

Raising Student Achievement: Do Our Actions Match Our Words?

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Introduction

America's leaders say that they want higher academic standards and increased achievement from students. Parents and teachers support this view. Despite these positive attitudes toward academic excellence, however, neither the standards to which students are held nor the conduct and priorities of students themselves seem to reflect a sincere commitment to higher academic achievement. This contradiction between what our nation's leaders, parents, teachers, and students say they want and what is actually happening is the focus of this booklet. Unless the nation addresses the problems arising from this contradiction, all efforts at school reform will be undermined.

Nearly every week, newspaper articles and television and radio newscasts report concerns that American students are scoring too low on standardized tests. Usually these reports include comments from local, state, and national leaders calling for improvements in student achievement in order to maintain our global economic competitiveness. This widespread concern about student learning has spurred states to establish higher academic standards for students and to initiate other reforms, such as requiring students to pass a test before they receive a high school diploma.

Because education is largely a local matter in the United States, the success of these reforms will depend on the support of teachers, parents, and students — and their commitment to make the reforms a reality.

In this booklet we examine recent public opinion polls and studies that have explored parent, teacher, and student attitudes about higher academic standards and increased student achievement. According to these polls and studies, parents, teachers, and students strongly support steps to increase academic standards and to make the high school diploma a meaningful credential. However, they seem less committed to changing their own conduct to attain high academic achievement. In fact, they are suspicious of people who are well-educated.

If the data from these polls and studies are correct, then it appears that the nation is facing a major contradiction between what our leaders believe we must do to increase student achievement and what parents, teachers, and students are willing to do to attain that goal. Unless the nation engages in a serious dialogue on this apparent contradiction, reform efforts seem destined to fail. And if that happens, the public schools likely will be blamed and all of us will suffer the consequences.

What the Nation's Leaders Say About Student Achievement

In 1983 a blue-ribbon commission appointed by President Ronald Reagan issued a report titled, *A Nation At Risk*. This report began as follows:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur — others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, p. 5)

As a result of this report, many states enacted various education reforms, such as tougher graduation requirements for students and career ladder programs for teachers.

In 1989 another call to action came when the nation's governors and President George Bush met in Charlottesville, Virginia, to discuss the state of education. This National Education Summit, as it was called, produced six National Education Goals, setting out what these leaders believed the nation ought to achieve by the year 2000:

- Every child should start school ready to learn.
- At least 90% of our students will graduate from high school.
- Students in grades 4, 8, and 12 will demonstrate competency in challenging subject matters.
- Our students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
- All adults will be literate and possess the necessary skills to compete in a global economy.
- Every school should be free of drugs and violence.

The Congress codified these goals and added two others: one that addresses teacher preparation and another that calls for greater parental involvement in education.

These goals came out at the same time that states were starting to establish higher academic standards describing what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. States that have developed academic standards are now designing curricula, textbooks, and tests around those standards, so that students will be taught and tested on the material that they are supposed to know.

As of January 1997, 48 states and the District of Columbia had either established, or were in the process of establishing, academic standards for their students (American Federation of Teachers 1996, p.13.). Several states also are in the process of instituting "high stakes" assessments based

on their state standards, whereby students will be required to pass a test before they can receive their high school diploma.

Many business leaders have supported the movement to raise student achievement. They applauded the release of *A Nation At Risk* and soon followed with their own reports, issued through various national business organizations, urging school reform and focusing on the need to improve student achievement.

In 1996 business leaders and the nation's governors met for a second National Education Summit. The host of the conference, Louis V. Gerstner, chairman of IBM, said, "Our educational system is broken — we all know that. . . . We are behind other countries . . . and in an increasingly global economy, I'm not liking our chances" (Sanchez 1996).

To do their part in raising student achievement, the business leaders attending this summit pledged to request students' high school transcripts as part of the hiring process, instead of just relying on their own companies' tests and interviews to determine which graduates to hire. By requesting transcripts, these major employers hope to motivate students to work harder and to send a message that high school performance does matter.

