Time To Move On

African-American

And

White Parents

Set An

Agenda For

Public Schools

A Report From Public Agenda

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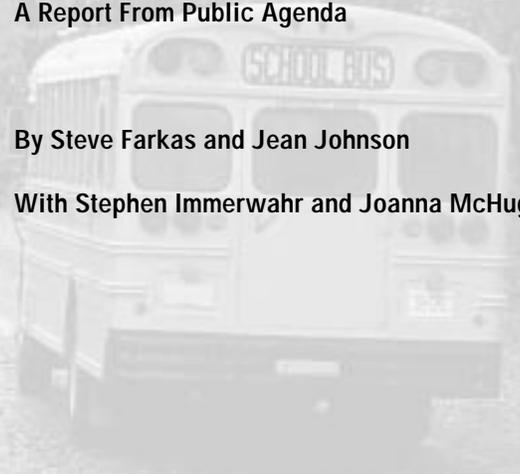
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By Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson

With Stephen Immerwahr and Joanna McHugh

About Public Agenda

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decisionmakers across the political spectrum.

More information is available by contacting: Public Agenda, 6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016, (212) 686-6610. Or on the Internet at www.publicagenda.org.

About The Public Education Network

The mission of the Public Education Network (PEN) is to create systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child. Created in 1991, PEN is a national nonprofit network of member Local Education Funds (LEFs). LEFs are not-for-profit, independent community-based organizations that engage citizens, parents, and policymakers in the improvement of public education.

Today the work of PEN and LEFs impacts over 5 million children in more than 275 school districts nationwide. PEN and LEFs run more than 300 effective model school reform programs that work to increase public school quality and educate the nation about the relationship between school quality and the vitality of community and public life.

More information is available by contacting: Public Education Network, 601 13th Street, NW, Suite 900 North, Washington, DC 20005, (202) 628-7460. Or on the Internet at www.PublicEducation.org.

A National Conversation: A Joint Project Of Public Agenda And PEN

Public Agenda and PEN have undertaken a special effort to engage local residents in serious discussions about what kind of communities they would like to live in, what kind of education they feel their children need, and what changes in the status quo they will support. Using this research as background, representative LEFs will sponsor an engagement effort to stimulate honest, civil and deliberative dialogue in communities nationwide throughout 1999.

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Acknowledgments

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Daniel Yankelovich, who joined with **Cyrus Vance** more than two decades ago to found Public Agenda. Dan's thinking on public opinion remains at the core of all our work.

And, **Deborah Wadsworth**, Public Agenda's Executive Director, who guides this organization with insight and judgment.

Introduction

*T**ime to Move On* gives voice to the aspirations and concerns of African-American and white parents who hope to secure a good education for their children in today's schools. It reports the results of in-depth telephone surveys of 800 black parents and 800 white parents, as well as findings from focus groups and individual interviews with parents and public education professionals. (See Methodology for additional details.) Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, collaborated with the Public Education Network (PEN), a national nonprofit network of member Local Education Funds (LEFs), to design and complete the study. The study was funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, Inc. and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The research looked at parents' personal experiences with public education; e.g., how well they think schools serve their children, and what changes they would like to see. It also probed their views on broader social and political questions: Do black and white children generally have access to equally good public education? Is the country making progress in this area? Is more integration needed for African-American children to obtain a comparable education? What measures do parents support to improve educational prospects for minority youngsters? And most important, do white and black parents see these issues from different — perhaps even opposing — perspectives, or are there areas of common cause?

The Dream, Not The Reality

Survey research suggests that most Americans believe in the concept of equal education for every child, regardless of race or ethnicity.[1] A mere handful questions the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, and only fringe elements voice any desire to return to the days of segregated schools and separate lunch counters. And most Americans say they believe the dream envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. has yet to be fully achieved.[2]

Despite this seeming consensus, however, policies designed to promote integration and improve public education for minority youngsters often breed bitter controversy. As a nation, we seem to agree on what should be, but not how to get there. Indeed, some observers believe that the nation is now in "pause" mode on issues of school integration and equal educational opportunity. At least

one widely reported study shows public schools becoming more, rather than less, racially divided.[3] Relevant court cases get bogged down in years of challenges and appeals. An emerging debate, launched by some prominent African Americans, asks whether high-quality schooling for black children really depends on having significant numbers of white children in the same classroom.[4]

Against this backdrop, Public Agenda and PEN joined together to take a fresh look at how parents — black and white — see this often vexing complex of issues. *Time to Move On* is one of a series of opinion studies on public education Public Agenda has conducted. Previous research examined the views of the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers and professors of education, among others, and measured attitudes on student skills, curriculum, academic standards, safety and discipline, teacher quality, school funding, governance and other related areas. Although the current study touches on all these issues, it focuses most directly on the controversies surrounding integration and equal education. In fact, in coming months this research will be used as the context for community discussions on these issues to be sponsored by PEN and its network of LEFs.

> Do white and black parents see these issues from different — perhaps even opposing — perspectives, or are there areas of common cause?

What About Hispanic And Asian Parents?

Readers may wonder why this study, which measures the views of white and black

parents of children now in school, does not include Hispanic and Asian parents as well. In part, this limitation reflects pragmatic realities — limited funding and the high cost of research that compares the views of multiple subgroups of the general population. But this limitation also reflects Public Agenda's decision that if the study is to be helpful, it must focus sharply on very specific questions about race, and devote ample time and attention to explore this difficult, often elusive issue. Our hope and plan is to conduct similar research, equally specific and targeted, with other groups of minority parents.

The focus on race raises a second equally valid question: Did people tell interviewers the truth? Race is an uncomfortable issue for most Americans, and it would not be unusual or unnatural for respondents — black and white — to feel hesitant and guarded discussing the topic with strangers.

> Some observers believe that the nation is now in "pause" mode on issues of school integration and equal educational opportunity.

Special Precautions

Public Agenda researchers took several steps to make participants feel more confident about speaking frankly. Focus groups were racially divided, and the telephone question-naires featured several batteries of questions designed specifically for either white or black respondents. Public Agenda routinely pretests telephone questionnaires for ease of comprehension and clarity, but for this study the research team redoubled those efforts. Senior Public Agenda researchers personally admin-istered draft questionnaires to respondents, specifically looking for questions that made them uncomfortable or suspicious, and openly seeking their advice on areas that needed to be reworked. (See Methodology for additional details.)

Can You See Into Their Souls?

These special precautions produced some sur-prisingly frank admissions from respondents. It is also true, as we report in our findings,

that while black respondents often relaxed and opened up after an initial reserve, white respondents frequently remained guarded. Most whites in focus groups, even with no African Americans present, seemed to choose their words carefully and speak with an unusual degree of caution when talking about race. Earlier Public Agenda studies on welfare reform revealed a similar phenomenon: White Americans often took pains to avoid making statements implying negative generalizations about blacks — at least in a public setting.[5]

In the end, it is difficult to know whether this carefulness among whites reflects a sincere desire to be fair and avoid offending, or whether it cloaks more pernicious assumptions beneath the surface. Some readers will rightly question the sincerity of some responses, and we ourselves do not believe that all responses in this (or any) survey should be taken literally or at face value.

On issues of race, the views of white respondents are somewhat opaque — always frustrating for opinion researchers who like to believe they have uncovered what people really think. Yet for the country as a whole, for anyone following the extraordinary American experiment in diversity and equality, this reticence among whites — a very obvious effort to at least appear fair-minded and unbiased — is in itself a measure of considerable progress.

The Order Of Presentation

Not surprisingly, survey results show interesting differences between the views of white and black parents (tables following the findings include extensive numerical comparisons). But numbers don't tell the whole story. How people talk, their demeanor, the stories they tell, the assorted ideas and experiences they bring to these issues together offer a subtler, more detailed understanding of their differing perspectives.

For this reason, we have chosen to describe each group's views in separate sections of the report. In the initial findings, we concentrate on what we heard from African-American parents. We next focus on the perspective of

white parents, and conclude by laying out, side by side, the agenda each group has for the public schools.

We hope that this order of presentation — though perhaps unusual — will allow readers to absorb each group's thinking in context, and enable those willing to listen carefully to open themselves fully to each perspective.

As researchers, we attempted to capture the views we heard as accurately and honestly as possible. We hope that in so doing, we can launch a renewed discussion of these difficult issues — one less encumbered by the weight of miscues and faulty assumptions.

Race is an uncomfortable issue for most Americans, and it would not be unusual for respondents — black and white — to feel hestitant discussing the topic with strangers.

Finding One

The Message From Black Parents: Academics First And Foremost

For African-American parents, the most important goal for public schools — the prize they seek with single-minded resolve — is academic achievement for their children. These parents believe in integration and want to pursue it, but insist that nothing divert attention from their overriding concern: getting a solid education for their kids. And despite jarring experiences with racism over the years, their focus is resolutely on the here and now. They want to move beyond the past and prepare their children for the future.

When a new superintendent took over a racially torn district in North Carolina, she faced a school board divided between white and black members and a city living with the consequences of white flight. Her approach to the district's problems was deceptively simple: bypass the race issue, center policy on high standards and expectations for both academic achievement and behavior, and hold educators and students accountable for their performances.

This superintendent, who is white, is concentrating on standards because she believes in them, but she is also convinced that after years of debating race and integration, parents in her district want to move on and refocus on the schools' bottom-line mission: academic achievement. Rededication to academic goals is the remedy, she told a Public Agenda interviewer, for black parents' concern that the district was writing off their kids, and for white parents' worry that the schools had stopped caring about quality.

What Do Parents Want?

How do parents nationwide feel about these issues?* Do they believe the country should continue — perhaps even reenergize — its efforts to achieve greater racial balance in public schools, or do they believe a different approach is warranted? Do they believe more integration is a prerequisite to better education for all, or do they think high-quality, well-run public schools — even racially unbalanced ones — can give children what they need to succeed academically?** In this section and the following two findings,

we describe what we heard from black parents. Beginning in Finding Four, we present the perspective of white parents.

Academics On Top

So where do black parents want public schools to put their efforts? By a stunning 80% to 9% margin, African-American parents nationwide say the higher priority for the nation's schools should be to raise academic standards and achievement rather than focus on achieving more diversity and integration. Even when the subject is *their own children's* schools, by an overwhelming 82% to 8% margin, they want the schools their children currently attend to make raising academic standards and achievement their foremost priority.

CHART 1

The bigger priority for *schools across the nation* should be:

Raising academic standards and achievement

80%

Both 11%

9%

Achieving more diversity and integration
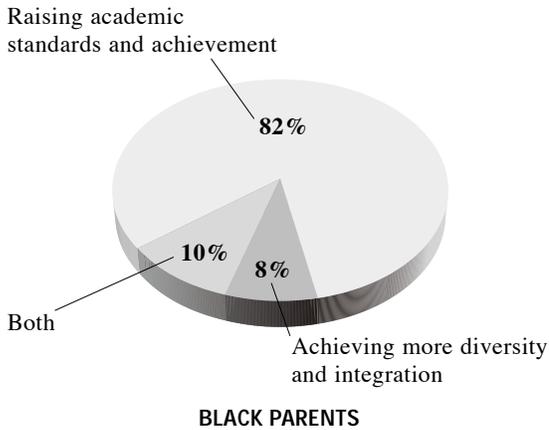
BLACK PARENTS
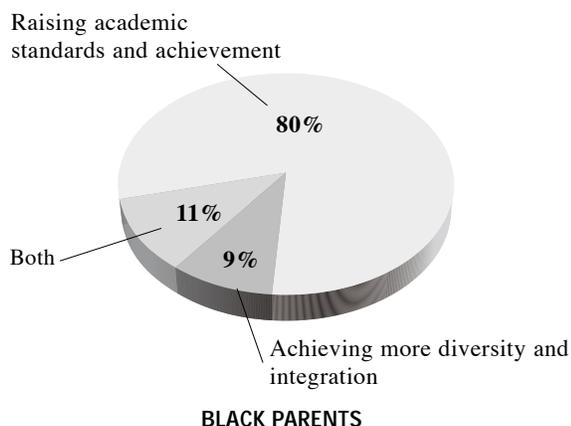
Question wording has been slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available from Public Agenda in the Technical Appendix for this study. Percentages reported in charts may not always add up to 100% because of rounding or the omission of "don't know" responses.

*Throughout this study, "parents" refers to parents or guardians of children currently in kindergarten through 12th grade.
** Throughout this study, school integration is used in the sense it is understood by the public, that is, making efforts to attain schools with racially mixed student populations.

CHART 2

The bigger priority for *your own children's schools* should be:

Raising academic standards and achievement

82%

10%

8%

Both

Achieving more diversity and integration

BLACK PARENTS

Integration: Still Highly Valued

African-American parents opt for academic achievement over integration not because they no longer value integration — they still do, and in greater numbers than white parents (see Finding Five). Nearly 8 in 10 African Americans (79%) say it is important to them that their own children's schools be racially integrated (49% say *very* important). "It's important to me," said one black parent interviewed for the study, "because I want my children to have a balance. They're not going to be living in a black world, so they need to know all cultures."

