The 22nd Annual GALLUP POLL Of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools

by Stanley M. Elam

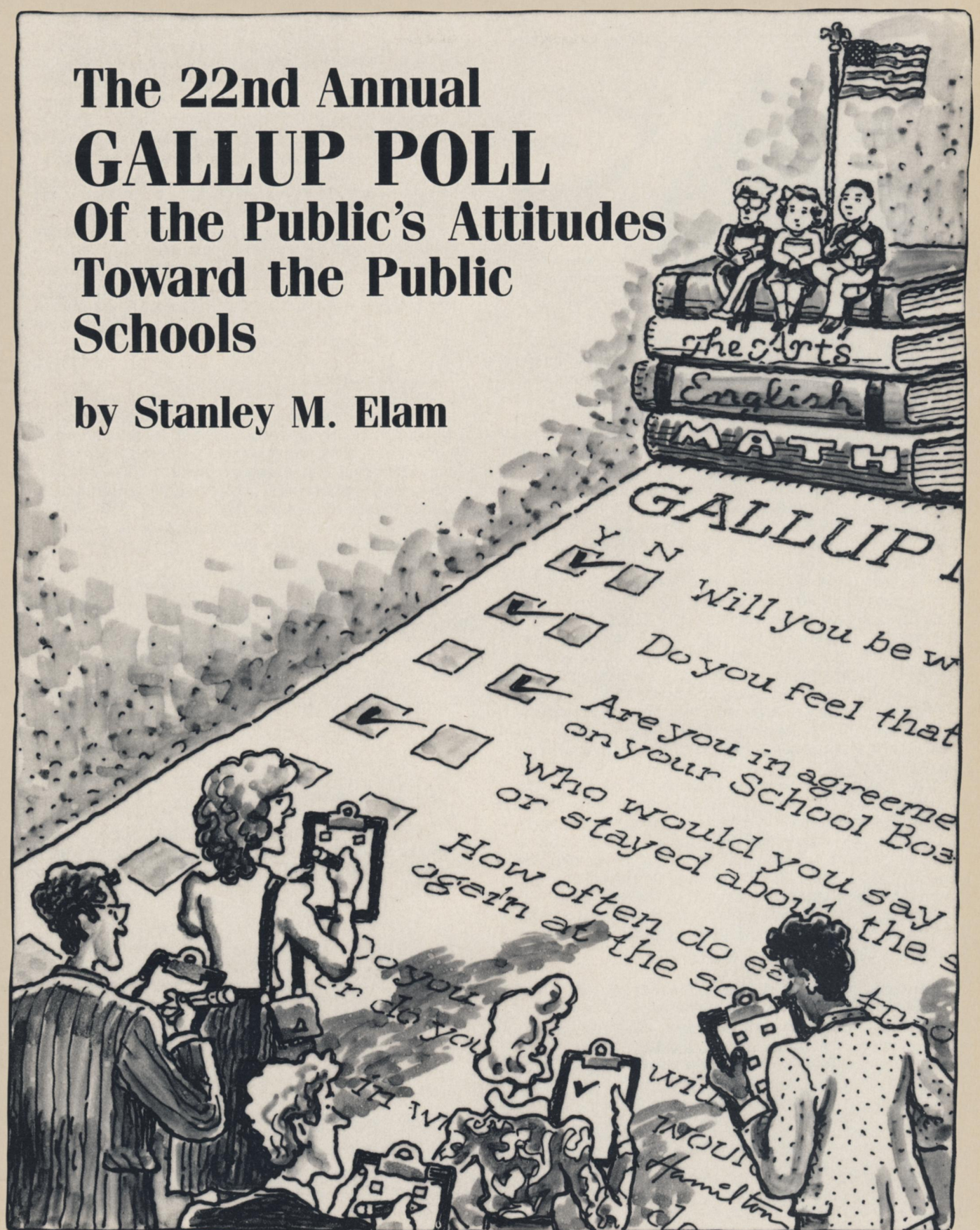
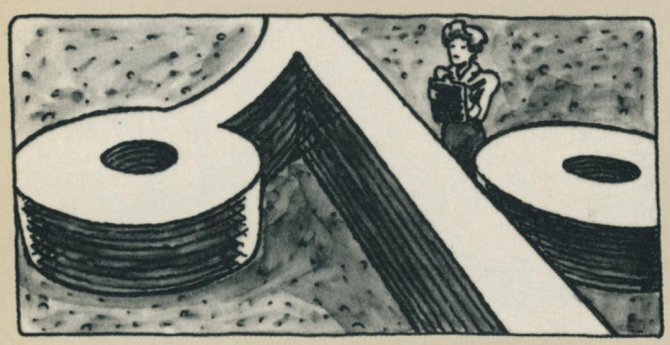


Illustration by Marcus Hamilton



National Goals for Education

People strongly believe in the six education goals for the Nineties announced last February, with appropriate fanfare, by President George Bush and the 50 state governors. They believe in them so strongly that they would like to vote for political candidates who support these goals. But people are also profoundly skeptical about the possibility that the goals can be reached within this decade, which was part of the plan put forth by the President and the governors.

These conclusions are drawn from answers to three key questions asked in the 22nd Annual Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa and conducted by the Gallup Organization in April and May 1990.

More than three-quarters of the 1,594 adults interviewed for the poll attach very high or high priority to all six of the national goals for education. They give highest priority to the last goal: to free every school in America from drugs and violence and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. But only 5% of the respondents think it very likely that we will achieve this goal by the year 2000, and 36% think it very *unlikely* that we will. The only goal among the six that even 50% of the people think we might reach in this decade is that of readying children to learn by the time they start school.

This pessimism echoes the judgment of many experts, some of whom, like Dorothy Rich, president of the Home and School Institute and a member of the governing board for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, regard the goals as political pabulum. "They are too big to be doable," she asserts. "It's like saying, 'No one will be killing each other in automobile accidents by the year 2000.' "*

The nation's education goals for the Nineties, as stated by President Bush at the conclusion of his February conference with the 50 state governors, are:

A. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn [i.e., in good health, having been read to and otherwise prepared by parents, etc.].
B. By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90% [from the current rate of 74%].
C. By the year 2000, American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. In addition, every school in America will insure that all students learn to use their minds, in order to prepare them for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in a modern economy.
D. By the year 2000, American students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
E. By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
F. By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

The first question:

This card describes several national education goals that have been recommended for attainment by the year 2000. First, would you read over the description of the different goals on the card. Now, as I read off each goal by letter, would you tell me how high a priority you feel that goal should be given during the coming decade — very high, high, low, or very low?

	Priority Assigned Each Goal				
Goal	Very High %	High %	Low %	Very Low %	Don't Know %
A	44	44	6	2	4
B	45	42	8	1	4
C	46	42	7	2	3
D	34	42	16	3	5
E	45	37	11	3	4
F	55	26	9	6	4

The second question:

As I read off each goal by letter again, would you tell me whether you think reaching that goal by the year 2000 is very likely, likely, unlikely, or very unlikely?

	Likelihood of Attainment				
Goal	Very Likely %	Likely %	Unlikely %	Very Unlikely %	Don't Know %
A	12	38	33	12	5
B	10	35	37	12	6
C	9	38	36	12	5
D	6	23	41	24	6
E	7	25	42	21	5
F	5	14	40	36	5

The third question:

As I read off each goal by letter again, please tell me how much influence a political candidate's support for that goal would have on your decision to vote for him or her — a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or almost none.

