sides of the aisle need also to heed the priorities of vast numbers of the public. With some courage and a lot of care, it should be possible to continue to fashion policies that will reinforce the public's confidence and belief in the importance of higher standards, and to do so with a reasonable approach to testing and accountability.