But school integration was not originally adopted solely to improve social relations between blacks and whites; its supporters also expected it to improve the educational opportunities and accomplishments of black children. Yet many African-American parents today are not convinced it has done so: While 41% of black parents agree that kids get a better education in a racially integrated school, 51% say school integration makes little difference and 5% say it makes for a worse education. "A lot depends on what they have to offer," commented one Oakland, California parent. School integration serves important — mostly social — functions, according to both African-American and white parents, but academic achievement is, for both groups, a separate and independent issue.

The widespread conviction among African-American parents that integration is not a magic wand holds even when minority schools are on the brink of failure. Asked what should be done when such schools fail and their African-American students perform poorly, black parents say they want those schools fixed. Fully 77% believe that "raising and enforcing academic standards in failing schools so that kids pass only when they learn what they are supposed to" is an excellent or good solution. In sharp contrast, only 41% say it is an excellent or good idea to take black kids out of failing schools and send them to schools that are successful but mostly white. To question after question, and in varying circumstances and conditions, African-American parents repeatedly say that achieving racial balance, although a worthy and highly desirable goal, is less important to them than ensuring black children's academic achievement.

Ready To Turn Away?

Some readers may be surprised that most African-American parents do not consider integration their topmost priority. Some may assume that this judgment signals one of two possibilities: either most blacks believe relations with whites are improving so dramatically that integration is now a less compelling need; or most have become so embittered, and disaffected from whites that they are now ready to turn away from them. Based on this study, neither of these assumptions is warranted.

African-American parents, like all Americans, bring a range of experiences and concerns to the issues of race and education. For most African Americans, this includes painful personal encounters with racism. Over half (54%) can recount specific incidents that had a strong and lasting effect on their lives. In focus groups, most respondents did not bring up more conventional, impersonal occurrences of discrimination such as hailing a cab and being ignored; nor did they refer to incidents such as lynchings or cross-burnings, or specific historical events like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Instead they described deeply personal events in which people they knew or thought they could trust betrayed that trust because of race.

A Noted Doctor Writes "Black Sambo"

Searing stories of blatantly racist incidents surfaced repeatedly in focus group discussions. These were often about encounters with whites in positions of authority who unexpectedly violated a confidence. "Once, a noted allergist left my hospital chart in the room — a noted allergist — and I took a look at it, and at the top of the chart he had written 'Black Sambo'. Prejudice was there then, and it's here now," concluded an African-American parent from a Baltimore, Maryland suburb.

Another parent who as a child had been bused to an unwelcoming white school vividly recalled the principal walking into his ground-floor classroom on the first day, and, without a word, lowering the window shades so that passersby would not see the black children. "I'll never forget the feeling," this parent said. "He should have been a leader. He should have made us feel welcome instead of being something to hide." An Oakland parent remembered sitting in the car as a child, as his father kept getting "pulled over every night coming from work, same time, same place, same policeman, for years."

For most respondents, these were defining moments that left them wary about the sincerity and trustworthiness of whites: Fully 70% of African Americans experiencing such incidents say that as a result they became more careful and suspicious about the intentions of whites.

"I Can Hardly Read The Stuff, And You Mark It 'Good'?"

Harsh experiences such as these often lead African Americans to be mistrustful of whites, and this wariness sometimes forms the subtext of their relationship with the schools. For black Americans, racial discrimination is always a possibility; their own lives provide the proof. Not surprisingly, many African-American parents voice concerns that schools sometimes label or ignore their children because they are black.

One Baltimore County parent suspected race was a factor when he complained to his son's teacher because he felt she was accepting and praising substandard work. "I went to school and told the teacher point-blank, 'He's giving surface answers: I can hardly read the stuff, and you mark it 'good'! How can it be good when you can't read it? I expect you to motivate this kid. I want you to have high expectations of my child. Don't be afraid to expect it." A Raleigh, North Carolina, mom said: "I have a ten-year-old, and they said he has a problem — Attention Deficit Disorder. Well, my son went through a battery of tests which found he was normal. It was just boredom." "They just label our children," responded another parent.

Is Labeling Common?

Are African-American parents actually more likely than whites to have these kinds of negative experiences in the schools, and do they always see them through the lens of race? In this survey, the numbers of blacks

CHART 3

% saying the following happened	White Parents	Black Parents	% Black parents saying this happened because of their child's race*
Teacher expected too little from child on academic work like homework, class participation and tests	40%	33%	42%
Teacher or school suggested that child be tested for a learning disability or Attention Deficit Disorder	32	29	27
Teacher blamed or punished child for bad behavior when it wasn't really child's fault	32	36	36
Asked or seriously considered asking to change child's class because child was getting treated badly	30	30	43
Net percentage of respondents experiencing any of the above	70%	66%	40%

* Base: Black parents who said this happened

and whites reporting these problems are remarkably similar: 33% of black parents and 40% of white parents say they have encountered a teacher who was expecting too little from their children; 29% of black parents and 32% of white parents have had a teacher or school suggest that their child be tested for a learning disability or Attention Deficit Disorder.

What's more, most black parents (60%) who had experienced at least one of the four school problems presented above *did not* attribute them to their child's race. However, a significant number (40%) did believe the problem probably or definitely occurred because their child is black.

"I Can Only Blame Him..."

This study suggests that, overall, most African-American parents do not reflexively approach the schools with an alienated, "The system is out to get us" mentality. "My seventeen-year-old, he's had some problems with the school," said one Baltimore County dad, "but they were because of *him*. He got involved with the wrong crowd, and he did some things he shouldn't have been doing. I certainly can only blame him." In fact, although they are always alert to the possibility of discrimination, 63% of African-American parents say they trust their kids' teachers and schools to be fair to them and have their best interest at heart; 36% say they can't trust their kids' teachers to be fair.

"Sometimes We Jump The Gun"

The vast majority of African Americans have had to think long and hard about race and racism, to the point where they acknowledge the possibility (as did 75% of those in the study) that "blacks are sometimes too quick to believe negative things happen to them because of their race." An African-American mom in Oakland, acknowledging that she could be too quick to read racial motives into incidents, said, "A lot of times we jump the gun, we get defensive, we feel it's a black-white issue. It *may* be, but because of experience and our history and what we've

gone through, when something happens, boom — that's the way we read it. My son wanted to be debate team captain and class president, and I wanted to know why they said he couldn't. But it turned out it wasn't a black-white thing; they just didn't want one kid to have two positions."

For most African Americans, racism is a part of reality — something they have had to learn to cope with. In focus groups, many were ready to talk about this in a personal way, even with a white moderator. But most were not overly eager to reveal such moments, nor did they wallow in them. Their lives and interactions with whites were not solely defined by their experience with racism. This is part of life, they seem to say — but only one part. In fact, nearly two-thirds of black parents (63%) agree that the statement, "Too much is made of the differences between blacks and whites and not enough of what they have in common" comes *very* close to how they feel.

> "[Integration is] important to me because I want my children to have a balance. They're not going to be living in a black world, so they need to know all cultures." — African-American Parent

"So Now, What Are You Going To Do About It?"

In a focus group in Oakland, one woman's comment captured a theme that emerged repeatedly in the study: Racism is real, but the future is in our hands. Here is how she put it: "So we know all of this [about racism and discrimination]. We have all this information as black folks. So now it's, 'What are you gonna do?' How long are we going to say, 'The white man treated me so bad'? I tell my kids this; that's the education part for me. We know what the situation has been; we know what it is. So now, 'What are you going to do about it?'" A second mother in the group immediately responded, "I'm going to make sure both of my female black children are going to be educated enough for them to be competitive. I don't want them to have to settle."

Finding Two

The Current Political Agenda: Time-Honored Or Timeworn?

> African-American parents are firmly committed to promoting diversity in the schools, but they voice serious doubts about some policies commanding center stage in political and media debates. They see approaches such as affirmative action in school hiring as double-edged swords: They accomplish some goals, but they also have the potential for negative consequences and can often distract schools from their main task. Most African-American parents also accept standardized tests as valid measures of student achievement, and most say community discussions about education might be improved by less emphasis on race.

Respect for people from different backgrounds has become one of the most cherished values among both blacks and whites. In an earlier Public Agenda study, fully 98% of white parents and 96% of black parents supported the idea of schools "teaching respect for others, regardless of their racial or ethnic background." Honesty and solving problems without violence were the only other values to draw as much support.[6]

Yet despite this broad agreement, many education policies intended to promote diversity or address racial differences provoke bitter discord. Should districts hire more African-American educators? Should classes in history or literature emphasize the contributions of African Americans and other minorities? Should schools repudiate standardized tests because they are biased? How should schools measure and respond to differences in achievement between black and white students?

How Far Should We Go?

In this survey, virtually all parents (97% black, 97% white) agree that "our country is very diverse, and kids need to learn to get along with people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds." Most black parents (60%) also say schools with "a diverse student body, with kids from different ethnic and racial backgrounds" are particularly valuable. "It's important because in this country these kids are going to have to deal with white kids, Asian kids, whatever; so you need to be a part of that," said a black parent from Raleigh.

African-American parents also want to ensure the school curriculum doesn't shortchange minorities. Three in 4 black parents (75%) believe it is absolutely essential for schools to teach about the contributions blacks and other minorities have made to American history (white parents agree, too, though to a lesser extent — 59%). But what else do African-American parents expect? How far do they want public schools to go in promoting diversity?

It is common to see school districts engage in emotional, all-consuming battles over the need to hire more African-American teachers or administrators. Suppose ordinary African-American parents were making the choice — how much emphasis would they place upon the race of the educators working in the schools? The quick answer seems to be: very little.

> "I want them [the school board] not to be prejudiced. As long as he's doing his job, I don't care if he's green!" — African-American Parent
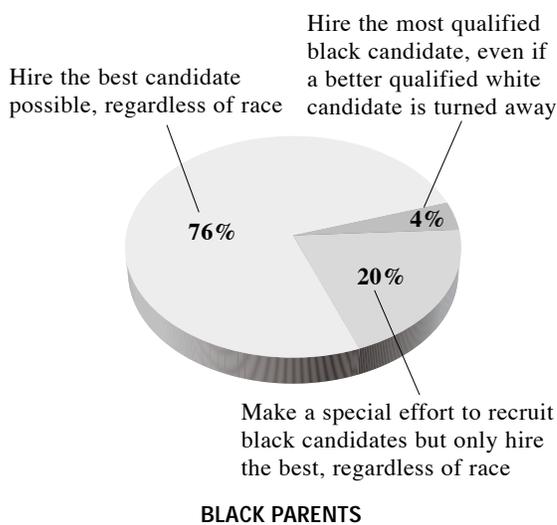
Simply The Best

Asked to choose among three ways to hire a superintendent in a mostly black school district, 76% of African-American parents say the choice should be the best candidate, regardless of race; only 4% would hire a qualified black candidate even if it means turning away a better qualified white candidate.
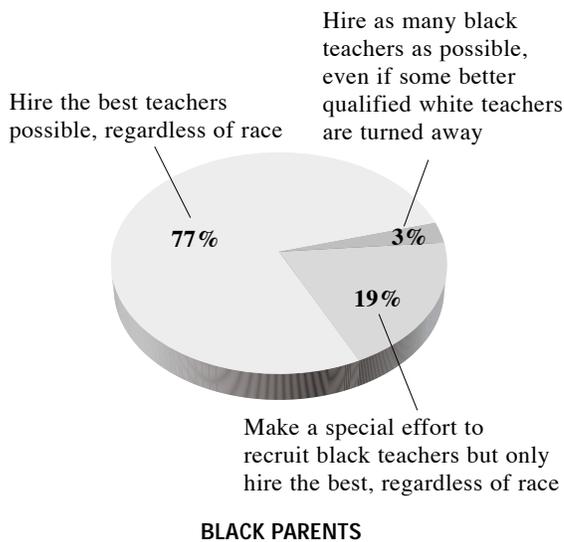
Surprisingly, the third option — making a special effort to recruit blacks, and *still* hiring the best candidate — failed to garner significant support. Only 1 in 5 African-American parents (20%) opts for this choice, though it is designed to expand the pool of black candidates and guarantee no compromise on the quality of the candidate selected.

CHART 4

What kind of *superintendent* should a mostly black district hire?

Hire the best candidate possible, regardless of race

Hire the most qualified black candidate, even if a better qualified white candidate is turned away

76%

4%

20%

Make a special effort to recruit black candidates but only hire the best, regardless of race

BLACK PARENTS

What kind of *teachers* should a mostly black district hire?