*For a roundup of expert opinion on the goals, see Lynn Olson, "Lessons Learned? Old Goal-Setting Stirs New Doubts," *Education Week*, 14 February 1990, pp. 1, 23. The same article appears in the April 1990 issue of *Teacher*, under the title "Now Comes the Hard Part" (pp. 12-15).

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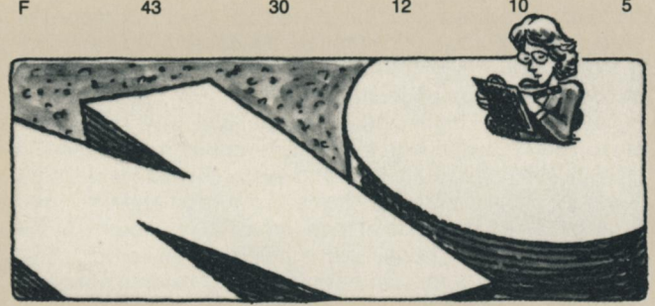
Illustrations by Marcus Hamilton

Influence of Candidate's Support on My Vote

Goal	A Great Deal %	A Fair Amount %	Not Very Much %	Almost None %	Don't Know %
A	29	37	18	11	5
B	30	36	19	10	5
C	32	36	17	10	5
D	26	35	21	13	5
E	33	36	16	10	5
F	43	30	12	10	5



Trends in Support for Parental Choice

Beginning in 1979, these annual polls have probed the sensitive issue of parental choice of schools. In that year parents were asked if they would like to send their eldest child to a public school different from the school that child currently attended. The great majority of parents (78%) whose eldest child was 12 or younger said no; only 12% said yes. An even larger majority (85%) of parents whose eldest child was older than 12 said no, while 11% said yes. This was hardly a resounding endorsement of school choice.

In 1986, however, two related questions were asked, with considerably different results. In that year 68% of public school parents said they wished they had the right to choose the public schools their children would attend, while 25% said they did not. Mothers were particularly intrigued with the idea; 73% of mothers (but only 62% of fathers) said they wished they could choose their children's schools. The percentage of public school parents who said they would choose the same schools their children currently attended dropped from the higher 1979 level down to 65%, again with women particularly favoring change.

In 1987 all respondents were asked whether they thought parents in their community should have the right to choose which local schools their children would attend. Seventy-one percent of the total sample (and 81% of all nonpublic school parents) said yes; only 20% of the total sample said no.

A question intended to reveal attitudes toward vouchers was asked several times in these surveys. The question was worded as follows: "In some nations, the government allots a certain amount of money for each child's education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. This is called the 'voucher system.' Would you like to see such an idea adopted in this country?" The national totals were:

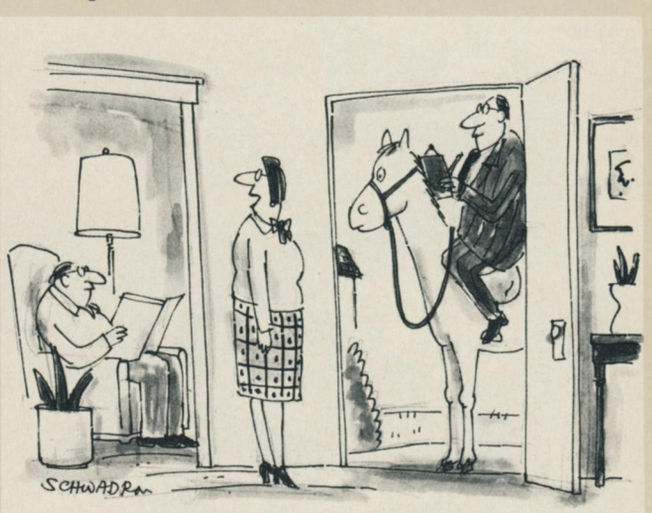
	1987 %	1986 %	1985 %	1983 %	1981 %	1971 %	1970 %
Favor	44	46	45	51	43	38	43
Oppose	41	41	40	38	41	44	46
Don't know	15	13	15	11	16	18	11

The 1987 poll followed this voucher question with another, asking people whether they thought the voucher system would help or hurt the local public schools. Forty-two percent said they thought vouchers would hurt the public schools, and 36% said they thought vouchers would help. Of those who *favored* vouchers, 73% thought that vouchers would help the local public schools; of those *opposed* to vouchers, 81% thought that vouchers would damage the local public schools.

Now that several states have begun experimenting with parental choice plans and the idea of school choice has the backing of President Bush and the U.S. Department of Education, the question on choice has been asked in a new form. As framed in 1989, it avoided the issue of public versus nonpublic schools that arises when vouchers are discussed. People were simply asked whether they favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose the public schools that students attend, regardless of where they live. (Respondents were not asked to consider the many ramifications of public school choice.) A sizable majority supported the idea in 1989 (60% in favor to 31% opposed), and the results were virtually identical when the same question was asked again this year.

In the 1989 poll, the question on school choice was followed by three other questions intended to reveal opinions regarding whether choice would improve all or only some schools, whether choice would improve student achievement, and whether choice would increase student satisfaction with the local schools. A majority (51%) thought choice would improve some schools and hurt others. Forty-two percent thought that choice would not make much difference in student achievement, but another 40% thought that achievement would increase. Half of the respondents (49%) thought that student satisfaction with the schools would improve; 37% said that choice would make little difference; and 7% said that student satisfaction would be lower.

It seems clear from the above record that the idea of public school choice is attractive, much as motherhood, freedom, and apple pie are attractive. It remains to be seen whether choice plans can be carried out in ways that preserve other values that may be equally important to people. The current experiments in Minnesota, Arkansas, and Iowa should give us clues.



"Someone from the Gallup poll, Mel."

The question:

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	62	60	65	81
Oppose	31	33	30	14
Don't know	7	7	5	5

Further breakdowns for the 1990 question:

	Favor %	Oppose %	Don't Know %
NATIONAL TOTALS	**62**	**31**	**7**
Sex			
Men	61	34	5
Women	63	29	8
Race			
White	60	34	6
Nonwhite	72	18	10
Age			
18 - 29 years	72	23	5
30 - 49 years	63	31	6
50 and over	54	38	8
Community Size			
1 million and over	64	27	9
500,000 - 999,999	61	36	3
50,000 - 499,999	60	33	7
2,500 - 49,999	61	36	3
Under 2,500	60	33	7
Education			
College	62	33	5
Graduate	62	30	8
Incomplete	63	34	3
High school	65	28	7
Graduate	66	28	6
Incomplete	62	29	9
Grade school	44	43	13
Income			
$40,000 and over	59	37	4
$30,000 - $39,999	62	32	6
$20,000 - $29,999	67	27	6
$10,000 - $19,999	60	30	10
Under $10,000	60	31	9
Region			
East	62	27	11
Midwest	57	38	5
South	66	28	6
West	62	34	4

Reasons for Choosing a School

In 1990 a new dimension was added to the survey's treatment of parental choice. Respondents were asked what aspects of a public school would be most influential in decision making should parental choice be adopted in their community. Teacher quality, student discipline, and the curriculum were judged very important by three-fourths or more of all respondents, but class size, the track record of graduates in college or on the job, school size, and proximity to the student's home were also rated either very or fairly important by large majorities.

