

NEPC REVIEW: OUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT: WHERE AMERICANS STAND ON PUBLIC K-12 EDUCATION (PUBLIC AGENDA, NOVEMBER 2018)



Reviewed by:

**Gustavo E. Fischman and Kevin Winn
Arizona State University**

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National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
(802) 383-0058
nepc.colorado.edu

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

Kevin Welner
Project Director

William Mathis
Managing Director

Alex Molnar
Publications Director

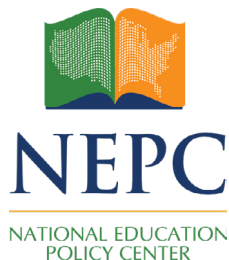
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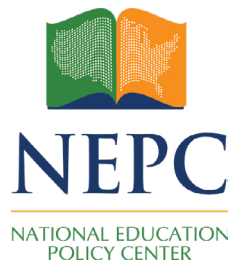
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Executive Summary

In a recent report, Public Agenda compiled public opinion surveys to show where the American public stands on education issues. The report notes the importance of gauging current public understanding of education in the nation, particularly given the three major policy changes in the past 10 years: *Race to the Top* (2009), the *Common Core State Standards* (2010), and the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015). While this publication makes a unique contribution in its gathering of many surveys into a single report and its inclusion of interviews with employers, the lack of clarity in its methods makes many of its conclusions questionable. The report was inconsistent in how it addressed disaggregated data and respondents from different demographic groups (e.g., race, class, political affiliation), resulting in an inability to generalize to the population or to any subgroup. Therefore, the conclusions are cursory and incomplete, requiring further study and research. While we do not recommend that the report be used to make policy, we do see the report as a good starting point for understanding where more research should be undertaken. As the report's authors accurately point out, this includes incorporating the often-ignored voices of students and parents.



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I. Introduction

Public Agenda's recent report, *Our next assignment: Where Americans stand on public K-12 education*,¹ reviews public opinion surveys published since 2013 about education in the United States. The report synthesizes surveys conducted by organizations such as Phi Delta Kappa, Pew Research, and the United States government to highlight American conceptions of and opinions about the current state of K-12 education. By collating the surveys' general findings within a single report, Public Agenda makes a singular, yet limited contribution.

The authors highlight contemporary education changes, noting that public education in the United States has undergone major policy shifts in the last 10 years. These changes included: (a) *Race to the Top*, an Obama administration initiative that encouraged competition among states for federal funding based on school performance; (b) *Common Core State Standards*, which 46 states adopted and set student learning goals by grade level; and (c) *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), the Obama administration's replacement of the George W. Bush era's *No Child Left Behind Act*, which focused on ensuring that children in public schools are adequately prepared to enter college or the workforce upon successfully completing high school.

The report notes the inadequate funding to implement these federal policies and the persistent achievement inequities among students. As the landscape of public education changes, this report's intention is to spotlight the public's opinions about K-12 education for the purpose of opening avenues of communication and dialogue amongst educational stakeholders. The report closes with a call to conduct further research that brings attention to the often-ignored voices of students, parents, and employers in the education policymaking process.

II. Findings and Conclusions

Public Agenda's report is divided into six findings sections:²

1. What is the purpose of public K-12 education?
2. What should students learn in K-12 education?
3. What do employers say about employees, the workforce and K-12 education?
4. How do people think schools measure up?
5. What are the challenges faced by K-12 education today?
6. What roles should government and employers play in improving K-12 education?

Regarding the purpose of K-12 education, the report found that Americans think school should provide more than just academic learning. Students should learn citizenship skills and be adequately prepared to join the workforce. Drawing on results of surveys and focus groups with employers, the findings indicate that learning both in school and on the job is largely incumbent on the individual, and individual motivation is essential for success. Finally, a majority (68%) of high school students expect to attend college, and 83% of parents expect their children to go on to higher education either part or full time.

Second, Americans support ideas of the Common Core. They believe subjects beyond STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), such as English, reading, and writing, should receive attention. Additionally, students should learn skills such as "cooperation, respect, and problem-solving," and career skills should also be more of a focus. Finally, most Americans acknowledge the necessity of standardized tests, but they do not believe they paint a complete picture of what a student actually knows.

Public Agenda conducted focus groups with employers to understand the qualities and skills that they looked for in applicants. Overall, its analysis determined that employers wanted employees "who can work with others, solve problems and think critically."³ They emphasized the necessity of potential employees possessing quality writing proficiency, public speaking, and data analysis skills."⁴ The employers surveyed indicated that these skills were particularly difficult to find in applicants for entry-level positions, and that the necessary skills for employment are missing in K-12 education.

With respect to public opinion about how public schools "measure up," the report revealed that Americans' opinions have remained consistent since the 1970s. Parents regularly rate their own local public school favorably while criticizing schools at the national level. Further, only about half of high school students believe their school has adequately prepared them to understand different career paths. A majority of college students felt that their public schools had prepared them for postsecondary education, including obtaining skills like time management, working with college faculty members, and having the appropriate academic knowledge to succeed in the classroom.

Next, Americans cite *lack of funding* as a key obstacle to school success, with a majority supporting greater federal funding assistance. Although employers recognize that inequi-

ties exist between schools in affluent versus poor areas, they note that another obstacle is students' and parents' lack of motivation. The report highlighted the following quote: "My personal belief is, I don't think the children are as motivated and have the ambition [that I had]. They don't seem to be as driven. That's my feeling, but I don't know if that's true."⁵ Further, employers recognize that teachers cannot do everything or solve every problem.