Hire the best teachers possible, regardless of race

Hire as many black teachers as possible, even if some better qualified white teachers are turned away

77%

3%

19%

Make a special effort to recruit black teachers but only hire the best, regardless of race

BLACK PARENTS

In Cleveland, when African-American parents were asked this question, they unanimously and without hesitation wanted simply to choose the best qualified candidate. "I want them [the school board] not to be prejudiced," said one. "As long as he's doing his job, I don't care if he's green!"

What About Teachers?

African-American parents are also decisive in opting for quality regardless of race, even when teachers are the issue. Three-fourths (77%) say a mostly black district should hire the best teachers possible, regardless of race. Only 3% prefer hiring as many blacks as possible, even if better qualified white teachers are turned away; and only 19% want the district to make a special effort to recruit black teachers while *still* hiring only the best.

These findings are strong and consistent, but somewhat counterintuitive. After all, nearly 7 in 10 black parents (68%) believe there is at least some truth to the statement that because of racial stereotypes, teachers and principals have lower expectations for black students; and the same proportion (68%) say too many white teachers don't know how to deal with black kids because they come from different cultures. In focus group discussions, stories of insensitive or uncaring white teachers were not uncommon. "A lot of white teachers can't relate to what black kids are dealing with in the neighborhood. They just have no comprehension at all, not even a little clue," said a black parent in Oakland.

A Major Distraction

If African-American parents believe black students sometimes pay a price when taught by whites, why are they reluctant to support an effort to improve the odds of hiring black educators? For one thing, black parents believe — and white parents concur — that when race becomes a prevailing consideration in education, the public schools' attention is diverted from what ought to be their top priority: academics.

And both groups cite integration efforts as an example: 73% of blacks and 77% of whites agree that "too often, the schools work so

hard to achieve integration that they end up neglecting their most important goal — teaching kids," with half of both groups *strongly* agreeing. "We've spent a lot of time on the race issues, and we need to redirect some of those energies to getting our children better educated," said an African-American parent in Pennsylvania. A Cleveland parent recalled the recent past when her district made serious commitments to integration: "The books and the materials weren't getting to the classrooms; the money wasn't being spent on the kids."

How To Get "Better Picking"

Why would expanding the pool of black applicants for superintendent — while still promising to hire only the best — worry African-American parents? In fact, one parent in the Cleveland group was not worried about this strategy at all: "If you've got a bunch of applicants, look at quality, not color. But out of these top candidates, yeah, pick a black if the schools are predominantly black."

> "We've spent a lot of time on the race issues, and we need to redirect some of those energies to getting our children better educated." — African-American Parent

But another parent's experience as a contractor, when he felt he had lost work because of his race, gave him reason to suspect quality would not win out if the district were looking at race. He had stopped putting down his race on job applications, he said, because "You could be better qualified, and they'd still hire a white with less experience because they say to themselves, 'I can work with this guy.'" He reasoned that a school board paying attention to the applicants' race might settle on a less qualified candidate just because he was black. "You'd get better picking if you weren't worried about color at all," was his conclusion. Other parents in the group simply insisted on assurances of quality, with no complicating considerations. "Just get the best qualified," they repeated.

"Oakland Doesn't Attract"

An intense desire to find and keep top-quality teachers and administrators emerged repeatedly in interviews with African-American parents. "Teachers need to go back to school," said a Pennsylvania parent. "They are not taking the kids to their potential. If we had better education, we'd have less problems; the racial thing wouldn't even be an issue."

"You can't blame it all on the students," said an Ohio parent about underachievement among black students. "You have to put some of the blame on administrators. If you don't make it a place where kids can achieve, you're not doing your job." In Oakland there was a widely shared sense among African-American parents that their district did not have and could not get the best teachers. "They just punch the clock," said one. "Oakland doesn't attract," said another. "The salary is lower than in other districts; teachers are leaving."

Is Testing Biased?

The use of standardized testing is another area where the views of African-American parents seem to run against the conventional wisdom. Given the heated controversy surrounding standardized testing, one might expect black parents to distrust them. Such sentiments were sometimes heard in the focus groups. In Raleigh, for example, a parent said, "They're biased. They'll have a question about Paris or whatever. They make references to places we don't go."

But most African-American parents reject the tests-are-biased argument. When asked why, on average, black students don't do as well as whites on standardized achievement tests, only 28% say it is mostly because "the tests are culturally biased against black students." Forty-four percent of black parents say "the tests measure real differences in educational achievement," and 18% say the reason for this difference is a failure of expectations: Black students keep hearing they're not supposed to do well, so they don't. "A lot of parents don't lay down the law with their kids," said one African-American parent in Cleveland,

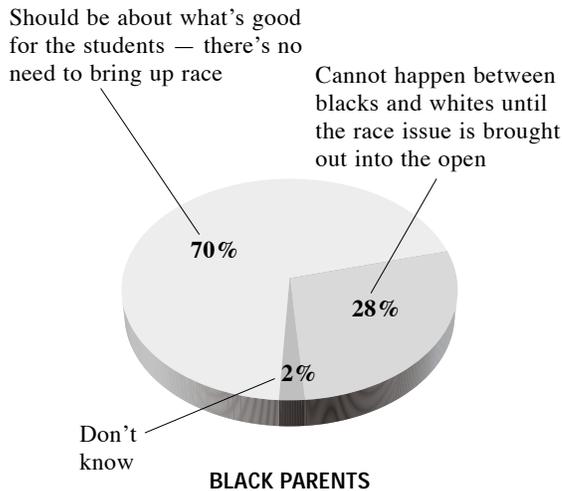explaining differences in achievement. "It's the quality and effort and training, starting at home."

"We've *Got To* Bring It Up"

Not only did most African-American parents say that standardized achievement tests reveal genuine educational difficulties among black children, they apparently aren't afraid of talking frankly about the problem. Asked whether publicizing differences in achievement "does more harm than good because it reinforces negative stereotypes about black students," or whether it is "necessary because it calls attention to a problem that needs to be solved," a resounding 78% agree with the latter view. "Make it public," said one parent in Cleveland, "so you can get some help." "I've heard about this problem — we need some help," said another parent. "We've *got to* bring it up." What about the potential negative publicity? "It's the way you present it," said one parent. "Put it into a positive context instead of a negative one. Don't put it on a garbage can lid, bring it on a platter."

CHART 5

Good discussions about schools:

Should be about what's good for the students — there's no need to bring up race

Cannot happen between blacks and whites until the race issue is brought out into the open

70%

28%

2%

Don't know

BLACK PARENTS

Is There Too Much Talk About Race?

There is still one more example of African-American parents' singular focus on academic achievement. Most black parents (54%) say people in this country "try to sweep race and racism under the rug," while 41% say there is too much talk about race and racism. But when asked if "good discussions about schools cannot happen between blacks and whites until the race issue is brought out into the open" or whether such discussions "should be about what's good for students — there's no need to bring up race" — 70% of black parents opt for putting race aside. "Focus on their education and what the problems in the schools are today — I want them to deal with today's issues," said an African-American parent in Cleveland. "Racism is out there, but it's nothing like it was back in the day."

Finding Three

Black Student Achievement: An Educational Crisis

> African-American parents' laser-like focus on academic achievement reflects deep anxiety about how their children fare in the nation's schools. They believe far too many black children are not learning enough, and far too many of the schools they attend are unacceptably deficient. In their minds, the problem is at crisis point. White parents also believe African-American youngsters attend poorer schools and are less likely to do well academically, but they see the problem as limited to poor, urban areas and do not call the situation a crisis.

Many years ago, the United States began to tackle the problem of unequal schools for blacks, but today's African-American parents are convinced the problem is far from solved. They believe strongly that African-American children as a whole are underserved and not achieving at satisfactory levels.

"More Resources, Strong Parents, Computers"

When asked to estimate how many black students attend good schools with good teachers, most black parents (56%) say less than half. An Oakland parent said, "It's not just psychological; it's a fact. The mostly white schools have more resources, strong parents, computers. They're able to put money into those schools, and parent interest is there. They can't hire just any teacher." By contrast, 74% of black parents believe most white students attend good schools. A Raleigh parent whose child had attended each type of school said, "In terms of self-esteem, going to an all-black school was the place to be. But the resources were better in the white school. We got the good books, the new materials."

The belief that mostly black schools have inferior resources is matched by a widespread sense that these shortcomings have inevitable consequences for student achievement — that African-American kids are just not doing as well as they should in school. While 48% of black parents say that more than half of today's black students are doing well in school, just as many (47%) put the figure at less than half. Meanwhile, 73% say the majority of white students are doing well in school.

Problems Beyond The Inner City

Moreover, most African-American parents (60%) do not think underachievement among black students is confined to inner cities; they say it affects black youngsters wherever they are. Over half (54%) also say the problem affects students regardless of family income. What's more, this concern includes their own children's schools and their chances for achievement. Sixty percent of black parents would switch their kids from public to private school if money were not an obstacle; only 38% would stay with their public school. "If I could afford it, she'd be in private school, definitely," said one Cleveland parent.

CHART 6

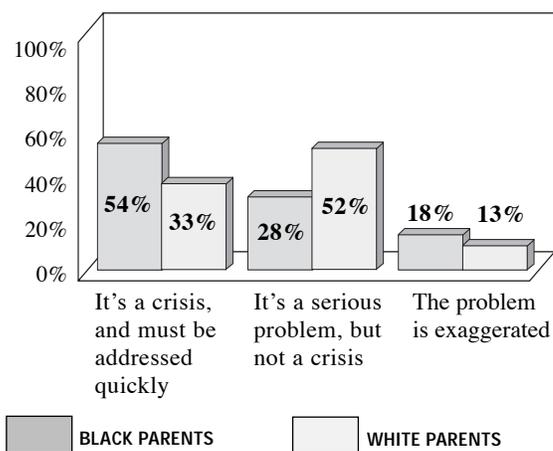|	Black Parents	White Parents
How many black students are in good schools with good teachers?		
Less than half	56%	54%
More than half	37	28
How many white students are in good schools with good teachers?		
Less than half	18	23
More than half	74	63
How many black students are doing well in school?		
Less than half	47	44
More than half	48	42
How many white students are doing well in school?		
Less than half	21	23
More than half	73	66

As in previous Public Agenda studies, the parents begin with initially positive evaluations of their local schools in response to general questions: about 6 in 10 (58%) say the schools are doing a good or excellent job overall.[7] But dissatisfaction quickly emerges when the discussions unfold or when questions probe specific criteria and comparisons.

Whites Also See The Problem

African-American parents are not alone in their belief that black children are suffering educationally. Many white parents also believe black students attend below-par schools and do not do well academically. Fifty-four percent of white parents say less than half of black students currently attend good schools with good teachers. And like African-American parents, whites divide when asked to estimate how many black students are succeeding academically: 44% say fewer than half are doing well, while 42% say more than half.

CHART 7

When you hear that many black kids are not doing well in school, which comes closer to your reaction?

It's a crisis, and must be addressed quickly — BLACK PARENTS 54%, WHITE PARENTS 33%
It's a serious problem, but not a crisis — BLACK PARENTS 28%, WHITE PARENTS 52%
The problem is exaggerated — BLACK PARENTS 18%, WHITE PARENTS 13%

BLACK PARENTS   WHITE PARENTS

White parents also essentially agree that white students have better educational opportunities, though they are somewhat less sanguine about the state of education for white youngsters. Most (63%) agree that the majority of white students attend good schools with good teachers; 2 in 3 (66%) say more than half of white students are doing well.

Although white parents acknowledge major problems in the education of black children, they mainly believe these problems are fairly narrow in scope. Most white parents (56%) think black students who do poorly in school are concentrated in inner cities, and most (64%) also believe they are mainly from low-income families.

Same Situation, Different Response

But if black and white parents see the situation for African-American youngsters in roughly the same way, they part company dramatically in how they react to it. African Americans voice a sense of alarm about the state of education for blacks that whites simply do not share.

When they hear that many black kids are not doing well in schools, over half of African-American parents (54%) respond by saying the problem is "a crisis and must be addressed quickly"; only one-third of whites (33%) say the same. For most whites, the plight of black students is a problem, but not one that leaps quickly to the forefront of their thinking. We turn our attention more fully to the perspective white parents bring to this and other issues in the next finding. But even here, it's important to note that very few people, either black or white, dismiss the problem facing African-American youngsters altogether: Only 18% of black parents and 13% of white parents say "The problem is exaggerated; things are probably not as bad as people make them out to be."

Finding Four

White Parents: Will My Children Have To Pay The Price?

The views of whites parents on race and the public schools are complex and often ambivalent. They want African-American children to receive a good education that will allow them to succeed and build strong lives for themselves. White parents often voice a sense of pride that their children's educational experience is far more diverse than their own. But they also have anxieties: They have often had to struggle to find good schools, and are concerned that their quality is tenuous. Many white parents fear that an influx of African-American students into a school would bring social and academic problems. Most say it is not the students' race, but the socio-economic status of their families that concerns them. And they are deeply uncomfortable admitting what troubles them.