These are all legitimate considerations. But one set of responses calls attention to the same concern about parental choice in public education that critics of voucher systems raise: Would not parental choice encourage and/or permit segregation on the basis of race, ethnicity, and perhaps socioeconomic status? Civil libertarians insist that a democracy cannot tolerate this kind of elitism and discrimination in the public schools.

Forty-eight percent of the respondents admitted that the racial or ethnic composition of the student body would be either a very or a fairly important consideration in decision making. This response puts racial and ethnic considerations near the bottom of the list. In interpreting such data, however, it is well to remember a distinction between public opinion and private sentiment drawn by historian John Lukacs: public opinion is the formal remarks that folks make to pollsters; private sentiment is the set of beliefs and biases that people are often too embarrassed to disclose. It is possible that racial and ethnic considerations are much more important factors in school choice than people admit to pollsters.

The question:

This card lists different factors that might be considered in choosing a public school for a child, assuming that a free choice of public schools was allowed in this community. As I read off each of these factors one at a time, would you tell me whether you would consider it very important, fairly important, not too important, or not important at all in choosing a local school?

	National Totals				
	Very Important %	Fairly Important %	Not Too Important %	Not Important at All %	Don't Know %
Quality of the teaching staff	87	8	2	*	3
Maintenance of student discipline	78	17	1	1	3
Curriculum (i.e., the courses offered)	73	22	2	*	3
Size of classes	56	32	8	1	3
Grades or test scores of the student body	48	41	7	1	3
Track record of graduates in high school, in college, or on a job	43	38	12	3	4
Size of the school	35	37	21	4	3
Proximity to home	31	43	19	4	3
Extracurricular activities, such as band/ orchestra, theater, clubs	24	50	20	3	3

Illustrations by Marcus Hamilton

	Very Important %	Fairly Important %	Not Too Important %	Not Important at All %	Don't Know %
Social and economic background of the student body	22	37	31	7	3
Racial or ethnic composition of the student body	21	27	34	15	3
Athletic program	20	38	32	7	3

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Parental Control of Public Schools

Since 1987 the public schools of Rochester, New York, have been run by a team of parents, teachers, and administrators. In Chicago locally elected councils composed predominantly of parents have been in charge of all the city's 541 public schools since last fall.

Responses to a question asked in last year's poll suggest that similar experiments would be warmly received elsewhere. The 1989 poll showed that more than 40% of the general public believed that parents should have a greater say regarding the allocation of school funds, the content of the curriculum, the hiring of teachers and administrators, and the choice of textbooks and instructional materials.

The 1989 question:

Do you feel that parents of public school students should have more say, less say, or do they have about the right amount of say regarding the following areas in public schools?

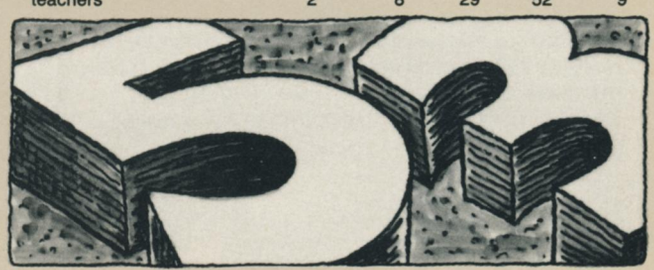
	More Say 1989 %	Less Say 1989 %	Right Amount 1989 %	Don't Know 1989 %
Allocation of school funds	59	10	27	4
Curriculum (i.e., the courses offered	53	9	36	2
Selection and hiring of administrators	46	14	37	3
Books and instructional materials	43	13	41	3
Selection and hiring of teachers	41	17	38	4
Teacher and administrator salaries	39	17	39	5
Books placed in the school libraries	38	15	44	3

In the current poll, people were asked for their opinion on how much influence public school parents actually do exercise in most of these same areas. The responses show that the public perceives parental influence to be minimal. In areas such as salaries and hiring, half of the respondents said that parents have almost no say.

The question:

In your opinion, how much say do the parents of public school students have about the following areas in the public schools in this community — a great deal, a fair amount, very little, or almost none?

	A Great Deal %	A Fair Amount %	Very Little %	Almost None %	Don't Know %
Books placed in the school libraries	5	17	29	37	12
Curriculum (i.e., the courses offered)	4	21	37	28	10
Books and instructional materials	3	14	31	41	11
Teacher and administrator salaries	3	12	25	50	10
Selection and hiring of administrators	3	11	26	50	10
Selection and hiring of teachers	2	8	29	52	9



Examinations for Promotion

Because many policy-making bodies have recently declared war on what they view as soft or shoddy academic standards, a question about promotion policy was included in this poll.

Public opinion continues to oppose promotion from one grade to the next unless the student can pass examinations — presumably grade- and curriculum-appropriate examinations. Opinion seems not to have changed on the issue since the question was first asked in 1978. But it is probably accurate to say that a majority of educators hold a different opinion. Although few teachers approve of strictly "social" promotion, most believe that considerations other than passing an exam must be taken into account when decisions about promotion are made. There is much research evidence to support their belief. Certainly, making a child repeat a grade without taking other steps to help him or her learn is often counterproductive. This is an area in which the profession needs to educate the general public.

The question:

In your opinion, should children be promoted from grade to grade only if they can pass examinations?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Yes	67	67	66	71
No	29	28	31	27
Don't know	4	5	3	2

	National Totals			
	1990 %	1984 %	1983 %	1978 %
Yes	67	71	75	68
No	29	25	20	27
Don't know	4	4	5	5

Retention in Grade and Dropout Rates

Get tough! This is the advice commonly offered to educators by critics who regard student achievement in public schools as unsatisfactory. To them, getting tough often means retention in grade for the student who can't or won't master the curriculum. At the same time, many of the same critics deplore today's public school dropout rate. Is there a connection between retention in grade and the dropout rate? This year's poll explored current opinion on the issue.

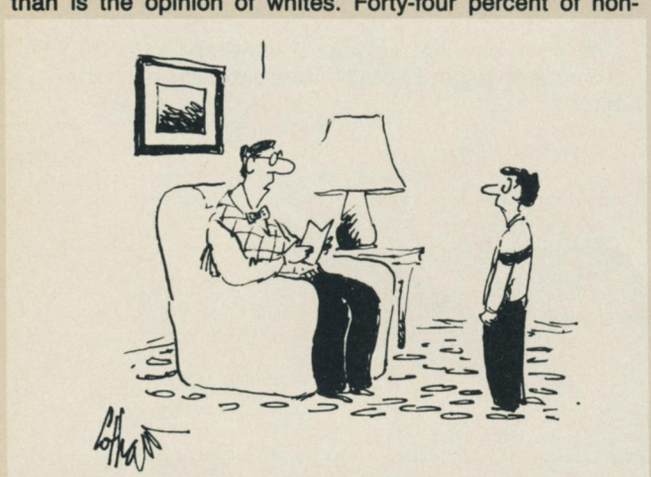
The question:

Just your impression — which children are more likely to drop out of school: those who fail achievement tests and have to repeat a grade, or those who fail achievement tests and are promoted anyway?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
More of those who repeat a grade will drop out	32	34	28	31
More of those promoted anyway will drop out	54	52	60	56
Don't know	14	14	12	13

As well-informed educators will recognize, the majority view on this question is at odds with the findings of research. In *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention* (Falmer Press, 1989), Lorrie Shepard and Mary Lee Smith report the findings of a meta-analysis of 63 studies, which shows that students who are retained in grade are far more likely to drop out than students of similar ability and achievement who are promoted. It is easy to oversimplify the Shepard/Smith findings, but there is little doubt that their chief conclusion is correct. Thus the majority view on this question is merely opinion, and it is erroneous.