Lastly, a large majority (85%) of Americans believe that state or local governments should be responsible for addressing the problem of failing schools, and 64% think that state and local governments should set educational standards for their students. A majority also believes that parents should take charge of teaching social skills to their children from ages 3 to 6, and that parents and schools share the role of teaching children academic skills. Employers conveyed how they could get involved in education, including job shadowing opportunities and internships. The report concludes with the customary call for more research, stating "Public views on the roles of communities, though not the focus, of this report, bear further inquiry."⁶

III. Rationale

The goal of the report is to highlight public opinion about K-12 education and to illuminate areas where more research is needed. Specifically, the authors note that the voices of parents and students should be sought more often.

IV. Report's Use of Research Literature

The report depended on public opinion survey documents (with different levels of population and sub-group representativeness), government statistics, and interviews. The authors made very little use of research literature.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's methods were described in two short sections. In the first, the authors explained that they synthesized "the results of surveys of the general public, parents, teachers, students, and other stakeholders."⁷ They found their information through searching "research databases, "gray literature," and peer-reviewed articles (though no peer reviewed articles are cited in their bibliography) published after 2015, with the exception of one survey from 2013."⁸ The 2013 survey was included to provide more information about parents.

In the second section, the report shares information about its focus group interviews with employers. Public Agenda hosted two-hour-long focus groups with 20 individuals who were supervisors, managers, or otherwise involved in the employee hiring processes. Each

worked at “businesses or organizations with fewer than 500 employees,” and they were chosen by hired research firms “according to Public Agenda’s specifications,”⁹ but these “specifications” are indicated nowhere in the report. Participants came from three areas of the country: Oakland, CA; Blue Ash, OH; and Taylors, SC. They represented “a cross section of the public in the three locations” and “these locations were chosen for their variety in size, region and economy.”¹⁰

Overall, our evaluation of the methodology for this report is mixed. There are potential advantages, such as its unique design of compiling many surveys on public opinion into one report and seeking employers’ voices about public education; however, the explanation of methods is short and lacks specificity. The lack of explanation and attention to the sample sizes left the reader unclear why particular statistics were emphasized and the validity of the conclusions. Specifically, while statistics related to race, class, geographic background, or political affiliation were considered noteworthy, gender was completely ignored. The participants in the focus groups were also unidentified.

The report was easy to read and digest due to its clear presentation of a mixture of written reports, understandable charts and graphs, boxes with other notable findings and quotes from employers in focus groups. Nevertheless, the findings must be questioned due to the unclear methodology and insufficient explanation of how the authors compiled and subsequently used the data, particularly as it relates to demographic breakdowns. Examples of this can be found throughout the report when claims begin with language such as, “Americans believe...” or “A majority of Americans think...” While these statements may be true, the authors do not consider disaggregated data in a comprehensive or consistent way. Readers are left wondering how particular demographic groups responded to certain questions and whether or not their answers differed from the general conclusions. One example of this occurs when the report addresses whether or not high school students feel prepared in understanding different career options. The report indicates that 49% feel their high schools helped them in this regard. The readers are not given any indication of which students feel prepared. Do these students representatively reflect the United States population of students? Are there differences in the ways that students answered this question in terms of race, class, or gender? As it is written now, the readers are left to guess and draw their own conclusions.

Throughout the report, there are small boxes with extra information about each particular finding. These asides offer more context, but these additional pieces of information are inconsistent from one finding to the next. It would have been helpful if the report had provided an explanation about why it included demographic breakdowns for some findings and not others.

The report concludes with a not-so-original general call to “conduct more research” in the areas of its six major findings. Perhaps the most curious implication and recommendation that the report offers is “Do not overlook employers’ views that parents are too lenient and students are lazy.”¹¹ This recommendation makes us wonder, to whom is this suggestion targeted? What is the work to be done here? It also makes us consider, and the authors do point this out, who should be involved in making education policy? Why privilege private sector employers’ voice in the discussion about education in America? Further, based on the gener-

al orientation of the educational reforms since the 1980s, it seems evident that policymakers have been listening to some employers, and ignoring other perspectives.¹²

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings

Our attention incessantly demands responses to new surveys developed and administered at increased speed, and the information produced becomes outdated at even faster rates. This report cannot escape this issue of ephemeral relevance, yet it offers important clues for further reflection. The authors gathered, classified, and analyzed opinions to explain the perspectives of large numbers of people who do not have any ideological consistency and often expressed contradictory opinions about the purposes of public schools.

Inquiring into the preferences of a society makes sense only by considering the historical conditions and social, economic, political and educational dynamics. Investigating public opinion cannot be done without contextualizing the findings, since the opinions expressed have meaning only within a relatively fixed time and space. To put it another way: examining *Where Americans stand on public K-12 education* as a measure of social preferences is not equivalent to inquiring about their tastes with respect to beer or toothpaste, although the technique used in the measurement can be the same. The relevant task for this kind of report is also contextualizing the findings, discovering what is not said, and interpreting what is expressed, and unfortunately, this report by Public Agenda does not get very high marks for relevance.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance and Policy and Practice

While this report offers valuable insights, these should be taken only as a starting point for policymaking. While the authors do a solid job of gathering relevant sources reporting the general opinions of Americans about K-12 education, the report lacks depth due to the lack of specificity in its explanation of methods, including its focus group interview participants, the lack of disaggregation of the data by group, and the inconsistent reporting of findings by demographics. However, it is a useful foundation for generating future and more comprehensive reports that will effectively identify representative opinion surveys, and conduct focus groups and questionnaires with diverse groups of educational stakeholders. It can be used as an initial informative starting point, but policymakers will be required to conduct deeper research for each issue within the report.

Notes and References

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