Both African-American and white parents bring a set of assumptions, experiences and emotions to conversations about race and the schools. For African-American parents, there is a conviction that black children face an educational crisis, combined with wariness about the intentions of whites, even those who appear fair-minded. But there is also optimism and resolve.

> "You work, you save to get a house there because that's where you want your kids to go to school, and now they tell you your kids can't go there?" — White Parent

White parents, as we spell out in the following pages, bring their own set of hopes and fears to these issues — namely an underlying uneasiness about the soundness of their own children's education and a conviction that many black children — for social and economic reasons — have trouble at school and at home. They also exhibit a paralyzing fear that if they voice their concerns, they will be labeled racists. Yet, the vast majority bring to this debate an ideal that race should not matter, combined with a strong desire to be fair and be perceived as fair.

A Good School Is Hard To Find

Previous Public Agenda research — along with studies conducted by other researchers — documents a strong sense among people from all demographic categories that American public education is a troubled, even malfunctioning, institution.[8] People want schools that are safe, orderly and academically sound, but they are not confident about finding them. White parents — even those with comfortable financial situations — often struggle to buy homes in neighborhoods with good schools, and even then, often feel they must be vigilant so their children aren't lost in an educational shuffle. Because they cannot take good schools or good teaching for granted, white parents are particularly nervous about any changes they believe could endanger the status quo.

"Why Should It Be This Hard?"

About 6 in 10 white parents (61%) say "One of the main reasons I live in this neighborhood is the quality of its schools." One New York parent spoke of the financial and emotional pressures she and her husband went through in order to move from one affluent neighborhood to an even more affluent one — Scarsdale — mostly because it promised quality education through high school for their daughters. "Do you know how hard it was to find a good school system?" asked the mother. "We won't be able to afford the lifestyle our neighbors live, but at least we won't have to worry about the schools. Why should it be this hard to find good schools?" she asked in frustration.

"I spent six months deciding what grade school I wanted them to go to," said a Raleigh parent, describing how he chose his present neighborhood. These preoccupations are part of the parental mind-set, and, based on interviews and survey findings in this

project, seem to be almost entirely independent of racial considerations. Concerns of this kind emerge routinely in focus groups whether the topic is standards, teachers, funding or class size. In this study, they emerged immediately and spontaneously, long before interviewers introduced any questions concerning integration or equal opportunity.

Having searched long and worked hard to do the best they can for their children's education, white parents are quite resistant to efforts to change the schools their kids attend. Fully 82% agree that "since parents often pick a neighborhood for its schools, it's wrong to force them to send their kids elsewhere to achieve racial integration."

"Now They Tell You Your Kid Can't Go There?"

A sense of helplessness and loss of control often leads to anger when parents discuss school systems that reorganize or redistrict under rules that are hard for them to understand. A Fort Myers, Florida parent who had recently had that experience said in frustration, "You work, you save to get a house there because that's where you want your kids to go to school, and now they tell you your kids can't go there? That's wrong." Another parent in Raleigh said, "I looked for a neighborhood with a good school, moved there, and then they told me he's going to be sent out to another school that's not as good. I got so mad."

"How Could It Not Work?"

As seen earlier, white parents suspect most African-American students are not attending good schools, and they firmly believe good schools are something any child deserves. White and black parents (86% of each group) overwhelmingly agree that "it is society's responsibility to make sure black students have teachers and schools that are just as good as those of white students." Notions of fairness and equity are at least partly behind this commitment. A white Walnut Creek, California, parent said, "My child's school has three black kids; they're doing well. If the

majority of blacks have bad schools it means someone's not doing their job. It's not because they can't learn."

CHART 8

It is society's responsibility to make sure black students have teachers and schools that are just as good as those of white students.

| | SOMEWHAT AGREE | STRONGLY AGREE |
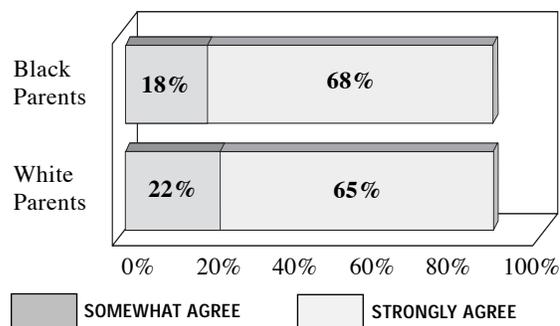
Nor are American parents — white or black — ready to walk away from even the most troubled schools, believing they can be reclaimed. Seventy percent of white and 80% of black parents feel inner-city schools that are failing can overcome their problems with better resources, programs and teachers; only 24% of white parents and 17% of African-American parents say these communities and kids face so many problems that there's really nothing more to be done. "Yes, it definitely will work," said a white Walnut Creek parent. "How could it not?"

The Reluctant Conversation

Focus groups conducted for this and previous Public Agenda projects show that white parents are very reluctant to talk about education in racial terms, even in groups with no African Americans present. White parents in every part of the country and from every income and educational level would circle warily around the issue for half an hour or more, resisting discussions about categories of people: "You can't generalize" and "It doesn't make a difference if you're black or white" were common refrains. The sense was that they simply felt it was not appropriate or fair to talk baldly about either white or black people. The reluctance was especially strong

when the subject was academic underachievement among African-American students. When the moderator persisted, the discomfort was clear and the reluctance to engage palpable.

White Americans take pride in refusing to judge people based on the color of their skin and in being more tolerant than earlier generations. About 3 in 4 (74%) white parents say they are better than their parents at dealing with people of other races. "There's still a lot of that racist attitude, especially in the older generations, people in their 50s and 60s. I've got no use for it," said a white parent in Raleigh. "I've adopted a black child, so diversity in the neighborhood is important to me," said a white parent in Walnut Creek. "But if you ask people where I was originally from, they'd pin the problems right on black people. My parents from Louisiana complain how it's like the United Nations around here."

Do Black Kids Bring Trouble?

As focus group conversations wore on and the moderator persisted, and as comfort levels increased, many white parents admitted they believe African-American students are more likely to have social or academic problems. They feared bringing a large number of black students into their mostly white schools would threaten their schools' quality. "I think they'd be a negative influence. Some of them come from a sociopathic environment: drugs, guns, crime. They don't care," said a white parent in Walnut Creek.

> "I'm asking — 'Do they want to learn? Are there discipline problems? Is he going to hurt my child's education? And who's going to pay?'"
> — White Parent

About 6 in 10 (61%) white parents in the survey believe that if a large number of black students started attending a mostly white school, one of several negative things — discipline and safety problems, lower reading levels, more social problems — would probably happen. For example, 4 in 10 (41%) say the school would probably have more discipline and safety problems. These numbers may understate the prevalence of such views, since some respondents may have given socially desirable answers. Said a white parent in Secaucus, New Jersey, "I'm asking — 'Do they want to learn? Are there discipline problems? Is he going to hurt my child's education? And who's going to pay?'" In Walnut Creek, one white parent said, "I have lots of black students — twenty-five percent — in my kid's school. They redrew the lines and brought in a large section of low-income housing kids into my children's elementary school. Test scores dropped. These are kids that need help and they get it. But it dumbs down the curriculum, and it takes away from the gifted kids."

Making A Connection

Fully 82% of white parents say they don't care about the race of kids in their schools as long as they come from good, hard-working families. But much of what whites see and hear about blacks tells them that African Americans are more likely to be poor, to be in prison, to have single-parent families, and less likely to be college graduates. Therefore, at a certain level, they fear that blacks are more likely to mean trouble — but they cannot say so because they believe it wrong to judge people by the color of their skin.

When it comes to their children and their schools, the protectiveness kicks in not because whites want to maintain superiority over blacks, or resent their economic and social emergence. Indeed, work for this project suggests that old-fashioned racism — a belief in natural or genetic superiority because of race — is both rare and as unacceptable to white Americans as it is to African Americans. But white parents are afraid of losing good schools, and make a connection between African-American youngsters and potential trouble. "If you are talking about a kid from New York City who really wants to learn and you bring him in, then I am more than happy to have him in the classroom. But don't put in a kid with a discipline problem — he is going to hurt my child's education," said a Secaucus parent.

CHART 9

Imagine that a large number of black students started attending a public school that had been mostly white.

% saying the following would probably happen	White Parents
More social problems	43%
More discipline and safety problems	41
Test scores and reading levels would drop	30
Net percentage of respondents saying at least one of these would probably happen	61%

Do you think the school could do something to make sure these problems do not happen, or that once the black students come these problems are unavoidable?

School could do something

71%

6%

23%

Don't know

Problems are unavoidable
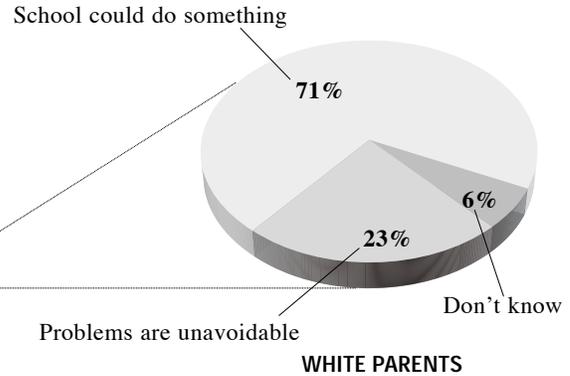
WHITE PARENTS

It Doesn't Have To Be That Way

White parents who fear that an influx of African-American students could mean social or academic problems also believe problems are not inevitable *if* schools work effectively. Fully 71% say a school can prevent problems; only 23% say once black students enter the schools such problems are unavoidable. And many feel private schools would do better in this area than public ones because of stricter standards for discipline or academics. When the same respondents were asked what would happen if "a large number of black students started attending a private school that had been mostly white," 52% say that school would do a better job of maintaining discipline and order, while 39% say it would do about the same as a public school.

It is important to point out that many whites believe the issue is not so much black-and-white as it is social and economic, and they themselves point out that people often make the mistake of confusing the two. "It's lower-income people, not blacks. They don't care about the same things," said a Walnut Creek parent.

"Walking On Egg Shells"

Conventional wisdom in research circles says that to ensure forthright focus group conversations with African Americans, an

African-American moderator is necessary. But one of the earliest observations in this project was that it was far easier for a white moderator to talk with an all-black group about race and schools than for a white moderator to discuss these issues with an all-white group. "Anytime you talk about black and white, there will be trouble," said a New Jersey participant, when asked why the conversation about race was uncomfortable. "Whites have to walk on egg shells," said a white Fort Myers parent.

African Americans are ready to talk quite openly about race when the conversation feels credible to them, and it doesn't seem to matter if the moderator is white. But to whites, discussions about race carry considerable risk — they may say the wrong thing, be misunderstood, or worse, be accused of racism — so a more common and safer response is to keep quiet or tread carefully. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of white parents and 73% of black parents say "It is hard for whites to talk honestly about problems in the African-American community because they are afraid someone will accuse them of being racist."

Replete With Twists And Turns

Still, the fact remains that whites and blacks both believe that African-American students have more academic and social problems. Most often, white parents reach for sociological explanations to account for differences: fewer intact families in the black community, tougher neighborhoods, drugs and discrimination. But the reticence of white parents to talk explicitly means their fears and anxieties remain beneath the surface, not easily vetted in public. One consequence is that while the views of African-American parents are resolved and focused, the views of whites about race and the schools often seem murky and ambivalent, replete with twists and turns in attitudes that are difficult to unravel because they are sometimes hidden — sometimes not worked through — and rarely discussed.

Finding Five

Integration: It's All In The Details

> Both black and white parents say integration is valuable, but on closer examination white — and to some extent, black — fears emerge. Both groups believe integrated schools improve race relations and enhance their children's ability to thrive in a diverse world. But they are also wary of associated costs: that schools will be distracted from academics, that bitter disputes will emerge, that their own children will end up paying the price. Whites are fearful that integration will bring troubled children into local schools; blacks fear their children will be thrown into hostile and contentious school environments. Most parents want integration to occur naturally and are optimistic that things can improve. Ironically, relatively few have direct experience with efforts to achieve school integration.

Integrated Schools Are Better Schools

African-American and white parents see great value in having their children attend integrated schools. About 8 in 10 black parents and 66% of white parents say it is very or somewhat important to them that *their own child's* school be racially integrated. Support among African-American parents is more intense: Nearly half (49%) say it is *very* important that their children attend integrated schools, compared to 28% of whites.

CHART 10

How important is it to you that your own child's school be racially integrated?