The governors who participated in this summit vowed to develop and implement, within two years, internationally competitive academic standards, assessments to measure student progress toward those standards, and accountability systems. The governors' promise in early 1996 not only affirmed the states' ongoing efforts to develop standards but also spurred them to pay closer attention to the quality of the standards they were setting. In turn, when making decisions about where to locate their businesses, the business leaders promised to take into consideration whether a state had academic standards and whether its standards were of high quality.

Why Are the Nation's Leaders Concerned About Student Achievement?

Are American students really performing poorly? For the past 27 years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has sampled student achievement in math, science, reading, and other core subjects. NAEP tests show that average student achievement currently is at approximately the same levels as in the early 1970s. (Mullis et al. 1994, pp. 48, 93, and 150; National Assessment of Education Progress 1995, p. 7.) However, national leaders are concerned because they believe that today's work force must have higher academic skills than the workers of 25 years ago if today's businesses are to compete effectively in a tight international economy.

On tests of international student math and science achievement, U.S. students exhibit average achievement. In mathematics, American eighth-graders perform slightly below average compared to eighth-grade students from 40 other industrialized nations. In science, U.S. eighth-graders perform slightly above average (U.S. Department of Education, *Pursuing Excellence*, 1996, p. 9). Students from some of our economic competitors — including Japan and Korea — posted the top scores on these tests. However, in reading U.S. students perform among the best of the 32 nations tested, with U.S. fourth-graders scoring second only to Finland (U.S. Department of Education, *Reading Literacy in the United States: Findings From the IEA Reading Literacy Study*, 1996, pp. 4-5).

Even if American student performance were better on all of these tests, the nation's governors and business leaders believe that the knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of tomorrow's world market will require American students to reach for higher goals of academic achievement. But how do those most directly involved in teaching and learning — namely parents, teachers, and students — feel about efforts to improve student performance? That is the next question.

Student, Parent, and Teacher Attitudes Toward School Reform

Several recent opinion polls show that students, parents, and teachers strongly favor school reform and standards-setting. First and foremost, almost everyone — students (94%), parents (91%), and teachers (98%) — wants students to learn the basics, which are loosely defined as being able to read, write, and spell in English and to do basic math (Public Agenda 1995, p. 43; 1997, p. 44). This commitment to the basics is backed up by the belief of students, parents, and teachers that students should not graduate from high school without mastering some basics. Indeed, 76% of students, 88% of parents, and 83% of teachers believe that students should not be allowed to graduate unless they can write and speak English well (Public Agenda 1996, pp. 12, 29; 1997, p. 45). At the same time, 41% of parents and 32% of teachers do not believe that a high school diploma is a guarantee that a student has mastered the basics (Public Agenda 1995, p. 19).

When specifically asked about support for high academic standards, these groups voiced similar support:

Eighty-six percent of parents and 80% of teachers polled believe that very clear guidelines should be established for what students should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject area (Public Agenda 1996, pp. 12, 29).

Approximately three-quarters of teenagers believe that more students will pay attention to their schoolwork and learn more if higher academic standards are instituted and enforced (Public Agenda 1997, p. 19).

Sixty-one percent of the general public believes that academic standards are too low in their community's schools and that students are not expected to learn enough (Public Agenda 1996, p. 8), while 51% of teachers believe that their schools' academic standards are too low (American Federation of Teachers 1994, p. 18).

If the results of these polls are accurate, then students, parents, and teachers support the types of school reforms for which the nation's leaders are calling. Students, parents, and teachers are strongly behind schools teaching the basics, instituting high academic standards, and making sure that students not only write and speak English well before receiving a diploma but also have mastered the required subject matter. Much of the support for such reforms is prompted by perceptions that current academic standards in community schools are too low and that a high school diploma may not signal mastery of the basics.

These results should not seem surprising. It might be assumed that parents and teachers want good schools with high academic standards and that they want a high school diploma to mean something. But how do student, parent, and teacher attitudes toward academic standards compare to the priorities that parents and teachers set for students and to the results that students actually achieve? Do students view earning high grades as essential to their future? Do parents and teachers believe that it is important for students to excel academically?

Student Attitudes Toward Achievement

Improved student achievement ultimately depends on the commitment of the students themselves. States and school districts can require schools to meet high academic standards, teachers can provide the opportunity for students to learn the material in the standards, and parents can encourage their children to study and pay attention in class. But if a student has no desire to learn or views school as merely a social club, then all the reforms in the world will fail.

