

# Americans on Public Education

Commentary by Everett C. Ladd

Americans are deeply committed to the enterprise of education. We say so, every time asked, no matter how we are asked—and we put our money where our mouths are. The best estimate is that in fiscal year 1995 the US spent about an even half-trillion dollars on schooling, from kindergarten on through advanced graduate training.

In one sense, this is nothing new. The idea of public education received strong backing in colonies such as Massachusetts and Connecticut long before the war for independence. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, primary and secondary education became free, public, and virtually universal in the United States—well before it was thus extended in any other country. Government-assisted mass higher education also came sooner to the United States; and as we see on page 25, today in America a higher proportion of students are enrolled in colleges and universities, many with substantial government assistance, than is found in other wealthy nations such as Germany, France, Britain, and Japan. America's educational expenditures (page 25) on a per capita basis have consistently surpassed those of other advanced industrial democracies.

While it is not often described that way, education is a type of welfare program. Surely it is closely linked to the idea of public well-being. Through public schools the authority and resources of government are used to make generally available a resource considered essential to personal development and national success. Why are Americans—less inclined than citizens of other industrial nations to support many govern-

ment welfare initiatives—so supportive of programs in education? It seems clear that public education historically has been an attractive value in the US because of its close link to the ideal of individual opportunity. Through access to education, people obtain the means of developing their talents and moving ahead socially and economically. Public spending for education enlarges the domain for individual initiative.

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There is no lack of support for education across group lines (page 27). There is, however, considerable concern, and even dismay, about aspects of current educational performance (pages 28-30). In recent years Americans have given the public schools as they see them around the nation very low grades. While some of this is another case of media effect—bad news driving out the good—even subject to personal observation and experience, schools close to home don't fare all that much better. In the 1995 Gallup survey taken for Phi Delta Kappa, 54% of respondents gave the schools “in this community” a grade of C, D, or F,

while only 20% graded them A or B (page 28).

Before such findings are dismissed with “well, we always grumble about things like education,” consider the data on pages 29 and 30. Our public school performance once got much better marks than it has over the last two decades. And the downward progression in public assessment is not limited to the United States. Canadians, for example, express the same declining confidence.

While any development such as this one involving assessments of educational performance is certain to reflect a variety of different factors, Americans persistently identify as their main concerns a perceived deterioration in “discipline” and “standards.” Matters of discipline cover considerable ground, extending at their more serious level to drug use and gang violence in the schools. Americans see the rising levels of undiscipline in the public schools—including again those in their home communities—as the biggest single problem now confronting public education (page 31).

There is also strong public backing for steps to raise standards. It's in this context that we endorse the idea of national testing. We say, as well, that we want more emphasis on such old “basics,” as math and English. More homework gets an approving nod. (See pages 32-33.) It is also likely that the substantial support Americans give to the idea of parental choice, involving which school their children will attend—certainly, which public school—stems from a general public frustration with school performance that survey findings so powerfully document.