	Black Parents	White Parents
Very important	49%	28%
Somewhat important	31	38
Not too important	10	16
Not important at all	10	16

Parents value integrated schools because they believe their own children and the country as a whole will be better able to handle the diversity of today's society. Nearly all parents agree that "our country is very diverse and kids need to learn to get along with people from different cultures and ethnic back-grounds" (97% of blacks, 97% of whites). Very large majorities (84% of blacks, 77% of whites) feel integrated schools will help improve race relations in America. Both

groups say "It was absolutely wrong to have segregation" (64% of black and 71% of white parents).

"Integration is positive and productive and does yield well-balanced children," said a black parent in Raleigh. "In the ideal situation, you have all the children interacting and learning together. So the majority develops a tolerance for the minority — ideally." Parents also believe integrated schools could bring concrete benefits: 86% of black and 74% of white parents say integration would mean a better chance that all kids will have good schools.

What's more, with the conspicuous exception of busing, policies intended to achieve integration draw support from clear majorities of both African-American and white parents. For example, about 6 in 10 black and white parents (60% and 59%) favor achieving integration through magnet schools that "attract high-achieving white kids to mostly black schools by offering talented and gifted programs." Another 69% of black and 60% of white parents favor "redrawing district lines to combine mostly black and mostly white districts into one district."

"Why Push Things?"

Given the support parents express for integration, its advocates might feel justified in pointing to politics and changes in judicial appointments to explain what many view as a nationwide retrenchment of integration efforts. But they would be missing an important piece of the puzzle. Despite

widespread support for the concept, there is a distinctive lack of energy and passion for integration among both black and white parents. Only a slim majority of black parents (52%) say the nation should do more to integrate schools; 38% say current efforts are about right and 8% say that less should be done. It is even harder to detect an appetite among whites for invigorating integration efforts: Only 27% want the U.S. to do more, while 47% believe things are about right and 17% say they should be scaled back.

"Don't push anything," said a white Secaucus parent. "If integration comes, it comes. But you can't say, 'Well, you are all white, you should get some blacks.' Why? If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. Why push things?" If the retrenchment in policy-making circles is there, it seems to be at least partially in accord with public sentiment.

Why So Little Passion?

If parents see school integration as a laudable concept, why don't more of them rally to its cause? The answer seems to be that though they see integration as an attractive ideal, black and white parents both believe its implementation comes with serious downsides, and uncertain gains.

Two explanations for the lack of ardor for integration were suggested earlier. While most parents praise integration as socially beneficial, many are not convinced integrated schools really improve learning (51% of black and 72% of white parents say integration makes little difference). Since academic achievement is the premier focus of both African-American and white parents, and since they don't believe integration addresses that goal, it fails to resonate.

The second reason is that the heavy investment of whites in finding good schools makes them cautious and tentative about upsetting the apple cart. "Since parents often pick a neighborhood for its schools, it's wrong to force them to send their kids elsewhere to achieve racial integration," say 82% of whites and 62% of blacks. As seen in

CHART 11

Do kids get a better education in a racially integrated school, is it worse, or does it make little difference?

BLACK PARENTS — WHITE PARENTS
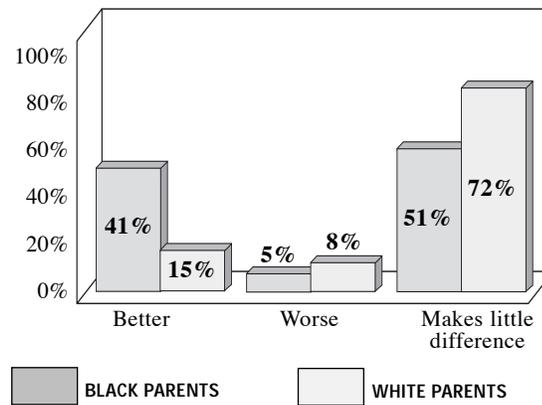
Finding Four, white parents are afraid they'll be asked to forfeit the schools for which they searched long and hard.

There are also broad concerns about how integration works in practice. Similar proportions of black and white parents (68% and 73%, respectively) say, "Integration is a very good goal, but the ways we've been trying to achieve it are wrong." A white Fort Myers parent argued that schools had been simplistic in their approach. "Integration has to be done the right way. You don't go in and say, 'Here are the blacks, the whites, the Hispanics, now you're all different, but [you] have to learn to get along.'" A black parent in Cleveland also criticized how schools there have implemented integration: "It was a good idea, but they didn't prepare the teachers. They just threw the black kids in and figured it would be fine. They forced it without preparing."

Integration = Busing = Integration

Even as the most painful and contentious battles over busing have receded in the nation's memory, their impact lives on in people's mistrust of efforts to achieve integration. It is hardly news that busing is extremely unpopular among white parents, and this survey confirms what others have

found: Only 22% of white parents favor it as a way to achieve integrated schools (55% among black parents).[9]

But busing has evolved to mean more to people than simply one policy to achieve integration. Busing has come to be inextricably intertwined with the meaning of integration. It was foremost in people's minds in the focus groups when they began talking about integration, and among white parents especially, it is the clearest example of how integration can go wrong. Indeed, integration and busing were so intimately connected in people's minds that Public Agenda interviewers had to constantly remind respondents in both the survey and the focus groups that these did not necessarily mean the same thing.

> Despite widespread support for the concept, there is a distinctive lack of energy and passion for integration among both black and white parents.

Unintended Consequences

As discussed earlier, parents also believe that efforts to integrate have distracted the schools from what should be their number one priority: academic achievement. "Too often, the schools work so hard to achieve integration that they end up neglecting their most important goal — teaching kids," say 73% of black parents and 77% of white parents.

What's more, there is a widespread sense that the very kids who are supposed to benefit from integration — African-American students — end up paying the price for its implementation. Most black (73%) and white (65%) parents say black kids are usually the ones to bear the burden of integration. "I have yet to see a few white kids in a mostly black class," protested an African-American parent in Raleigh.

White Flight

Most parents are also wary of another downside that sometimes accompanies integration efforts: white flight. Sixty-nine percent of black parents and 62% of white parents say "efforts to integrate often backfire because white people end up leaving the schools or the communities that try to integrate." In this view, integration is futile, even counterproductive. As one African-American parent from Cleveland said, "It got a lot of white people angry. You didn't want to get bused out, you left the area."

African-American parents are especially likely to say that whites' preconceptions and fears of them are to blame. More than 8 in 10 (83%) say whites often leave neighborhoods when blacks move in because they assume blacks mean trouble. A smaller majority of white parents (56%) agree. A black parent from the Baltimore suburbs said, "The 7-11's never been robbed. It gets robbed, they go, 'Ah, yes, the brothers are coming out to the county now.'" "Stereotypes," said an African-American parent in Raleigh; "They're thinking, 'Property values are going down; I've got to move farther out.'"

The Color Of Money

In the focus groups, whites often disputed that white flight was still widespread. A white Secaucus parent said: "In older times, if black people started moving into a neighborhood, either they were forced out or the whites moved out. I think now people are a little more tolerant. My daughters bring home the League of Nations, and I know I've become more tolerant. I think people are much more likely to take people at the value of what they are. If you see a hard-working guy who is going to work everyday, trying to raise his family, you are going to give him a break no matter what color or nationality he is."

Focus group participants often argued that they did not judge their neighbors or their children's classmates by their color, but by their behavior and demeanor. About 8 in 10 of both groups of parents say they aren't

concerned about the race of students in local schools as long as they're from solid families (78% black, 82% white). "If everything was the same — same money, education — would blacks and whites be different or the same?" asked a Fort Myers parent. "I think the same. Economics and education are the reasons why people are the way they are."

"There's No Rap Music. They're Professional Types."

For a nation that tries hard — at least as an ideal — to ignore class distinctions, class consciousness sometimes served as an antidote to racial comparisons. With near unanimity, white and black parents (96% and 94%, respectively) say "As long as someone can afford to buy a home in my neighborhood and keeps up their property, I don't care what their race is."

"We have black neighbors," said a Secaucus parent. "Let me tell you, they take care of their houses. My black neighbor is great; I wish my white neighbor was as nice. I am not judging anybody by their color; first of all, if you can afford to move into my neighborhood, God bless you. And if you keep your property nice, I don't have a problem." In Raleigh, a white parent said, "There's one black family in my neighborhood, upper-middle class. Let me put it this way: There's no rap music. They're professional types."

In each focus group at least one person volunteered that the real distinction was between renters and homeowners, not between blacks and whites. "Rentals, rentals," said a Fort Myers parent. "I know what those areas are like; that's where the problems are — transient, zoned for multi-family homes." More than 8 in 10 white parents (85%) believe that "People who own their homes care more about keeping up the neighborhood than people who rent," and 78% of black parents concur.

Some parents started by saying race didn't matter, but ended up conceding that ultimately it could. "I'd like to think that as long as they were decent and hardworking it wouldn't affect me," said a white Fort Myers parent. "But if everyone on the street were black, I don't know."

Speaking From Experience?

For all the strong sentiments integration triggers, few American parents have actual experience with it. Only 23% of black and 18% of white parents say that they have experience with busing in their own child's schooling. Even fewer were themselves bused for racial reasons when they were going to school (18% of black, 7% of white parents). They report similarly low levels of experience with other policies to achieve racial balance, i.e., magnet schools or redrawing district lines.

CHART 12

Is this something that you ever experienced with your children's schools?

% saying "yes"	Black Parents	White Parents
Busing to achieve racial balance	23%	18%
Magnet schools	19	17
Redrawing district lines	24	15
Parents pick top 3 schools, then let district choose with an eye to racial balance	25	14

And how do parents who have actually gone through these experiences feel about them?

Although most white parents oppose busing, whites who have had busing at their children's schools are twice as likely to favor it as parents who have not (38% to 19%). Black parents, whether they have experienced busing at their children's schools or not, are equally likely to support it (59% to 55%, respectively). Whites and blacks whose children have attended magnet schools are substantially more upbeat about them than parents whose kids have not (77% to 57% for whites; 70% to 58% for blacks). Of course, one might well suppose that dissatisfaction with magnet schools would come from parents whose kids were *not* selected, yet live near enough to see them work. "In order to get the higher-income white kids into the projects, they have a magnet school," began an African-American parent in Raleigh. "I'm ticked because my son wasn't allowed to go to that school. This school has everything; I have to drive past it everyday. It makes my blood boil."

Eventually, some parents began asking why all schools aren't like magnet schools: "Why not make all the schools like that?" asked another African-American parent, when he heard a description of the magnet school program.

Given Time

Seventy-eight percent of black parents and 85% of white parents say their children presently attend a school in their neighborhood. In the final analysis, white parents do not seem anxious to see school districts take rigorous action to change this state of affairs; and African-American parents seem to be pursuing what is, for them, far bigger game — strengthening academic achievement among black kids.

Thus for different reasons, black and white parents end up with a similar viewpoint:

"Don't force the issue, let it come naturally." Nearly 7 in 10 black (69%) and 81% of white parents say, "Given time, neighborhoods and schools will become more integrated on their own — you really can't force them."

There is real optimism about the power of time and people's capacity to evolve and improve; people point to their own lives as examples. Most African Americans (66%) and whites (74%) consider themselves better than their parents at dealing with people of different races. Even asking a more difficult question — do their kids do a better job of dealing with other races than they do — garners the agreement of about half of black and white parents (51% and 47%, respectively).

> "I think now people are a little more tolerant. My daughters bring home the League of Nations, and I know I've become more tolerant."
> — White Parent

Finding Six

Of Like Minds: African-American And White Parents Set An Agenda For Public Schools

> Despite many differences in their experiences and concerns, white and African-American parents have strikingly similar visions of what it takes to educate kids: involved parents, top-notch staff and schools that guarantee the basics, high academic expectations and standards, safety and order. White and black parents also share considerable common ground over how to help black children and failing schools improve.

African Americans and whites often have profoundly different life experiences, and some have limited exposure to each other socially and in the schools. And controversies over integration, busing, textbooks, tracking, promotion policies, hiring policies and other educational issues might lead one to assume that white and black parents have very different definitions of what constitutes a good education and a good school.

But based on this study and earlier Public Agenda work, it is evident that African-American and white parents have very similar visions of the schools they want for their kids.[10] Comments by white and black parents during the first half hour of the focus group discussions — devoted to what a good school means, how kids learn best and what students should learn — were so remarkably alike as to be virtually indistinguishable. In responding to questions asking them to identify the absolutely essential characteristics of good schools — teaching good work habits, teaching standard English, educators who push students to work hard — black and white parents come within five percentage points of each other on 9 of 12 questions.