It is interesting to note that opinion expressed by nonwhites on this question is closer to the findings of research than is the opinion of whites. Forty-four percent of nonwhites (but only 30% of whites) believe that repeaters are more likely to drop out. By contrast, 57% of whites (but only 41% of nonwhites) believe that students who are promoted despite unsatisfactory performance are more likely to drop out.



"Judging from your grades, I'd say you've found your niche — it's the fourth grade."

Access to Personal Information About Students

Research recently conducted by members of Phi Delta Kappa under the direction of Jack Frymier, senior fellow at Phi Delta Kappa International Headquarters, shows that teachers have only limited access to the kinds of personal background information about students that would help them adapt their methods to individual needs.* Because of privacy considerations, schools have been hesitant to collect this kind of information and make it available to teachers, even under rules designed to guarantee strict confidentiality.

Answers to a question asked in the current poll show that a majority (60%) of the respondents favor giving educators more latitude to collect and use personal information. However, the size of this majority is by no means overwhelming, as it should probably be before policies are changed. This is a case in which local polls would be useful to policy makers.**

The question:

Some educators say that the public schools could do a better job of educating students if they had more personal information about the home situations of students, for example, whether the parents are divorced, whether there is a family history of alcoholism, or whether there are other factors that put the student at risk. Assuming that the information is kept confidential, do you think that the public schools in this community should or should not have access to more personal information about students than they now have?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Should	60	61	56	61
Should not	32	30	37	32
Don't know	8	9	7	7

*Jack Frymier and Bruce Gansneder, "The Phi Delta Kappa Study of Students at Risk," *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1989, pp. 142-46.

**Phi Delta Kappa distributes a manual titled *PACE* (Polling Attitudes of the Community on Education), which explains in detail how to conduct accurate local polls. For information, contact Neville Robertson, Director, Center for Dissemination of Innovative Programs, Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402. Ph. 812/339-1156.

Illustration by Marcus Hamilton

Equal Educational Opportunity

Whites in America seem convinced that, on the whole, blacks and other minority children have the same educational opportunities as whites. This conviction has not changed since 1975, when the question was first asked in these surveys.

But nonwhites (who make up 14% of the sample in the current poll) have a considerably different view. A disturbing 38% see inequality of opportunity in education. Much of the dissatisfaction appears in larger cities, where minority populations are concentrated.

The question:

In your opinion, do black children and other minorities in this community have the same educational opportunities as white children?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Yes	79	78	81	77
No	15	16	14	19
Don't know	6	6	5	4

Further breakdowns:

	Yes %	No %	Don't Know %
NATIONAL TOTALS	**79**	**15**	**6**
Sex			
Men	80	15	5
Women	79	15	6
Race			
White	83	11	6
Nonwhite	56	38	6
Age			
18 - 29 years	73	22	5
30 - 49 years	81	13	6
50 and over	82	12	6
Community Size			
1 million and over	71	23	6
500,000 - 999,999	82	17	1
50,000 - 499,999	81	13	6
2,500 - 49,999	90	8	2
Under 2,500	86	6	8
Education			
College	79	15	6
Graduate	78	15	7
Incomplete	80	15	5
High school	80	15	5
Graduate	79	15	6
Incomplete	82	14	4
Grade school	78	15	7
Income			
$40,000 and over	80	13	7
$30,000 - $39,999	83	12	5
$20,000 - $29,999	80	16	4
$10,000 - $19,999	82	15	3
Under $10,000	75	19	6
Region			
East	80	13	7
Midwest	80	11	9
South	81	17	2
West	76	20	4

Desirability of Teaching as a Career

Perceptions of the desirability of public school teaching as a career have been measured seven times since this series of polls began in 1969. The attractiveness of the occupation has fluctuated considerably, related no doubt to changing popular attitudes toward the schools and to impressions about teacher income. Unfortunately, only about half of today's parents (compared with 75% in 1969) would like to see one of their children become a public school teacher. Interestingly, college-educated and high-income respondents are as likely as poorly educated and low-income respondents to perceive teaching as a desirable career for their children today.

The question:

Would you like to have a child of yours take up teaching in the public schools as a career?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Yes	51	49	56	51
No	38	39	37	40
Don't know	11	12	7	9

	National Totals						
	1990 %	1988 %	1983 %	1981 %	1980 %	1972 %	1969 %
Yes	51	58	45	46	48	67	75
No	38	31	33	43	40	22	15
Don't know	11	11	22	11	12	11	10

Teacher Salaries, Working Conditions, And School Quality

In 1969 more people thought teacher salaries in their communities were about right (43%) than thought them too low (35%). Today 50% of poll respondents think salaries are too low, and 31% think them about right. Only a small minority has ever thought that teachers are paid too much for their services.

Respondents to the current poll were asked whether they think raising teacher salaries would improve school quality. A substantial majority (79%) do think that higher salaries would have this effect, but 17% said that there would be almost no improvement. (Respondents were not given the option of saying that higher salaries would damage school quality.)

A similarly worded question asked about the possible effect on public school quality of better working conditions for teachers. Responses differ little from those obtained for the salary question. However, there is a hint that people think better working conditions would yield more school improvement than higher salaries. Teachers themselves often espouse the same belief.*

*Stanley Elam, *The Second Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Survey of Public School Teacher Opinion: Portrait of a Beleaguered Profession* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1989).

The first question:

Do you think salaries for teachers in this community are too high, too low, or just about right?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Too high	5	5	3	1
Too low	50	49	54	54
Just about right	31	31	32	34
No opinion	14	15	11	11

	National Totals					
	1990 %	1985 %	1984 %	1983 %	1981 %	1969 %
Too high	5	6	7	8	10	2
Too low	50	33	37	35	29	33
Just about right	31	43	41	31	41	43
No opinion	14	18	15	26	20	22

The second question:

Do you think that raising teacher salaries would improve the quality of education in the schools in this community a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or almost not at all?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A great deal	16	14	18	21
A fair amount	35	36	35	33
Not very much	28	28	28	23
Almost not at all	17	17	17	18
Don't know	4	5	2	5

The third question:

Do you think that providing better working conditions for teachers would improve the quality of education in the public schools in this community a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or almost not at all?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A great deal	25	24	29	31
A fair amount	37	38	34	36
Not very much	21	21	20	19
Almost not at all	12	11	14	12
Don't know	5	6	3	2

Appropriate Salaries for Teaching And Other Occupations

In the 1984 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll, people assigned numerical values to their impressions of the prestige and value to society of each of 12 different occupations. Public school teachers were ranked third, after the clergy and physicians, in value to society, but they were ranked seventh in prestige or status.

A related question in the current poll suggests that the public does not believe that the value of a profession to society should necessarily determine the income of those who practice that profession. Respondents were asked to indicate what annual salary should be paid to people in each of seven different occupations. As the table below shows, people think teachers should be paid less than medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, pharmacists, and even nurses. Interestingly, the clergy, whose societal contribution the public considers so valuable, are dead last in terms of the salary the public would assign them.

