Readin’, Ritin’
and Reform

By Deborah Wadsworth

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
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, parentst 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 checkout 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 literally to destroy a youngster’s chances for a decent life.

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.

As to the usefulness of testing in general as a tool for reform, the education bill—with its 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 sort. 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 9% of parents and 15% of teachers—said there should be no exam at all. 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.
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 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 underperforming 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 by surprise—draconian decisions that have not been previously or adequately explained—could swiftly derail the current positive momentum.

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.


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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't get nervous at all</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get so nervous I can't take the test</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get nervous, but I handle it</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>