"If Parents Aren't Helping, It's No Good"

Educators who insist that the parents play a crucial role in the successful education of children may be heartened to know that parents — black or white — could not agree more. About 9 in 10 (88% black; 92% white) say, "Kids learn best when their families stress the importance of education; respect for the value of school begins at home." "If it's not reinforced in the home, what they're taught in school has no relevance," said an African-American parent in Oakland. "If they don't have a quiet place to study, if parents are not helping, it's no good. One teacher was upset because there were only two parents at this event; she said, 'How dare they leave the raising of their children up to us.'"
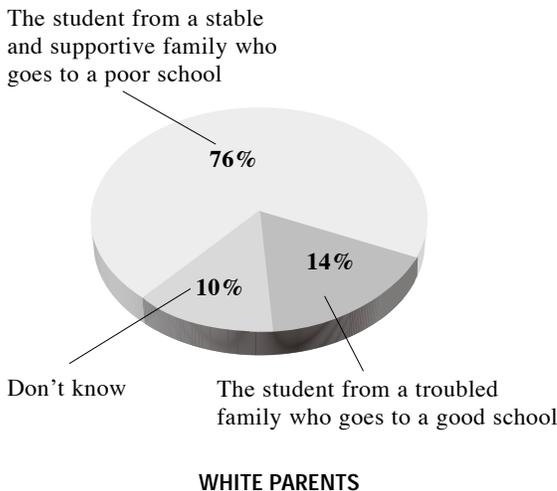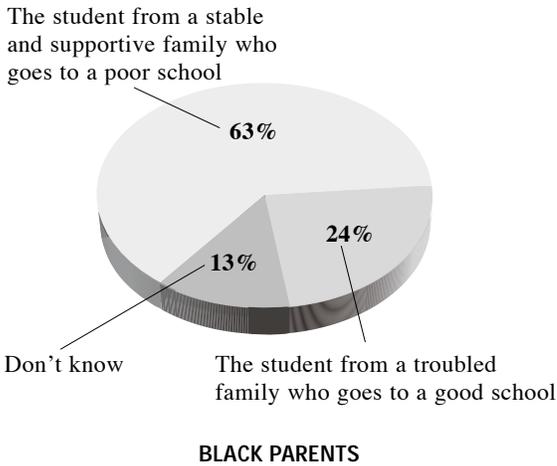
Parents believe their role is essential to children's academic success, even more than the quality of schools they attend. Asked who is more likely to succeed, a student from a troubled family who goes to a good school, or one from a supportive family who goes to a poor school, most black (63%) and white (76%) parents think it would be the student with the strong family. "How education is treated at home is what determines success — if a kid is encouraged to study hard," said a white parent in Raleigh. "I don't know that having a kid in a good school with good teachers and lots of computers would be a solution." In Oakland, an African-American parent said, "A lot of what we're talking about comes from the home. It's really on me as far as my child goes. That expectation level — you have to expect a lot of yourself as a parent."

> Comments by white and black parents on what a good school means were so remarkably alike as to be virtually indistinguishable.

Part of their responsibility, parents say, is to monitor their children's education to make sure it meets their own standards. Most (83% black, 67% white) say they need to keep a close eye on teachers and schools to make sure their kids are treated well. Parents believe that when they stay involved, their kids — and educators — take note. "Your presence is really important," said an African-American parent in Oakland. "If they know you're going to be there, your kid is not going to be the one who slips through the cracks."

CHART 13

Which student is more likely to succeed?

The student from a stable
and supportive family who
goes to a poor school

63%

24%

13%

Don't know

The student from a troubled
family who goes to a good school

BLACK PARENTS

The student from a stable
and supportive family who
goes to a poor school

76%

14%

10%

Don't know

The student from a troubled
family who goes to a good school

WHITE PARENTS

The Basics — Still Basic After All These Years

In a 1994 study, *First Things First,* Public Agenda identified three hallmarks of parental expectations of public schools: insuring safety, maintaining order, and teaching the three Rs effectively.[11] Four years later those priorities have not changed, and it makes little difference whether the parents are white or black.

Fully 91% of black and 95% of white parents say it's *absolutely essential* for a school to "make sure students master the basics such as reading, writing and arithmetic." Media conflagrations over Ebonics notwithstanding, 86% of black and 90% of white parents say that making sure "all kids can speak and write standard English, with proper pronunciation and grammar," is absolutely essential. "I'd rather see them focus on the basics — reading and math," said an African-American parent in Oakland.

At a minimum, parents expect the schools their children attend will be free from weapons, drugs and gangs (93% of black and 97% of white parents say this is absolutely essential). Even before the most recent incidents of school violence, many parents were worried: "You take your life in your hands just going into the school," complained a white Secaucus parent.[12] "Kids are the ones who are ruling and the teachers are afraid of them. You don't want to go to a school where your child is going to get beat up. I don't need this for my daughter." On the other side of the country, an African-American parent in Oakland sounded much the same: "I would like to see more control in the schools as far as weapons and drugs. I send her to school, I expect them to have control over the drugs, the gangs."

Adults In Charge?

Parents want assurances not only of safety, but also of an orderly environment, where adults are in charge and behavioral distractions are kept to a minimum. More than 8 in 10 African-American and white parents say it is absolutely essential for schools to "make sure students behave themselves in class and on the school grounds" (82% of black and 87% of white parents). "The amount of power teachers and administrators have to discipline and control their classes has diminished greatly over the years," said a white parent in Secaucus. "When I went to school, teachers demanded respect and used to get it. If I had a problem with a teacher, the first thing my mother said was, 'What did you do?' Now the teacher is always wrong." In Oakland, an African-American parent said, "If I stepped out of line in school, I got my butt whupped. But now they can't do anything about it."

An Out-Of-Kilter World

Some educators worry that the public's interest in orderly, safe schools is draconian, or bemoan the public's focus on the basics as beside the point. They worry that parents fail to grasp the true objective of education: instilling a love of learning and encouraging the discovery of knowledge. Yet for parents, this first-things-first agenda is a prerequisite for *any* learning to occur. Moreover, parents these days are fundamentally unsettled, even frightened, by the world in which their children are growing up.[13] "If the only problem I have is my kid wearing his pants baggy, I am in real good shape," said a white Secaucus parent. "There is a loss of innocence. They are growing up learning very quickly about streets, guns, AIDS. Think about that." Parents therefore long for public schools to do whatever they can to shield their kids from the harshness of the outside world.

In light of worries about an out-of-kilter world, parents also expect schools to reinforce key mainstream values such as a good work ethic, honesty and civility. Virtually identical numbers of black and white parents believe it is absolutely essential that schools "teach such values as honesty, respect and civility" (84% and 83%, respectively); and about 8 in 10 of both groups think it absolutely essential to "teach good work habits such as being neat, responsible and on time" (78% and 80%, respectively).

Push Students To Excel

The national push to strengthen academic standards is also in line with what parents expect from schools. They believe schools should pass students from grade to grade only when students are ready. About 8 in 10 black (83%) and white (82%) parents say it is absolutely essential that schools "promote kids to the next grade only after they show they have learned what they were supposed to."

Parents believe a school's atmosphere should reflect heightened expectations on the part of educators. Having "teachers and a principal who push students to study hard and to excel academically" is viewed as absolutely essential by 87% of black and 82% of white parents. In Cleveland, an African-American parent said schools should be concerned with "quality education for the children — they need it. In order to succeed, they need to meet the same standards they have in the suburbs. And they can do it, too." However, parents don't want schools to have a relentlessly cold, uncaring atmosphere:

> "If the only problem I have is my kid wearing his pants baggy, I am in real good shape."
> — White Parent

About 9 in 10 black and white parents also say having "teachers who pay personal attention to kids and want them all to succeed" is absolutely essential (88% and 89%, respectively).

Some Points Of Departure

There are a few places where black and white parents differ about what good schools mean. Black parents are more likely than white parents to think it is absolutely essential for schools to expect all kids to go on to college (51% to 31%). Most white and black parents would nevertheless be disappointed if their own kids failed to graduate from college (84% of white and 87% of African-American parents).

Two other areas where blacks and whites differ relate to diversity: African-American parents (60%) are far more likely than white parents (34%) to believe having "a diverse student body, with kids from different ethnic and racial backgrounds" is absolutely essential (although another 46% of white parents say this is "important, but not essential"). And black parents are more likely to think that teaching "the contributions blacks and other minorities have made to American history" is absolutely essential (75% of black, 59% of white). "Black history isn't on the schedule; there's only American history," said a black parent in Oakland.

Evening The Academic Score

It is one thing for black and white parents to agree over what makes a good school. How do they compare when it comes to fixing schools that are failing and mostly black?

And what do parents from each group think should be done to raise achievement for African-American students? Here parents — black and white — are remarkably consistent: The beliefs that guide their definition of high-quality education drive their agenda for helping failing black schools and students. Although it is important to remember that African-American parents are far more likely to view the current situation as a crisis, both groups endorse a variety of measures to address the problem.

Part Of The Answer: Resources

First, parents say, level the playing field: 86% of both black and white parents say it is society's job to make sure black students have teachers and schools that are just as good as those of white students. African-American parents — and to a lesser degree white parents — believe that currently, mostly black schools have fewer good teachers and less money to work with (74% and 56%, respectively). Therefore, resources are part of the answer; 74% of black and 57% of white parents say giving these schools more money and resources is an excellent or good idea. But some added an important caveat: Ensure money now in the system is well spent. "Let's make sure they know what the problem is," said an African-American parent in Cleveland. "We don't have enough books, computers, security, teachers. But sometimes money is not the problem; it's how the money is spent. It's not what you have, it's what you do with what you have."

> Support for helping low-income black families ensure their children are ready for school is overwhelming.

Families Matter

Since parents believe the family is the crucial ingredient in a child's success, they place much of the responsibility on themselves. Fifty-five percent of African-American parents and 52% of white parents say it is the responsibility of the family — not the school (4% and 6% respectively) or society (26% and 27%) — to address the problem when black students underachieve. Strengthen parental skills and accountability, they say, and you will close differences in academic achievement between white and black students. "That's what we're missing: Teachers can't teach without parents," said an African-American parent in Cleveland. "Make parents accountable."

The belief that parents are the first and most important line of defense echo and confirm Public Agenda findings in the 1997 study, *Kids These Days*.[14] One favored solution to the problem of under-performing black schools and students is requiring parents of failing students to attend programs on how to help their kids learn — described by 88% of black and 86% of white parents as an excellent or good solution. Right now, say 72% of black and 59% of white parents, "Too many black parents neglect to push their kids to work hard in school." Support for helping low-income black families ensure their children are ready for school is overwhelming: 90% of African-American and 85% of white parents would expand pre-school programs for that purpose.

"The School Was A Madhouse"

Parents also insist schools do their part to improve achievement among black students: first, take action that makes it clear the business of students is learning, not mischief. Fully 81% of black and 86% of white parents think "taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn" is an excellent or good idea. An African-American parent visiting a Cleveland middle school had this impression: "As soon as I walked in, I didn't want to go in. The school was a madhouse; it was filthy. Who's in control here? The kids?" Black (78%) and white (86%) parents also strongly approve permanently removing kids caught with drugs or weapons.

Some educators might balk at these measures because they seem to amount to abandoning troubled kids who should be the system's responsibility. Focus group discussions indicate parents believe such kids are redeemable and do not want to abandon them. But they also believe that special attention, not the ordinary classroom, is the answer. "When you take them out," admonished one

African-American parent in Cleveland, "don't you just take them out and forget them. Give them attention."

Getting Tough?

Do these sentiments merely reflect a penchant for getting tough with black, inner-city youth? That is an unlikely possibility. For one thing, a solid majority of both white and African-American parents, whether in the inner city or outside it, support these measures. For another, these same policies, described exactly the same way, were strongly supported in previous Public Agenda surveys, which did not mention black students or mostly black schools that are failing.[15] Parents approve these measures because they fall precisely in line with their conception of what good schools look like.

> "I have a niece who's not graduating until she passes this test. They're not just letting them go now." — African-American Parent

Parents say good schools have high academic standards and expectations, and do not pass students who have not learned what is required. Are parents willing to see schools follow through and hold kids accountable for learning? Do they believe that holding back black students who are underachieving is punishing them unfairly for circumstances beyond their control?

Parents, white or black, low-income or high, support "raising and enforcing academic standards in failing schools so that kids pass only when they learn what they are supposed to" (77% black, 82% white). But a perennial question has been whether parents would stay the course with such a policy even if they found out many kids end up failing. We probed parents' commitment to standards by asking them to suppose their schools had adopted tougher standards, but that more kids were held back as a result. Would they still support the policy or turn against it? Few parents, black or white, say they would have doubts; fewer still say they would turn against it. Instead, 75% of black and 86% of white parents say they would continue to back tougher standards.

"Standards Are Standards. . ."

African-American parents interviewed in Cleveland were certain something had recently changed in their district and that "social promotion" was a thing of the past. "Oh no, not now," said one parent when asked whether kids were undeservingly passed through the system. "They make sure they know what they need to know. I have a niece who's not graduating until she passes this test. They're not just letting them go now." The parents in the Cleveland focus group still did not believe their schools' standards were as high as those in the suburbs, but knew they had improved. How did they feel about it? "Standards are standards," said one, "and if you're not meeting them... It started from ground zero; now they're making an effort." The overriding sense among black (82%) and white (81%) parents is that inner-city schools too often pass kids through the system when they should be held back.

