

## EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE: WHAT ARE AMERICANS SAYING?

By John Benson

Americans are strongly committed to education. No other country spends as much on it as we do, and over the past two centuries none can claim more impressive educational accomplishments. Yet there is almost universal agreement — among the general public, governmental leaders, businessmen, and education professionals — that the American educational system isn't performing well enough.

**This issue's Public Opinion Report features data on educational performance.**

### Commitment

Since researchers at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) started asking the question in 1973, they have never found less than a plurality of the public saying the country was spending too little on education. In 1989 that proportion reached a high of 70%. This in spite of the fact that per pupil spending for public education has risen from \$103 in 1940, to \$512 in 1960 and \$5,010 in 1988. Per student expenditures in higher education leaped from \$406 in 1940 to \$2,081 in 1960 to \$9,733 in 1988. Inflation greatly exaggerates the nominal climb, but the real (after inflation) increase is enormous. Expenditures in 1988 for all levels of education in the US totalled more than \$308 billion.

Nor is public espousal of increased spending (which should be interpreted more in a symbolic than a literal sense) confined only to certain segments of the public. Everyone backs it, though there are some group differences. The young (74%) are more likely than the old (57%) to say we are spending too little, college graduates (77%) more likely than those without a high school diploma (61%), the well-off (72%) a bit more likely than those with low incomes (65%), Democrats (75%) are more likely than Republicans (63%) to say we're not spending enough, and blacks (74%) slightly more likely than whites (70%). *But in every major demographic category, at least nine times as many people now say we are spending too little as say too much.*

The public believes improving the quality of public education requires governmental action, is

willing to support substantially higher teacher salaries, and professes a willingness to pay higher taxes for this end. When asked how important the schools are to one's future success, overwhelming majorities say it is extremely important. The value attached to education generally carries over to the college level, as well. Surveys done in 1985 as part of the International Social Survey Program found Americans more inclined than citizens of five other industrial nations to say that opportunities for young people to go to college should be further increased.

### Criticism

But Americans find that the educational system is not meeting their expectations. Certainly businessmen recognize a problem. They complain of the system's failure to contribute to a workforce properly prepared for today's competitive marketplace. Many businesses, including insurance giant Aetna (see interview on pp. 15-16), spend large sums on their own remedial programs to make up for perceived deficiencies in the public system. College professors, too, see serious shortcomings in secondary education. In the 1989 Carnegie Foundation survey, for example, 75% of faculty members said that undergraduates with whom they had close contact were seriously underprepared in basic skills; and 68% agreed that their institution spends too much time and money teaching students what they should have learned in high school.

The general public is equally concerned. In survey after survey it has called performance standards and achievement too low, and signalled support for action to raise them. In a February 1987 Yankelovich Clancy Shulman survey done for *Time*, 56% described educational standards as poor rather than excellent (28%). Sixty-eight percent of respondents in a March 1988 Roper survey for *US News and World Report* agreed that one of the reasons the US is having problems competing with other countries is that its education system is not good enough. In May 1988, 89% said they feared a further decline in the quality of education in the US will take place (Gallup for Times Mirror).

Lack of discipline is seen as a major stumbling block to learning. During the twenty years of the Gallup education surveys (sponsored first by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, then by Phi Delta Kappa), discipline has virtually without exception topped the list of most important problems facing local schools, displaced only during the last three years by drugs. A plurality of respon-

dents to a May 1989 Roper Organization survey thought teachers and parents alike expected too little from their students/children. In the same survey, "more attention to the teaching of basic skills" topped a list of nine options to improve the quality of education in local schools. A 1983 survey by the *New York Times* also found that 87% of the public thought local public schools should place more emphasis on the old standards, the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

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Ninety-five percent of respondents in a June 1984 Associated Press/Media General poll said teachers should be required, before they get a job, to pass a competency test in the subject they plan to teach, while 85% supported periodic competency tests for teachers. The percentage of the public who support standard nationwide examinations as a requirement for getting high school diploma has risen dramatically, from 50% in 1958 to 73% in 1988 (Gallup), in spite of some public skepticism that such tests really reflect how well students are learning in school.

### Performance

The public perception that something is wrong with the educational system has been fed by a number of recent events centering around unease over the competitive position of the US. Publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk* prompted a wave of media reports about the "rising tide of mediocrity." A slew of recent studies—among them, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* by Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr.; and *Cultural Literacy*, by E. D.

Hirsch, Jr. — have also sounded a warning. Scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) showed a substantial decline during the late 1960s and 1970s before levelling off in recent years. While the reading and mathematical proficiency of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has not declined since the early 1970s, responses to particular items on the NAEP tests reveal a striking lack of basic knowledge. Only 32% of eleventh-graders in 1987 could place the Civil War in the correct half-century; given four choices, only 40% knew the purpose of the authors of the Federalist Papers; likewise just 40% could identify (from a list of four possibilities) Walt Whitman as the author of *Leaves of Grass*.

In a recent Gallup survey for the National Geographic Society, only 32% of the adult Americans were able to name any members of NATO. Only 57% could identify England on a map of Europe, and only 55% could pick out New York state on a map of the 48 contiguous states. The survey also showed us moving backwards. Young adults exhibited much less geographical knowledge than their elders. The US was the only country among the nine surveyed where the youngest group did not score higher than the oldest, and those 18-24 lagged far behind their agetates elsewhere.

Not all the news is bad. SAT scores of black and Mexican Americans have risen since 1976, even as larger numbers of them took the test. And while the public perceives a serious problem, they nonetheless express considerable confidence in their own local schools. Most important, however, is the continued high commitment of the American public, which recognizes the value of public education and is willing to make certain sacrifices for it, provided the bottom line is improved performance.

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