A recent book by Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (1996), reports on a comprehensive national study of high school students and their attitudes toward school and education. Over four years, Steinberg and his colleagues studied 20,000 teenagers and their families in nine different communities across the United States. They found that about 40% of the students are “disengaged” from school, meaning that they do only what it takes to avoid getting into trouble, expend little energy on their studies in or out of class, and generally have a cavalier attitude about what a high school education means for their future (pp. 15, 67). For example, one-third of the students surveyed said that they get through the school day primarily by “goofing off” with their friends (p. 18).

Lack of student engagement has caused many of the education reforms of the last 20 years to fail. According to Steinberg, “Today’s schools and teachers face a cohort of students who come to school less interested, less motivated, and less engaged in the business of learning” (p. 60). He goes on to describe how parents help determine whether their children are “engaged” students, but ultimately he concludes that peer groups — especially ethnic peer groups — have the greatest effect on teenagers.

Steinberg also illustrates how some students feel about high achievement. He and his colleagues asked students what the lowest grade was that they could bring home before they would “get in trouble” with their parents. More than half of the students said that they could bring home grades of a C or worse without their parents getting upset, and one-fourth claimed to have gotten grades as low as D without facing negative consequences at home (p. 190). But different ethnic groups report varying degrees of “trouble” from their parents for bad grades:

Among Black and Latino students, not until their grades dipped below a C- did these adolescents perceive that they would get into trouble. Among White students, however, the average “trouble threshold” was one entire letter grade higher — somewhere between a B and a C. And among Asian students, the average grade below which students expected their parents to become angry was an astounding A-! (p.161)

Students do see the value in completing high school: 73% reported that their friends believe it is important to graduate from high school, and 46% believe it is important to go to college. However, students do not hold high academic achievement as a worthy goal. Only 32% say that their friends think it is important to get good grades. Almost 17% reported that they deliberately hide their intelligence and desire to do well in school from their friends because they worry what their friends will think — with good reason: 20% of the students say their friends make fun of students who try to do well in school (p. 146).

Students were asked which “crowd” their friends belonged to as well as which “crowd” they would most like to be a part of. Their responses were telling. For example, when asked which crowd they would most like to belong to, “five times as many students say the ‘populars’ or ‘jocks’ as say the ‘brains.’ Three times as many say they would rather be ‘partyers’ or ‘druggies’ than ‘brains.’ Of all the crowds, the ‘brains’ were least happy with who they are — nearly half wished they were in a different crowd” (p. 146).

Are U.S. teenagers appreciably different from teens in other industrialized nations when it comes to school? According to a study of 25,000 middle-class teens on five continents conducted by the BrainWaves Group, a consumer research company, teens are more similar than different, having been “shaped by Western movies, television, music, and higher levels of education, which has moved them away from their families and into a peer culture” (Stepp 1996).

However, U.S. teens differ from their international counterparts in many ways that may affect their academic achievement. According to the BrainWaves study, 58% of U.S. teens — or three times the global average — report having a paying job. Many European countries forbid teens from working, and in other nations teens are expected to be at home. U.S. teens also date more frequently than other youths — twice the global average.

The U.S. teenagers surveyed were more likely to say that they worked around the house and cared for a sibling than youths in other countries. U.S. teens also read for pleasure less often than their international counterparts. In short, U.S. teens are far busier with nonschool activities than the rest of the world’s adolescents (Stepp 1996). Given these results, it may be safe to assume that in other countries, teens are expected primarily to go to school and study, while U.S. teenagers often are expected to go to school, study, hold a paying job, date, care for a sibling, and do household chores.