The question:

As I mention the name of an occupation or profession, would you please tell me the annual salary you feel people in that occupation should be paid in this community?

	$50,000 And Over %	$40,000-$49,999 %	$30,000-$39,999 %	$29,999-Or Less %	Don't Know %
Medical doctors	73	6	3	10	8
Lawyers	66	10	6	8	10
Engineers	53	20	11	6	10
Pharmacists	38	23	18	14	7
Nurses	26	22	26	18	8
Public school teachers	21	21	28	22	8
Plumbers	18	19	30	25	8
Clergy	12	14	26	37	11

Required Core Courses

For the sixth time, this poll gathered data on the public's perception of which subjects should be required of high school students who are bound for college and of high school students who are not college-bound. Public opinion on these issues has changed little over the past decade. For students who plan to attend college, more than 70% of the respondents would require at least five basic subjects: math, English, history, science, and computer training.

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More than half would require geography, career education, business education, foreign language, and health education. People would place less emphasis on several of these subjects for non-college-bound students, particularly foreign language and science, but they would require vocational education instead.

The question:

Please look over this card, which lists high school subjects. If you were the one to decide, what subjects would you require every public high school student who plans to go on to college to take? What about those *not* planning to go on to college?

For Those Planning to Go to College

	1990 %	1987 %	1985 %	1984 %	1983 %	1981 %
Mathematics	96	94	91	96	92	94
English	92	91	88	94	88	91
History/U.S. government	84	84	76	84	78	83
Science	81	83	76	84	76	76
Computer training	75	72	71	–	–	–
Geography	63	–	–	–	–	–
Career education	62	63	57	–	–	–
Business education	59	59	59	68	55	60
Foreign language	56	56	53	57	50	54
Health education	53	54	48	52	43	47
Physical education	40	45	40	43	41	44
Vocational training	29	31	27	37	32	34
Art	24	23	23	24	19	28
Music	22	23	24	22	18	26

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)

For Those *Not* Planning to Go to College

	1990 %	1987 %	1985 %	1984 %	1983 %	1981 %
Mathematics	90	88	85	92	87	91
English	86	85	81	90	83	89
Vocational training	74	78	75	83	74	64
History/U.S. government	67	69	61	71	63	71
Computer training	63	61	57	–	–	–
Business education	63	65	60	76	65	75
Career education	60	61	57	–	–	–
Science	58	57	51	61	53	58
Health education	50	49	43	50	42	46
Geography	48	–	–	–	–	–
Physical education	38	41	40	44	40	43
Foreign language	25	20	17	19	19	21
Art	17	17	15	18	16	20
Music	16	15	15	18	16	20

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)

Subjects High Schools Should Emphasize

Respondents to this poll were asked which subjects should receive more — and which subjects should receive less — emphasis in high school. People tend to want more emphasis on the same subjects that top their required lists. For example, 80% would increase emphasis on mathematics. But it is something of an anomaly that foreign language is given short shrift, since so many people would require it for college-bound students. Not surprisingly — although most educators will deplore this finding — many respondents would deemphasize music and art.

The question:

As I read off each high school subject, would you tell me if you think that subject should be given more emphasis, less emphasis, or the same emphasis it now receives in high school — regardless of whether or not you think it should be required?

National Totals

	More Emphasis %	Less Emphasis %	Same Emphasis %	Don't Know %
Mathematics	80	3	14	3
English	79	3	15	3
Computer training	79	5	12	4
Career education	73	6	16	5
Science	68	11	18	3
History/U.S. government	65	9	23	3
Vocational education	65	9	22	4
Health education	62	10	25	3
Business	60	11	25	4
Geography	53	18	25	4
Foreign language	37	34	25	4
Physical education	32	27	37	4
Music	13	39	43	5
Art	12	42	40	6

Beyond the Basics

People would like their public high schools to do much more than teach the so-called basics. In fact, more people would require drug abuse education in high schools than would require any subjects other than math and English. Alcohol abuse education, AIDS education, sex education, and information about environmental issues and about teen pregnancy are also high on the public's list of subjects to be required. Character education, which is uncommon as a formal subject in public high schools, has as much support as a required subject as does driver education.

The question:

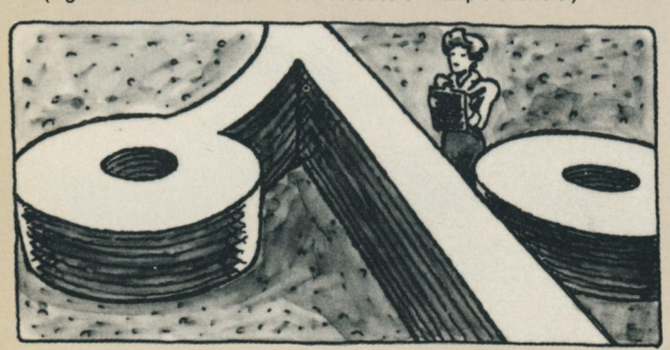
Please look over this card, which lists areas in which some public high schools offer instruction beyond the standard academic courses. If you were the one to decide, which subject areas would you *require* every public high school student to study?

	National Totals %	Public School Parents %	No Children In School %
Would Require			
Drug abuse education	90	92	89
Alcohol abuse education	84	86	82
AIDS education	77	77	77
Sex education	72	74	71
Environmental issues and problems	66	65	66
Teen pregnancy	64	64	65
Driver education	59	62	59
Character education	57	56	57
Parenting/parent training	46	48	45
Dangers of nuclear waste	30	29	31
Dangers of nuclear war	28	28	28
Communism/socialism	24	23	25

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)

	National Totals		
	1990 %	1984 %	1983 %
Would Require			
Drug abuse education	90	82	81
Alcohol abuse education	84	79	76
AIDS education	77	–	–
Sex education	72	–	–
Environmental issues and problems	66	–	–
Teen pregnancy	64	–	–
Driver education	59	73	72
Character education	57	–	–
Parenting/parent training	46	55	58
Dangers of nuclear waste	30	61	56
Dangers of nuclear war	28	51	46
Communism/socialism	24	57	51

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)



Success in High School And in Later Life

Educators are well aware that there is a close correlation between academic success in high school and academic success in college. This relationship has been extensively explored and documented. The current poll shows that the general public is also aware of this correlation: 76% of poll respondents said that the relationship between success in high school and success in college is either very close or fairly close.

The relationship between academic success in high school and success in one's occupation is less extensively researched and documented, partly because of the difficulty of measuring "success" in an occupation. But as the answers to the second question below demonstrate, nearly as many laypeople believe that high school grades correlate with occupational success as believe in the connection between high school grades and college success. These findings are congruent with earlier poll findings that show how important people believe a good education to be for success in one's life work.