"Why Not Try Something Different?"

A voucher proposal, described in this survey simply as "giving families financial aid so they can take their kids out of failing public schools and send them to private schools," got the support of more than half (54%) of black parents (only 36% of white parents thought it a good or excellent idea). Although advocates of voucher programs sometimes point to the power of the free market and need for competition as persuasive arguments, this study suggests that most parents come to this issue from a different perspective: They are frustrated with public schools, want results and are desperate to give their children the best possible chance. In Cleveland, where there is such a program, one African-American parent simply said, "If you're failing, why not try something different?" White parents may be less likely to support vouchers because they are less dissatisfied with their public schools, and black parents more supportive because they are far more disappointed.

The higher levels of support for vouchers among African-American parents do not seem to signal a whole-hearted rejection of public education. In fact, the voucher proposal

places in the bottom half of a list of ten possible alternatives for helping underachieving black students. Previous Public Agenda research also suggests that the general public may not be especially quick to embrace vouchers, even in the face of failing schools. In Public Agenda's 1995 study, *Assignment Incomplete,* only 28% favored giving parents vouchers, even when the question described public schools that had been failing to give kids quality education for many years.[16]

Charter schools get exactly the same support from both black and white parents, with 55% saying they are an excellent or good idea. Interestingly, even as charter schools generate increasing publicity and discussion in education circles, the ideas behind them and even the label "charter school" itself were not familiar to most parents in the focus groups.

Just Transplanting The Problem

What about "taking black kids out of failing schools and sending them to schools that are successful and mostly white?" Of ten proposals to deal with failing schools and black students who are not doing well, this is the least preferred solution, with only 41% of black and 34% of white parents rating it an excellent or good idea. It is the least preferred because both black and white parents think it is not likely to get the results they want. "It just transplants the problem," said a black parent in Cleveland. "It didn't work," said another. "It's terrifying to the children because you're taking them out of their environment. And they walk into that classroom and that teacher is probably prejudiced. They don't know how to communicate with our children. Will they get a better education, or not?"

The ideas behind charter schools and even the label itself were not familiar to most parents in the focus groups.

Afterword

By Wendy D. Puriefoy and Deborah Wadsworth

For more than 40 years, debates about race and education in America have been framed mainly by courtroom decisions and judicial orders. Whether the focus is court-ordered desegregation, affirmative action, redistricting or unequal funding, the resulting debate is likely to be strident.

Such debates — at least as they have been captured in news headlines and statements from the courthouse door — would lead almost any observer to assume that white and African-American parents have virtually nothing in common when it comes to getting the best education for their children. It would be natural to conclude that black parents have one set of goals for public schools while white parents have an entirely different set.

The Source Of Misgivings

Time to Move On does indeed give voice to some very different life experiences and concerns that white and African-American parents bring to the issues of public education. But the research also explodes some commonly held assumptions about each group. The vast majority of African-American parents *do not* want academic standards watered down for their children; most *do not* think standardized tests are culturally biased against black students, and very few believe race should be a factor when it comes to finding the most talented and effective teachers for their children.

The findings about white parents also challenge some prevailing wisdom. Observers periodically suggest, for example, that whites resist integration and investment in minority schools because they fear economic competition from educated blacks and simply do not want black children to achieve. White parents have many reservations, to be sure, and readers may well be disturbed by their reflexive conclusion that an influx of black children into local schools means trouble. But it is essential to be clear about the source of the white parents' misgivings: It is the spectre of poorly educated, troubled African-American children that sets their fears in motion, not the vision of bright, achieving, motivated ones.

It is important to keep each group's particular concerns and fears in mind, but in the last analysis, white and black parents have unambiguous and virtually indistinguishable agendas for their children's schools. Top-notch staff, involved parents and schools that guarantee basics, set high standards, insure safety and order — these are what parents, black and white, are seeking.

> It is the spectre of poorly educated, troubled African-American children that sets their fears in motion, not the vision of bright, achieving, motivated ones.

A Troubling Question

The findings from *Time to Move On* raise an obvious but somewhat troubling question. Did we, as a nation, take a tragic misstep when we allowed public schools to back away from rigorous standards and discipline at the very moment we attempted for the first time to bring black and white children together in the classroom? In times of change and social upheaval the need for rules and standards, order and predictability is arguably at its greatest.

By deemphasizing standards, order and civility, we may have led people of good (and bad) will to draw erroneous conclusions and make unwarranted assertions about what parents and communities really want. The sense that public schools have retreated from standards and order has powerfully damaged public confidence in them. It may also have confused and derailed the nation's drive to achieve equal opportunity and better understanding among the races.

Neither Alienated Nor Destroyed

Despite numerous setbacks and crossed signals, black and white Americans have come a long way in our attempt to live together as equals. There is no sense in this study that African Americans have been destroyed or alienated by the ups and downs of this journey. And whites, in their obvious reluctance to bring up race, acknowledge how wholly unacceptable prejudice has become in the 1990s.

Somthing To Talk About

For PEN and Public Agenda, the research conducted for *Time to Move On* is the overture, not the heart of the performance. The project now moves ahead to organize public conversations on these issues in communities nationwide. It would be naive and foolhardy to assume that these conversations will be easy and comfortable or that they will quickly produce consensus about next steps.

But the research does suggest there are areas where progress is possible. African-American parents say they want to ensure that their children attend safe, orderly schools where strong academic standards and high achievement are the order of the day. White parents say they want exactly the same thing for their children. Surely *that* is something we can all talk about together.

Did we, as a nation, take a tragic misstep when we allowed public schools to back away from rigorous standards and discipline at the very moment we attempted to bring black and white children together for the first time?

Supporting Tables

What's Important For Schools

How important is it for a school to [INSERT RANDOMLY]? Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important?

% saying "absolutely essential" (Split sample)	Black Parents	White Parents
Be free from weapons, drugs and gangs*	93%	97%
Make sure students master the basics such as reading, writing and arithmetic*	91	95
Have teachers who pay personal attention to kids and want them all to succeed†	88	89
Have teachers and a principal who push students to study hard and to excel academically†	87	82
Make sure all kids can speak and write standard English, with proper pronunciation and grammar†	86	90
Teach such values as honesty, respect and civility†	84	83
Promote kids to the next grade only after they show they have learned what they were supposed to*	83	82
Make sure students behave themselves in class and on the school grounds*	82	87
Teach good work habits such as being neat, responsible, and on time†	78	80
Teach the contributions blacks and other minorities have made to American history†	75	59
Have a diverse student body, with kids from different ethnic and racial backgrounds*	60	34
Expect all kids to go on to college*	51	31

* Split sample: Black Parents, n = 401; White Parents, n = 402
† Split sample: Black Parents, n = 399; White Parents, n = 398

Note On Question Wording: Wording has been slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available from Public Agenda in the Technical Appendix for this study.

Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Reasons African-American Students Are Not Doing Well

Some statistics show that African-American students are not doing as well academically as white students. I'm going to read you some explanations for this and ask how much truth you think there is to each one. [INSERT RANDOMLY] Is there a lot of truth, some truth, a little truth or no truth to that?

	Black Parents				White Parents			
	A lot of truth	Some truth	A little truth	No truth	A lot of truth	Some truth	A little truth	No truth
Many black kids are trapped in harsh urban inner-city neighborhoods	53%	34%	7%	5%	57%	33%	5%	3%
Urban inner-city schools too often pass kids through the system	50	31	9	6	49	33	7	4
The schools are often too quick to label black kids as having behavior or learning problems	45	35	12	6	22	38	18	15
Schools that are mostly black have fewer good teachers and less money	44	30	13	9	23	33	17	17
Too many white teachers don't know how to deal with black kids because they come from different cultures	33	35	19	12	18	37	21	22
Too many black parents neglect to push their kids to work hard	32	41	17	9	22	36	17	15
The differences in achievement are mostly caused by differences in income and education, not race	31	38	15	14	40	38	11	9
Peer pressure leads black kids to look down on being good students	31	36	17	15	26	39	16	14
Because of racial stereotypes, teachers and principals have lower expectations for black students	28	39	17	14	15	33	23	23

Full sample: Black Parents, n = 800; White Parents, n = 800

Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

How To Help Failing Schools And African-American Students Who Are Not Doing Well

Here are some ways to deal with failing schools and African-American students who are not doing well in school. How good an idea do you think each is? Would [INSERT RANDOMLY] be an excellent, good, fair, or poor idea?

(Split sample except where indicated)	Black Parents		White Parents	
	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Good
Expanding pre-school programs to help prepare low-income black kids for school[†]	63%	27%	52%	33%
Requiring the parents of failing students to attend programs that teach them how to help their kids learn[*]	58	31	55	31
Permanently removing from school grounds kids who are caught with drugs or with weapons[†]	57	21	64	22
Taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn[†]	54	27	59	27
Raising and enforcing academic standards in failing schools so that kids pass only when they learn what they are supposed to[††]	45	33	51	30
Giving families the right to choose the public schools they want for their kids[*]	45	36	33	40
Giving mostly black schools that are failing more money and resources[†]	38	36	22	35
Giving families financial aid so they can take their kids out of failing public schools and send them to private schools[*]	27	27	15	21
Having more charter schools that free schools from many existing regulations and give them control over their own budget, staff and curriculum[*]	20	36	20	35
Taking black *children* out of failing schools and sending them to schools that are successful and mostly white[***]	15	28	8	26
Taking black *kids* out of failing schools and sending them to schools that are successful and mostly white[**]	15	26	10	24
Taking black *teenagers* out of failing schools and sending them to schools that are successful and mostly white[****]	12	30	9	21

[*] Split sample: Black Parents, n = 401; White Parents, n = 402
[†] Split sample: Black Parents, n = 399; White Parents, n = 398
[††] Full sample: Black Parents, n = 800; White Parents, n = 800
[**] 1/3 split sample: Black Parents, n = 259; White Parents, n = 231
[***] 1/3 split sample: Black Parents, n = 250; White Parents, n = 244
[****] 1/3 split sample: Black Parents, n = 255; White Parents, n = 225

Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Support For Ways To Integrate Schools

Now I'm going to read you some ways to achieve integrated schools, and ask if you favor or oppose each one. How about [INSERT RANDOMLY]? Do you favor or oppose this? [PROBE: Strongly/Somewhat]

(Split sample)	Black Parents		White Parents	
	Strongly/ Somewhat Favor	Strongly/ Somewhat Oppose	Strongly/ Somewhat Favor	Strongly/ Somewhat Oppose
Encouraging the development of housing for lower-income families in middle-class neighborhoods[†]	84%	15%	63%	32%
Redrawing district lines to combine mostly black and mostly white districts into one school district[†]	69	28	60	33
Letting parents choose their top 3 schools, while the district makes the final choice, with an eye to racial balance[†]	65	34	61	35
Relying on magnet schools that attract high-achieving white kids to mostly black schools by offering talented and gifted programs[*]	60	32	59	31
Busing children to achieve a better racial balance in the schools[*]	55	42	22	76

[*] Split sample: Black Parents, n = 401; White Parents, n = 402
[†] Split sample: Black Parents, n = 399; White Parents, n = 398

Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Endnotes

[1] For example: *The Washington Post* (sponsored by Harvard School of Public Health; Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation). National telephone survey of 1,970 adults, conducted July 20-September 28, 1995. "Do you believe it is the responsibility or isn't the responsibility of the federal government to make sure minorities have equality with whites in each of the following areas, even if it means you will have to pay more in taxes? Making sure minorities have schools equal in quality to those held by whites." Yes, is responsibility, 72%; No, isn't responsibility, 26%; Don't know/No opinion, 2%.

[2] For example: Gallup Organization (sponsored by Cable News Network; *USA Today*). National telephone survey of 1,005 adults, conducted January 10-13, 1997. "Thinking about the goals of Martin Luther King and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, do you think that all of their goals have been achieved, most have been achieved, only some have been achieved, or almost none of their goals have been achieved?" All, 2%; Most, 24%; Only some, 61%; Almost none, 9%; Not familiar with goals (vol.), 4%.

[3] Gary Orfield et al., "Deepening Segregation in American Public Schools," *Harvard Project on School Desegregation,* (April 5, 1997).

[4] Steven A. Holmes, "At N.A.A.C.P., Talk of a Shift on Integration," *The New York Times,* 23 June 1997, late edition, sec. A, p. 1, col. 2.

[5] *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want From Welfare Reform,* Public Agenda, (1996), p. 33.