Another international study, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), closely examined and compared eighth-grade students in Japan, Germany, and the United States. The study found that Japanese teachers assigned less science and math homework than U.S. or German teachers did. Even though less homework was assigned, Japanese students reported studying about the same amount of time as students in the other two countries. Researchers looked more closely at what motivated Japanese students to study more and found that Japanese parents, teachers, and friends encouraged eighth- and ninth-graders to study hard so that the students could pass the high school entrance exam required at the end of the ninth grade:

Students are believed to have considerable personal responsibility for this process. Some popular teen magazines even run articles on how to devise a personal study and review plan. Japanese students described a combination of peer support and competition that encouraged them to study harder during these years. (U.S. Department of Education, Pursuing Excellence, 1996, p. 64)

On a more hopeful note, a 1997 report by Public Agenda indicates that American students realize that they are not working hard enough in school and want to be pushed to learn more by parents and teachers:

- 65% of high school students surveyed conceded that they could do much better in school if they tried (Public Agenda 1997, p. 19).
- 74% of high school students believe that schools should not allow students to move on to the next grade unless they learned what is expected of them (Public Agenda 1997, p. 19).
- 79% of teens reported that students would learn more if schools ensured that students were on time and completed their homework. (Public Agenda 1997, p. 23).
- 71% of high school students believe that schools should require after-school classes for students who get D's and F's in major academic subjects. (Public Agenda 1997, p. 23).
- 70% say that unruly students disrupt their classes, and 82% of teens believe that these disruptive students should be removed from the regular classroom so that other students can learn (Public Agenda 1997, p. 15).

From these various studies, one might draw several conclusions. First, a significant portion of U.S. teens are not engaged in their roles as students. Many young people seem to hold to a general attitude that is anti-achievement.

Second, some ethnic peer groups have a more negative influence on the academic achievement of their friends than other ethnic peer groups do.

Third, U.S. teens are busier with nonschool activities, such as jobs, chores, and dating, than their international counterparts are. And some other countries have a culture that encourages students to study hard and take personal responsibility for their grades.

Finally, most U.S. teens recognize the problem and want to be pushed to do better in school.

Together, these findings illustrate the challenges that American schools face in trying to improve overall student achievement. But what messages about achievement do students receive from parents and teachers? Do parents and teachers stress the value of education, and do they encourage children to get good grades? These are the next important questions.

Do Parents and Teachers Value High Academic Achievement?

Parents and teachers voice overwhelming support for raising academic standards and requiring students to know more. But when they are questioned about specific behaviors that encourage high academic achievement, many parents and teachers reveal that they do not push students to excel. It appears, in fact, as though parents and teachers themselves are not entirely convinced of the value of high academic achievement.

Parents are more concerned that their children be well-rounded than that they receive top grades. For example, 62% of parents are satisfied if their child has a B average, and 16% are satisfied if their child gets mostly A's. Twenty-three percent of parents would be unconcerned if their child had a lot of friends, participated in many social activities, but was only a C student (Public Agenda 1995, p. 32). Another poll found similar attitudes: 33% of public school parents prefer that their child maintain an A average, while 56% prefer that their children get average grades but participate in extracurricular activities (Elam, Rose, and Gallup 1996, p. 56).

Parents do not view an excellent academic education as the most important factor in determining people's success in their jobs and careers. Only 29% of parents polled agreed that a good education was the most important factor, while 38% believed that "being persistent and having inner drive" was the most important. Twenty-five percent believed that knowing how to deal with people well was the most important factor in career and job success, while 5% thought that knowing the right people and having connections was most important. If persistence and inner drive are more important to career success than getting a good education, are our nation's leaders wrong in pushing for higher academic achievement? That seems to be the message parents are giving when they identify the factors needed to succeed in life.

Teachers, it appears, are even less convinced of the role of an excellent academic education in careers. Only 11% of teachers cited getting an excellent academic education as the most important factor, while 50% believed it was persistence and inner drive, 33% believed that it was knowing how to deal with people, and 4% thought it was knowing people and having connections (Public Agenda 1995, p. 43). If teachers believe that personal characteristics are more important for career success than an excellent education, does this mean they are not pushing students to know more?

Interestingly, students are the only group that rated getting an excellent academic education as the most important factor (32%), followed closely by having an inner drive (30%) (Public Agenda 1997, p. 41). Are students naive because they have not had the real-life experiences of their parents and teachers? Or do students more accurately sense their own futures, because they seem to agree with the country's leaders on the importance of education?