The first question:

Just your impression — how close a relationship do you feel there is between how high a student's grades are in high school and how academically successful he or she will be in college? Do you feel the relationship is very close, fairly close, not very close, or not close at all?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Very close	25	25	26	21
Fairly close	51	51	51	63
Not very close	13	13	13	11
Not close at all	4	3	4	1
Don't know	7	8	6	4

The second question:

Just your impression — how close a relationship do you feel there is between how good a student's grades are in high school and how successful he or she will be after completing school, that is, in an occupation or profession? Do you feel the relationship is very close, fairly close, not very close, or not close at all?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Very close	21	19	23	12
Fairly close	49	49	48	68
Not very close	19	20	18	11
Not close at all	5	5	7	1
Don't know	6	7	4	8

Grading the Public Schools

Over the past seven years there have been no statistically significant changes in the ratings people give their local public schools. During this period, between 40% and 43% of poll respondents have graded their local schools A or B. The highest ratings were given in 1974, when this question was first asked. In that year nearly half (48%) of all respondents gave their schools an A or a B. The low point came in 1983, just after *A Nation at Risk* was released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education and was widely publicized by the media. Only 31% of poll respondents gave local schools an A or a B in that year. Even allowing for some sampling error, the drop of 17 percentage points in approval ratings between 1974 and 1983 represented a negative shift in opinion for perhaps 25 million of the 170 million or more voting-age adults in the U.S. Now

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we seem to have gained back about 10 points. These trends are presented in the tables below.

One interesting but unexplained feature of the 1990 findings is the fact that, for the first time in several years, whites and nonwhites award very similar ratings to their local public schools. In past polls nonwhites tended to give their schools measurably lower ratings. For example, in 1987 only 35% of nonwhites gave their schools A or B ratings; 43% of whites did so. This year the figures are virtually identical for the two groups.

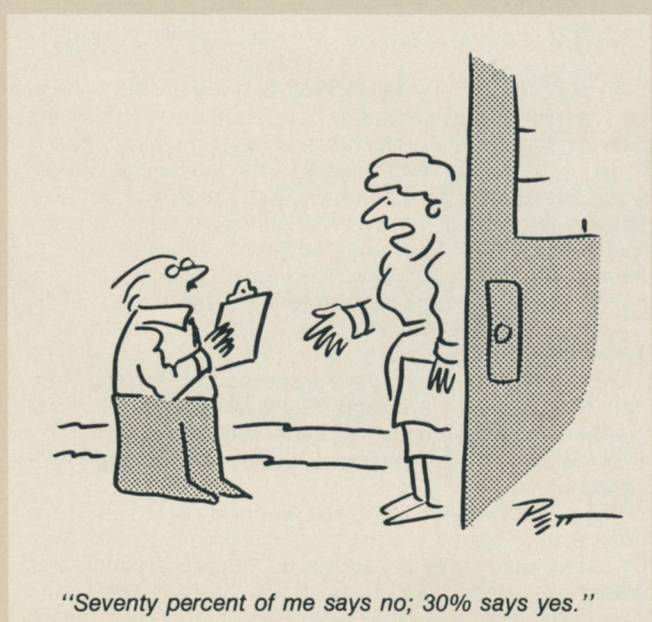
As past polls have amply demonstrated, people tend to give higher grades to their local public schools than they give to public schools nationally. There is a suggestion in the tables below of a slow deterioration in the national ratings in recent years. It is tempting to attribute this change to increasingly negative media coverage, but I know of no hard evidence to support such a conclusion.

The contrast between ratings given the nation's schools and ratings given local schools by the people who should know them best — parents of children currently attending the schools — is striking and instructive. Note that 72% of parents believe the public school their eldest child attends is worthy of a rating of A or B. Compare this with the 21% A or B rating given to the nation's public schools by all respondents, parents included. The most reasonable explanation for this phenomenon is that the more firsthand knowledge one has about the public schools (i.e., knowledge that doesn't come from the media), the better one likes and respects them.

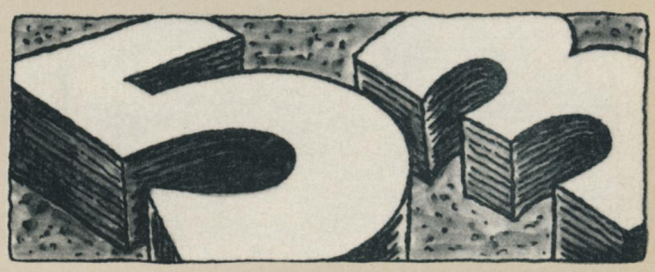
Other tables presented below reveal the public's opinion on how well elementary teachers, high school teachers, and parents are doing their jobs for America's children.

The first question:

Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the *public* schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?



"Seventy percent of me says no; 30% says yes."



	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	41	39	48	32
A	8	7	12	6
B	33	32	36	26
C	34	34	36	37
D	12	12	9	18
FAIL	5	5	4	6
Don't know	8	10	3	7

Ratings Given the Local Public Schools

	1990 %	1989 %	1988 %	1987 %	1986 %	1985 %	1984 %	1983 %	1982 %	1981 %	1980 %
A & B	41	43	40	43	41	43	42	31	37	36	35
A	8	8	9	12	11	9	10	6	8	9	10
B	33	35	31	31	30	34	32	25	29	27	25
C	34	33	34	30	28	30	35	32	33	34	29
D	12	11	10	9	11	10	11	13	14	13	12
FAIL	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	7	5	7	6
Don't know	8	9	12	14	15	13	8	17	11	10	18

The second question:

How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	21	20	23	18
A	2	2	2	1
B	19	18	21	17
C	49	49	51	50
D	16	16	14	24
FAIL	4	4	4	5
Don't know	10	11	8	3

The third question:

Using the A, B, C, D, and FAIL scale again, what grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?

	Public School Parents %
A & B	72
A	27
B	45
C	19
D	5
FAIL	2
Don't know	2

Ratings Given the School Oldest Child Attends

	1990 %	1989 %	1988 %	1987 %	1986 %	1985 %
A & B	72	71	70	69	65	71
A	27	25	22	28	28	23
B	45	46	48	41	37	48
C	19	19	22	20	26	19
D	5	5	3	5	4	5
FAIL	2	1	2	2	2	2
Don't know	2	4	3	4	3	3

The fourth question:

What grade would you give the public *elementary* school teachers in this community?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	58	55	67	49
A	18	15	26	10
B	40	40	41	39
C	21	22	21	31
D	6	5	6	12
FAIL	3	2	3	2
Don't know	12	16	3	6

	National Totals	
	1990 %	1987 %
A & B	58	53
A	18	18
B	40	35
C	21	21
D	6	4
FAIL	3	2
Don't know	12	20

The fifth question:

What grade would you give the public *high school* teachers in this community?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	43	42	44	37
A	8	8	8	7
B	35	34	36	30
C	28	29	28	32
D	10	10	9	12
FAIL	4	4	4	5
Don't know	15	15	15	14

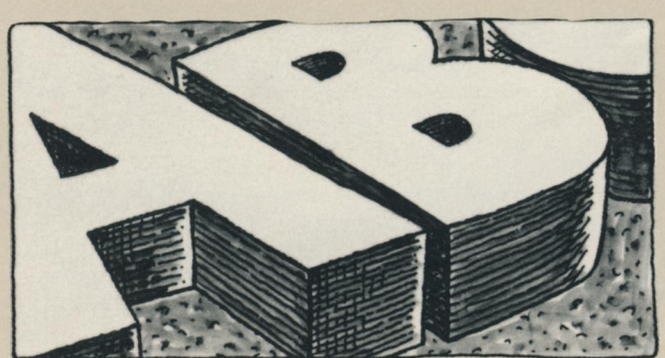
	National Totals	
	1990 %	1987 %
A & B	43	43
A	8	12
B	35	31
C	28	24
D	10	8
FAIL	4	3
Don't know	15	22

The sixth question:

What grade would you give the parents of students in the local public schools for bringing up their children?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	26	25	28	27
A	3	3	3	1
B	23	22	25	26
C	40	36	47	44
D	20	22	17	19
FAIL	7	9	4	2
Don't know	7	8	4	8

	National Totals	
	1990 %	1984 %
A & B	26	33
A	3	7
B	23	26
C	40	36
D	20	16
FAIL	7	6
Don't know	7	9



Have the Schools Been Improving?