[6] Respondents were asked to rate how appropriate various class textbooks and lesson plans would be for their community's public schools using a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 means it is highly appropriate and 1 means it is not at all appropriate. Ninety-seven percent of African-American and white parents rated "teaching honesty and the importance of telling the truth" as 4 or 5. Ninety-six percent of African-American parents and 98% of white parents rated "teaching respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background" as 4 or 5. Ninty-eight percent of African-American and 94% of white parents rated "teaching kids to solve problems without violence" as 4 or 5. *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools,* Public Agenda, (1994), p. 46.

[7] *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform,* Public Agenda, 1995, p. 11; and "Public Agenda: Reality Check," *Education Week,* 8 January 1998, p. 75.

[8] For example: Hart and Teeter Research Companies (sponsored by NBC News, *The Wall Street Journal).* National telephone survey of 2,010 adults, conducted March 6-10, 1997. "When you think about public education in the United States, do you feel that we need to make fundamental changes, some changes, minor changes, or no changes at all?" Fundamental changes, 58%; Some changes, 36%; Minor changes, 4%; No changes at all, 1%; Not sure, 1%. Also see: *First Things First,* (1994); *Assignment Incomplete,* (1995).

[9] For example. Gallup Organization. National survey of 1,549 adults, conducted December 5-8 1980. "Do you favor or oppose busing children to achieve a better racial balance in the schools?" Favor, 22%; Oppose, 72%; Don't know, 6%.

[10] *First Things First,* (1994), p. 33-35.

[11] Ibid, p. 10-14.

[12] All focus groups, with the exception of the Cleveland group, were conducted before the March 24, 1998, murders at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

[13] *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About The Next Generation,* Public Agenda, (1997), p. 17.

[14] *Kids These Days,* (1997), p. 13-15.

[15] Respondents were asked to rate how various ideas would improve kids' academic achievement using a 5 point scale where 5 means that it would improve academic achievement a great deal and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all. Eighty-four percent of white parents and 83% of African-American parents rated "permanently removing from school grounds kids who are caught with drugs or with weapons" as 4 or 5. Seventy-six percent of white parents and 79% of African-American parents rated "taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn" as 4 or 5. *First Things First,* (1994), p. 42.

[16] Respondents were presented with the following situation: "If the public schools in your community had been failing to give kids a quality education for 10 or 15 years, which of the following would you want done FIRST? Give parents vouchers to make private schools a more affordable option." Twenty-eight percent of the general public selected this option. *Assignment Incomplete,* (1995), p. 39.

Methodology

To assess attitudes toward race and education, Public Agenda conducted a national telephone survey of 800 African-American and 800 white parents. In preparation for the survey, Public Agenda held eight focus groups across the country and conducted interviews with 22 experts in the field. In addition, we conducted nearly two dozen open-ended follow-up interviews with respondents who had completed the survey.

Quantitative Research: The National Survey

Telephone interviews were conducted among randomly selected households with parents or guardians of children in kindergarten through 12th grade, in either public or private school, from March 26 to April 17, 1998. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length.

The 800 white parents were selected through a standard random-digit dialing (RDD) technique whereby every household in the continental United States, including those with unlisted numbers, had an equal chance of being contacted.

The sample of 800 African-American parents was gathered in the following way: 745 calls were completed by dialing numbers in targeted exchanges. Census data were used to identify telephone exchanges in areas with a 12% or higher density of black households. These exchanges cover 77% of the black households estimated in the U.S.; households were contacted randomly within these exchanges and only black parents were accepted for the survey. The remaining 55 interviews were completed from the RDD sample.

The margin of error for both black and white parents surveyed is plus or minus 3%.

The questionnaire was subject to rigorous pretesting: first with a small number of white and black parents via individual, face-to-face interviews; then with 31 interviews with black and white parents by telephone, using RDD sample.

To make the interview as comfortable as possible, all respondents were asked at the very beginning of the survey which term, "black" or "African American," they preferred. All subsequent questions in the survey used their preferred wording.

A total of 127 of the 800 interviews with black parents were conducted by African-American interviewers. A comparison of interviews conducted by black and nonblack interviewers is in Appendix 1.

As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. In addition to the pretesting of the instrument, efforts were made to minimize these by randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and Public Agenda is solely responsible for all analysis and interpretation of the data.

Interviews were conducted by Robinson and Muenster Associates of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Sample was provided by Survey Sampling, Inc. of Fairfield, Connecticut.

Qualitative Research: Focus Groups, Expert Interviews, and Background Research

To understand the public's concerns and help frame the research, eight focus groups with black and white parents were conducted across the country. To allow participants to speak more freely

about their own views, groups were race-segmented. To make it easier to evaluate class differences, some groups were also income-segmented. All groups were moderated by Public Agenda's Director of Research, Steve Farkas.

Quotes were drawn from the focus groups to give voice to the attitudes captured statistically through the survey. These were supplemented by nearly two dozen open-ended interviews conducted by telephone with respondents who agreed to be contacted after the survey.

Secaucus, NJ	White suburban parents, mixed income
Fort Myers, FL	White parents, low income (family income $15k – $35k/yr)
Baltimore County, MD	Black suburban parents who had left the city, mixed income
Raleigh, NC	Black urban parents, high income (family income $35k/yr and over)
Raleigh, NC	White urban parents, high income (family income $35k/yr and over)
Oakland, CA	Black urban parents, low income (family income $35k/yr and under)
Walnut Creek, CA	White suburban parents, high income (family income $35k/yr and over)
Cleveland, OH	Black urban parents, mixed income

To prepare for the focus groups and survey, Public Agenda conducted interviews with 22 experts and practitioners in relevant fields. These were conducted in the winter of 1997-1998 by senior Public Agenda staff. A full listing of participants is in Appendix 2.

Background research for this study also included a review of public opinion data on black and white attitudes toward the schools and a literature review of news on race and school integration.

Appendix 1

Interviewer Effects

A comparison of the 127 interviews of black parents conducted by African-American interviewers with the 673 conducted by nonblack interviewers (650 white, 23 other nonblack) shows few significant differences. In *only 5 of 120* substantive questions asked in the survey were these differences statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (using a Pearson Chi-Square test). These five questions were:

Question	Black Parents	
	Black Interviewer	**White Interviewer**
Have you ever asked your children's teachers or school — or seriously considered asking them — to change one of your children's classes because you felt they were getting treated badly? IF YES: Do you think their being treated badly definitely had something to do with your child's race, probably had something to do with it, or do you think it would have happened to any child, regardless of their race? Percent responding "definitely had something to do with race." (Black interviewers = 36, White/other interviewers = 202)	36%	17%
Which do you prefer: the term black or African American? Percent responding "African American." (Black interviewers = 121, White/other interviewers = 636)	61	44
On average, black students don't do as well as whites on standardized achievement tests. Do you think this is mostly because the tests are culturally biased against black students, because the tests measure real differences in educational achievement, or because black students keep hearing they're not supposed to do well, so they don't? Percent responding "because the tests measure real differences in educational achievement." (Black interviewers = 123, White/other interviewers = 643)	34	46
How close does this statement come to your view: Blacks are sometimes too quick to believe negative things happen to them because of their race. Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to your view? Percent responding "very close/somewhat close." (Black interviewers = 127, White/other interviewers = 671)	84	74
In the past 30 days, have you experienced racial discrimination while shopping or dining? Percent responding "yes." (Black interviewers = 127, White/other interviewers = 671)	28	18

Appendix 2

Experts Interviewed

Interviews were conducted by senior Public Agenda staff in person or via telephone with the following individuals, in the winter of 1997-1998:

Beth Dilley
Executive Director
Grand Rapids Public Education Fund

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

Dr. William H. Frey
Demographer, Professor of Sociology
University of Michigan

Dr. Joe Hairston
Superintendent
Clayton County Public Schools

Dr. Clifford B. Janey
Superintendent
Rochester City School District

Neal Johnson
Senior Research Partner
Educational Testing Service

Anna Faith Jones
President
The Boston Foundation

Beth Lief
President and Chief Executive Officer
New Visions for Public Schools

Dr. Douglas S. Massey
Professor of Sociology
University of Pennsylvania

Marciene Mattleman
Executive Director
PHILADELPHIA READS

C. Kent McGuire
Assistant Secretary for the Office of Education
Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

Dr. Gary Orfield
Professor of Education and Social Policy
Harvard University

Dr. Thomas W. Payzant
Superintendent
Boston Public Schools

William Raspberry
Columnist
The Washington Post

Virgil Roberts, Esq.
Managing Attorney
Bobbitt & Roberts

Warren Simmons
Executive Director
Philadelphia Education Fund

Sue Van Slyke
Executive Director
Hattiesburg Area Education Foundation

Dr. Estus Smith
Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Kettering Foundation

Dr. Beverly Daniels Tatum
Professor of Psychology and Education
Mount Holyoke College

Dr. John W. Thompson
Superintendent
Tulsa Public Schools

Dr. Saul M. Yanofsky
Superintendent
White Plains Public Schools

Dr. Chip Zullinger
Superintendent
Charleston County School District

Related Public Agenda Publications

Reality Check. 1998. Surveys of five groups — parents, students, K-12 teachers, employers and college professors — find sharp differences on the impact of higher standards in the classroom. The debate about standards has caught hold, but has yet to produce results employers and college professors expect. *Reality Check* is included in *Education Week's Quality Counts '98,* call (301)280-3100 for a copy. *Fully Annotated Reality Check Survey Results* are available from Public Agenda for $40.00.

Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation. 1997. A comprehensive study of Americans' attitudes toward our nation's youth, including a special focus on the views of black, Hispanic and white parents. Will today's children, once grown, make this country a better place? Are parents teaching their kids right from wrong? What solutions do Americans propose to the problems children face? These questions, and what kids have to say, are addressed in this study. Price: $10.00.

Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education. 1997. This is the first comprehensive survey of the views of education professors from U.S. colleges and universities. Their vision of education and the mission of teacher education programs are explored including their attitudes toward core curriculum, testing, standards, and the public's parameters. Price: $10.00.

Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools. 1997. Public high school students are the focus of this national telephone survey, which looks at how teens view their schools, teachers, and the learning process. Includes insights into what students say would motivate them to work harder in school and how they define "good" and "bad" teaching. Special sections on black and Hispanic students, private high school students, and students from Jefferson County (KY) and the San Francisco Bay Area are included. Price: $10.00.

Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today. 1996. Focuses on how public school teachers view the performance of the public schools; what children need to learn; and what schools need to be effective. A special focus on black and Hispanic teachers is included, along with a comparison of the views of teachers, the public, parents, and community leaders. Price: $10.00.

Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform. 1995. A follow-up study to *First Things First* (1994), this report examines why public support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so focused on the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. Price: $10.00.

First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools. 1994. Looks at how the general public, including parents of children currently in public schools, views education reform efforts as well as values issues in the schools. Included are detailed analyses of the perspectives of white and black public school parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians. Price: $10.00.

Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think About the Education Press. 1997. Prepared for the Education Writers Association, this study explores the attitudes of the general public, parents with children in public schools, educators, and education reporters and editors, toward media coverage of education. Price: $7.00.

Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda. 1996. Prepared for the 1996 Education Summit, this assessment draws from Public Agenda's extensive archive of public opinion research on education — including surveys and focus group reports — and from studies by other prominent opinion analysts. Price: $7.50.

Some Gains, But No Guarantees: How New York City's Employers Rate the Public Schools. 1998. Conducted on behalf of the New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce, this survey explores the views of the leaders of New York City-based businesses and nonprofits concerning the City's public schools and the young people graduating from them, and ways in which business could help. Copies are available from the New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce, call (212) 493-7400.

What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education. 1997. Prepared for the South Carolina Department of Education, this comprehensive study examines how South Carolinians view their public schools. The differences among the public, educators and community leaders in how they look at their schools and what solutions they feel are most promising are identified. Copies are available on the South Carolina Department of Education's Web site: www.state.sc.us/sde.

Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education. 1996. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Missouri Partnership for Outstanding Schools, this report describes how Missouri citizens feel about public education. Gaps in perspectives among educators, community leaders, and the public, including a special focus on blacks, are outlined. Copies are available from the Missouri Partnership, call 1-800-659-4044.

The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education. 1994. Prepared by Public Agenda for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, this study describes how the citizens of Connecticut feel about public education and integration in their state and why they hold these attitudes. The gaps among educators, business leaders, and the public, including a special focus on blacks and Hispanics, are outlined. Price: $5.50.

Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts. 1993. Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation, this study of educators, education administrators, parents, and business executives looks at the substantial infighting and communication gaps among these groups of education stakeholders. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $10.00.

Clarifying Issues. 1996. A nonpartisan issues guide uniquely designed to help voters clarify their own views and values on eight major issues: Race and Opportunity; the Economy; Juvenile Crime; Immigration; the American Family; the Federal Deficit; America's Global Role; and Poverty and Welfare. For each issue the guide provides a comparison of three different points of view, an outline of public initiatives consistent with each perspective, and a reference section of charts and graphs providing essential facts. Price: $5.00.

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