Another relevant issue is how much adults are encouraging schools to succeed and students to learn. Forty-seven percent of parents and 49% of teachers thought that a high school principal would be applying too much pressure if he or she constantly pushed teachers and students to maintain the school's top academic ranking, while 44% of parents and 40% of teachers thought this situation showed about the right amount of pressure. Similarly, 47% of parents and 65% of

teachers believed that it was too much pressure if a high school principal eliminated team sports in an effort to get students to concentrate on academics, but 32% of parents and 17% of teachers thought this was about the right amount of pressure (Public Agenda 1995, pp. 40-41).

In surveys, nearly half (46%) of the teachers say they experience pressure to pass students on to the next grade before the students are academically ready (American Federation of Teachers 1994, p. 9). In addition, approximately one-third of teachers say they are under pressure to lower the standards in their classrooms. For example, they report being pressured to give students higher grades than they deserve or to reduce the difficulty and amount of the homework assigned (American Federation of Teachers 1994, p. 9). Apparently, many teachers have succumbed to this pressure. The average grade in today's schools is a B (U.S. Department of Education 1994, p. 1). An analysis of ACT scores and student grade-point averages (GPAs) also points to grade inflation. Researchers studying the ACT scores and GPAs of more than 2.6 million students in 5,000 high schools over the course of five years found that, while the ACT scores remained stable, the grade-point averages consistently rose over the five-year period (ACT 1997, p. 4).

Furthermore, teachers may not be getting the backing they need from parents. When teachers were asked to identify the biggest problem facing their schools, the most frequent response was lack of support from parents (Langdon 1996, p. 244). An illuminating study found foreign educators teaching in the United States through the Fulbright teacher-exchange program reporting that, when teachers and students disagree over an issue such as discipline or grades, American parents take the side of the student more often than parents in their native countries do (McAdams 1994, p. 32).

It seems, then, that while parents and teachers support education reform, including higher academic standards, they are less committed to pushing students to excel academically. In fact, parents are more concerned that children be well-rounded. Many parents and teachers oppose decisive steps that put the primary focus on achievement, such as ending a school's athletic program. Teachers seem to share parents' beliefs that factors other than getting an excellent academic education are more important in job and career success. Teachers admit to feeling pressure to lower the academic standards in their classrooms, to give higher grades than their students' work merits, and to promote some students even though the students are not sufficiently academically prepared. And parents may not be giving teachers the backing they need to enforce higher standards.

Conclusion

In the area of education, the nation is facing a contradiction. Leaders are calling for increased academic achievement and moving ahead with standards and other reforms that are designed to “raise the achievement bar.” At the same time, while parents and teachers are supportive of such reforms, a sizable percentage do not believe that students really need to achieve at high levels. Furthermore, a large portion of students are willing to do the minimum it takes to get by, while others are distracted from their school work by after-school jobs, dating, caring for siblings, and doing household chores.

These are the subjects for an essential, national dialogue. We must begin a serious discussion about student achievement. Unless our leaders, parents, teachers, and students agree that it is essential to improve student achievement and to encourage every student to work to his or her full potential, attempts at reforming schools will fall far short of their goals. Without a true commitment by all citizens to the goal of academic excellence for all, the nation’s economic and political position in the world may be compromised.

Following are some basic questions that might frame such a dialogue:

- Do we agree with the nation’s leaders that raising education standards and increasing student achievement are essential to the welfare of the nation? Or are our nation’s leaders wrong in emphasizing academic achievement so much when other factors, such as personal drive, also determine success in careers?
- If we believe in higher academic standards, how can we translate our support for such standards into action? For example, should parents and teachers encourage students to study more and have fewer out-of-school obligations, such as jobs and dating? Should students take personal responsibility for doing better in school? Should employers insist on good grades before hiring a student?
- Should schools be blamed for not doing a good job of educating students when parents and students do not place a priority on learning? In other words, do we currently have from parents, teachers, and students the commitment to schoolwork that will be necessary if increased academic achievement is to become a reality?
- Is it necessary to make a choice — being well-educated or being well-rounded? Can students be both?

What do we really want from our schools? Actions always speak louder than words. Do our actions as citizens, employers, parents, teachers, and students indicate that we really do not value higher academic achievement — despite what we say and what our leaders are demanding?

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