On two occasions — first in 1988 and now in 1990 — Gallup interviewers have asked people whether they think the public schools in their communities have improved, gotten worse, or stayed about the same over the preceding five years. This question is intended to determine whether people believe the current wave of school reform has been successful. Evidently, not many people do. Whereas 29% of those surveyed in 1988 saw improvement over the preceding five years, only 22% did so this year. This finding seems congruent with the opinions people offered about the education goals announced by President Bush and the 50 governors last fall, which were discussed earlier in this report. Not only does a sizable group of respondents think that the schools haven't gotten better recently, but they also think that no great improvement is likely to occur within the current decade.

This preponderantly negative opinion is fairly evenly distributed among the major demographic groups that the Gallup Organization defines. However, the pessimism seems stronger in large cities, in the South and the West, and (ominously) among 18- to 29-year-olds. In cities of a million

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or more people, only 17% think their public schools have improved, while 35% think they have gotten worse. However, in communities of 50,000 and under, more people believe that their schools have improved than believe that they have deteriorated.

The question:

Would you say that the public schools in this community have improved from, say, five years ago, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Improved	22	20	29	18
Gotten worse	30	30	27	37
Stayed about the same	36	36	36	39
Don't know	12	14	8	6

	National Totals	
	1990 %	1988 %
Improved	22	29
Gotten worse	30	19
Stayed about the same	36	37
Don't know	12	15

Further breakdowns:

	Improved %	Gotten Worse %	Stayed About The Same %	Don't Know %
NATIONAL TOTALS	**22**	**30**	**36**	**12**
Sex				
Men	24	27	38	11
Women	20	32	35	13
Race				
White	22	29	37	12
Nonwhite	21	34	34	11
Age				
18 - 29 years	24	37	25	14
30 - 49 years	24	26	39	11
50 and over	18	29	41	12
Community Size				
1 million and over	16	36	35	13
500,000 - 999,999	22	32	39	7
50,000 - 499,999	26	28	33	13
2,500 - 49,999	27	23	39	11
Under 2,500	25	24	39	12
Education				
College	21	27	38	14
Graduate	19	22	44	15
Incomplete	23	31	33	13
High school	22	33	35	10
Graduate	22	32	35	11
Incomplete	22	35	35	8
Grade school	25	23	36	16
Income				
$40,000 and over	21	21	44	14
$30,000 - $39,999	23	33	34	10
$20,000 - $29,999	22	32	35	11
$10,000 - $19,999	24	34	32	10
Under $10,000	24	30	32	14
Region				
East	21	27	37	15
Midwest	21	22	45	12
South	25	37	30	8
West	20	31	33	16

Biggest Problems Facing Local Public Schools in 1990

In 1986, for the first time, the use of drugs edged out lack of discipline as the most frequently mentioned problem that people see besetting the local public schools. Every year since then more people have mentioned the drug problem. In 1989, 34% of the public cited drug use as the most important problem facing the schools; the comparable figure in 1990 is 38%, exactly double the percentage of people who mention lack of discipline. In other respects, the 1990 responses are similar to those given in other recent Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa surveys. However, one problem appears for the first time on this year's list: how to deal with the increasing number of students whose first language is not English. This problem was mentioned by 1% of the respondents and so moved out of the miscellaneous category.

The question:

What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Use of drugs	38	40	34	39
Lack of discipline	19	19	17	25
Lack of proper financial support	13	18	17	21
Poor curriculum/poor standards	8	9	7	6
Large schools/ overcrowding	7	6	10	16
Difficulty getting good teachers	7	6	10	10
Pupils' lack of interest/ truancy	6	7	3	3
Low teacher pay	6	5	6	8
Crime/vandalism	5	7	4	1
Integration/busing	5	5	4	6
Parents' lack of interest	4	5	3	3
Drinking/alcoholism	4	4	4	3
Teachers' lack of interest	4	3	5	5
Moral standards	3	4	2	1
Lack of respect for teachers/other students	3	3	3	4
Lack of needed teachers	3	3	3	1
Lack of family structure	3	3	3	2
Lack of proper facilities	2	1	2	4
Parents' involvement in school activities	2	2	2	2
Mismanagement of funds/ programs	2	1	2	1
Problems with administration	2	2	3	3
Communication problems	2	2	2	2
Fighting	2	2	2	*

	National Totals %	No Children in School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Lack of after-school programs	1	1	2	2
Transportation	1	1	1	2
Taxes are too high	1	1	1	1
Too much emphasis on sports	1	1	1	*
School board politics	1	1	2	*
Non-English-speaking students	1	1	*	*
Peer pressure	1	1	*	*
There are no problems	1	1	2	3
Miscellaneous	5	4	6	6
Don't know	6	7	2	5

*Less than one-half of 1%.
(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)

Assigning Blame: Schools or Society?

Educators can take some comfort, perhaps, from responses to a question asking where the blame for the problems confronting public education should be placed — on the schools themselves or on society in general. People evidently blame society, not the schools. Note that parents of children who do not attend public schools — those who have already opted out of the public school system — tend to put more blame on the public schools.

The question:

In your opinion, which is more at fault for the problems currently facing public education in this community — the performance of the local public schools or the effect of societal problems?

	National Totals %	No Children in School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Performance of schools	16	14	18	26
Effect of societal problems	73	73	75	63
Don't know	11	13	7	11

Research Procedure

The Sample. The sample used in this survey embraced a total of 1,594 adults (18 years of age and older). It is described as a modified probability sample of the nation. Personal, in-home interviewing was conducted in all areas of the nation and in all types of communities. A description of the sample can be found below.

Time of Interviewing. The fieldwork for this study was carried out during the periods of 6-18 April and 4-22 May 1990.

The Report. In the tables used in this report, "Nonpublic School Parents" includes parents of students who attend parochial schools and parents of students who attend private or independent schools.

Due allowance must be made for statistical variation, especially in the case of findings for groups consisting of relatively few respondents, e.g., nonpublic school parents.

The findings of this report apply only to the U.S. as a whole and not to individual communities. Local surveys, using the same questions, can be conducted to determine how local areas compare with the national norm.

Composition of the Sample

Adults	%
No children in school	67
Public school parents	30*
Nonpublic school parents	6*

*Total exceeds 33% because some parents have children attending more than one kind of school.

