

WHAT DOES THE AMERICAN PUBLIC
WANT IN EDUCATION?
NOT ENOUGH.

By Albert Shanker

What does the American public want from its schools? Some people would answer, "All the world — and on the cheap." But I'd be inclined to say that Americans don't want enough from their schools.

People who talk about unreasonable demands on schools have some good arguments on their side. US schools have long had a custodial function — besides educating students interested in getting an education, our schools have also had the job of keeping the rest of the school-age population occupied and off the streets. Now, more and more functions that once belonged to the family are becoming the responsibility of the schools: informing and counseling students about sex, drug abuse and AIDS; assisting pregnant teenagers and homeless children; training students in proper values and helping them to develop self-esteem. As the schools are called on to do more (without corresponding increases in funding), it becomes more difficult for them to fulfill their basic educational mission. But though these new expectations raise some big problems for the public schools, I see an even bigger problem elsewhere — *people don't expect enough*. And what I mean is that they don't expect enough educationally.

American education is in deep trouble. Every measure we apply, formal and informal, shows us that our students are poorly educated. Colleges and universities tell us that the proportion of freshmen needing remedial work before they can handle college-level material, is increasing. Businesses that test applicants for entry-level jobs tell us about the poor math, reading and writing skills they find. We hear that, if things continue as they are now, the US won't have enough qualified workers to compete in the world markets of the next century.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and various international assessments seem to confirm these gloomy predictions. The results for American 17-year-olds are particularly sobering. Most youngsters who are going to drop out are gone by then, so the sample is skewed positively. Still, only 20% of these students can write an adequate persuasive letter to a princi-

pal, or to the manager of a supermarket in applying for a job. And the NAEP standards here are not overly demanding.

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For instance, a letter of application to the supermarket manager needs to include at least one reason why the writer should get the job. It might say, "I used to work in a candy store, and I know how difficult it is to get help at the last minute, so you can count on me to be there every day." Or, "I used to be the treasurer of my Boy Scout troop, and I know how easy it is to lose money when you don't count change accurately. I've had that experience and I'll be a good employee." The letter can even have some spelling or grammatical errors and still be considered adequate — but only 20% of 17-year-olds were able to write such a letter. Only 12% could take six common fractions with different denominators and arrange them in size order. And only 6% could solve this problem: "Christine borrowed \$850 for one year from the Friendly Finance Company. If she paid 12% simple interest on the loan, what was the total amount she repaid?"

None of these problems has much intellectual content. Students don't have to display knowledge of Shakespeare or Dickens, know calculus, or be familiar with complex scientific theory. They only need to have the basic knowledge required if they are to find their way around in the world.

Poor scores are not, as some would like to think, mainly a problem of minorities. In fact, NAEP results show that minorities are rapidly catching up. They still need and deserve special help, but when they reach the same levels of achievement as the majority population in this country, we will still have an educational disaster on our hands. NAEP figures show that, depending on how high the standards are set, we're doing a good job at educating about 10%, 15% or 20% of students. No fair-minded person could examine the results of these NAEP tests and maintain that as much as 40% of the youngsters who graduate from high school are adequately educated.

How do US results compare with student assessments in other countries? Let's forget about Japan because that society is so different from ours, and look instead at other Western democracies like Great Britain, France, West Germany, and Canada. These countries don't have a national assessment like ours, but they all have either national or

provincial examinations for students graduating from secondary school, exams which are much harder than the NAEP tests. Some of them take days, and they include writing essays and solving demanding problems in math and science. In West Germany there are still oral examinations.

Every student in these countries who does well enough on these exams to get into college would be in NAEP's top category. In Great Britain, where the percentage is smallest, 15 to 17% of students pass examinations more difficult than NAEP; approximately 22% do so in France and 27% in West Germany. This compares with the 4 to 6% who attain the highest level in NAEP.

You would think that results like these would have citizens taking to the streets to demand reform. But the yearly Gallup polls on Americans' attitudes toward public schools show an odd kind of myopia. People are willing enough to believe that US schools are not doing very well, in general, but they are satisfied with their own local schools. In 1989, asked to grade public schools on a scale of A to F, only 22% gave public schools, nationally, A's or B's, but 43% gave these marks to their local schools, and 71% gave an A or B to the school attended by their eldest child.

In other words, Americans seem to think that education in their own backyards is fine and that the schools with big problems are across town or in another county. They do this by ignoring the NAEP scores I just mentioned, which show very clearly how few 17 year-olds can write decent prose or read a piece of writing as complicated as this article.

Moreover, they are encouraged to think that education in their schools must be OK because the majority of high school graduates go on to postsecondary education — 55% according to recent US Department of Education statistics. If our stu-

dents were judged by European standards, only 4 to 6% would go to college, but of course parents don't apply these standards. They compare their children with the kids next door, and if they feel their children are doing a little better than the neighbors', they are pleased. They fail to realize that in many cases their sons and daughters are going to college only because most colleges have low standards. They don't see that the majority of our students who do go to college are in effect getting their high school education there — or that many of the kids who don't go on to college *never* attain the basic skills they should have learned in high school.

Am I saying that the American public is responsible for the terrible state of our schools? Partly. To the extent that schools mirror the expectations of a society, the American people have to bear some of the blame. But there's plenty of blame to go around, and that's not the point anyway.

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We are at a critical juncture in American education. The school reform movement, which is now seven years old, has accomplished little of value, partly because reformers have seen change mainly in terms of governance and management techniques. Only now are they starting to look at issues of substance. The American public, too, must look at the "bottom line" of educational substance.

It's not enough for a school to have a good football team, or good grades in standardized, multiple-choice tests, or lots of kids going on to postsecondary education. And it's not enough for a school to be an orderly and drug-free place — though this is very important. A school must have a challenging curriculum and real standards of achievement. The American public must start *expecting* these things — and *demanding* them.

Albert Shanker is president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and vice president of the AFL-CIO, Washington, DC.