Sex	%
Men	48
Women	52
Race	**%**
White	86
Nonwhite	14
Age	**%**
18-29 years	23
30-49 years	41
50 and over	36
Occupation (Chief Wage Earner)	**%**
Business and professional	29
Clerical and sales	7
Manual labor	37
Nonlabor force	16
Occupation (Chief Wage Earner)	**%**
Farm	3
Undesignated	8
Income	**%**
$40,000 and over	28
$30,000-$39,999	17
$20,000-$29,999	16
$10,000-$19,999	20
Under $10,000	13
Undesignated	6
Region	**%**
East	25
Midwest	25
South	31
West	19
Community Size	**%**
1 million and over	37
500,000-999,999	8
50,000-499,999	19
2,500-49,999	11
Under 2,500	25
Education	**%**
College	43
High school	49
Grade school	8

Design of the Sample

The sampling procedure is designed to produce an approximation of the adult civilian population, age 18 and older, living in the U.S., except for persons in institutions such as prisons or hospitals.

A replicated probability sample is used, down to the block level in urban areas and down to segments of townships in rural areas. More than 300 sampling locations are used in each survey.

The sample design included stratification by these seven size-of-community strata, using 1980 census data: 1) incorporated cities of population 1,000,000 and over, 2) incorporated cities of population 250,000 to 999,999, 3) incorporated cities of population 50,000 to 249,999, 4) urbanized places not included in 1 and 2, 5) cities over 2,500 population outside of urbanized areas, 6) towns and villages with populations less than 2,500, and 7) rural places not included within town boundaries. Each of these strata was further stratified into four geographic regions: East, Midwest, South, and West. Within each city-size/regional stratum, the population was arrayed in geographic order and zoned into equal-sized groups of sampling units. Pairs of localities were selected in each zone, with probability of selection of each locality proportional to its population size in the 1980 census, producing two replicated samples of localities.

For each survey, within each subdivision for which block statistics are available, a sample of blocks or block clusters is drawn with probability of selection proportional to the number of dwelling units. In all other subdivisions or areas, blocks or segments are drawn at random or with equal probability.

In each cluster of blocks and each segment, a randomly selected starting point is designated on the interviewer's map of the area. Starting at this point, interviewers are required to follow a given direction in the selection of households until their assignment is completed.

Interviewing is conducted at times when adults, in general, are most likely to be at home, which means on weekends, or, if on weekdays, after 4 p.m. for women and after 6 p.m. for men.

Allowance for persons not at home is made by a "times-at-home" weighting* procedure rather than by "callbacks." This procedure is a method for reducing the sample bias that would otherwise result from underrepresentation in the sample of persons who are difficult to find at home.

The prestratification by regions is routinely supplemented by fitting each obtained sample to the latest available Census Bureau estimates of the regional distribution of the population. Also, minor adjustments of the sample are made by educational attainment by men and women separately, based on the annual estimates of the Census Bureau (derived from its Current Population Survey) and by age.

*A. Politz and W. Simmons, "An Attempt to Get the 'Not at Homes' into the Sample Without Callbacks," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, March 1949, pp. 9-31.

Sampling Tolerances

In interpreting survey results, it should be borne in mind that all sample surveys are subject to sampling error, i.e., the extent to which the results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole population surveyed had been interviewed. The size of such sampling errors depends largely on the number of interviews.

The following tables may be used in estimating the sampling error of any percentage in this report. The computed allowances have taken into account the effect of the sample design upon sampling error. They may be interpreted as indicating the range (plus or minus the figure shown) within which the results of repeated samplings in the same time period could be expected to vary 95% of the time, assuming the same sampling procedure, the same interviewers, and the same questionnaire.

The first table shows how much allowance should be made for the sampling error of a percentage:

Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of a Percentage

	In Percentage Points (at 95 in 100 confidence level)* Sample Size						
	1,500	1,000	750	600	400	200	100
Percentages near 10	2	2	3	3	4	5	8
Percentages near 20	3	3	4	4	5	7	10
Percentages near 30	3	4	4	5	6	8	12
Percentages near 40	3	4	5	5	6	9	12
Percentages near 50	3	4	5	5	6	9	13
Percentages near 60	3	4	5	5	6	9	12
Percentages near 70	3	4	4	5	6	8	12
Percentages near 80	3	3	4	4	5	7	10
Percentages near 90	2	2	3	3	4	5	8

*The chances are 95 in 100 that the sampling error is not larger than the figures shown.

The table would be used in the following manner: Let us say that a reported percentage is 33 for a group that includes 1,000 respondents. We go to the row for "percentages near 30" in the table and across to the column headed "1,000."

The number at this point is 4, which means that the 33% obtained in the sample is subject to a sampling error of plus or minus four points. In other words, it is very probable (95 chances out of 100) that the true figure would be somewhere between 29% and 37%, with the most likely figure the 33% obtained.

In comparing survey results in two samples, such as, for example, men and women, the question arises as to how large a difference between them must be before one can be reasonably sure that it reflects a real difference. In the tables below, the number of points that must be allowed for in such comparisons is indicated.

Two tables are provided. One is for percentages near 20 or 80; the other, for percentages near 50. For percentages in between, the error to be allowed for lies between those shown in the two tables.

Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference

TABLE A	In Percentage Points (at 95 in 100 confidence level)* Percentages near 20 or percentages near 80					
Size of Sample	**1,500**	**1,000**	**750**	**600**	**400**	**200**
1,500	4					
1,000	4	5				
750	5	5	5			
600	5	5	6	6		
400	6	6	6	7	7	
200	8	8	8	8	9	10

TABLE B	Percentages near 50					
Size of Sample	**1,500**	**1,000**	**750**	**600**	**400**	**200**
1,500	5					
1,000	5	6				
750	6	6	7			
600	6	7	7	7		
400	7	8	8	8	9	
200	10	10	10	10	11	13

*The chances are 95 in 100 that the sampling error is not larger than the figures shown.

Here is an example of how the tables would be used: Let us say that 50% of men respond a certain way and 40% of women respond that way also, for a difference of 10 percentage points between them. Can we say with any assurance that the 10-point difference reflects a real difference between men and women on the question? Let us consider a sample that contains approximately 750 men and 750 women.

Since the percentages are near 50, we consult Table B, and, since the two samples are about 750 persons each, we look for the number in the column headed "750," which is also in the row designated "750." We find the number 7 here. This means that the allowance for error should be seven points and that, in concluding that the percentage among men is somewhere between three and 17 points higher than the percentage among women, we should be wrong only about 5% of the time. In other words, we can conclude with considerable confidence that a difference exists in the direction observed and that it amounts to at least three percentage points.

If, in another case, men's responses amount to 22%, say, and women's to 24%, we consult Table A, because these percentages are near 20. We look in the column headed "750" and see that the number is 5. Obviously, then, the two-point difference is inconclusive.

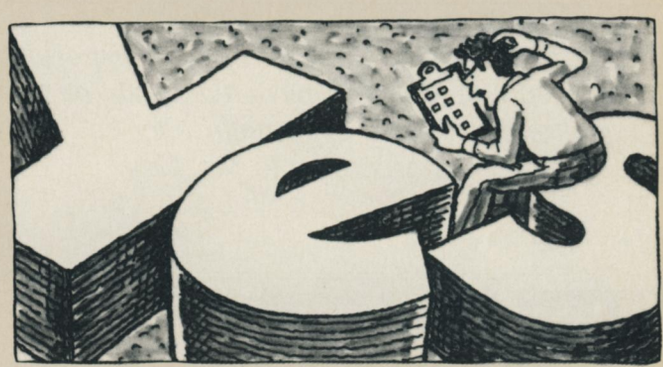

Illustration by Marcus Hamilton

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