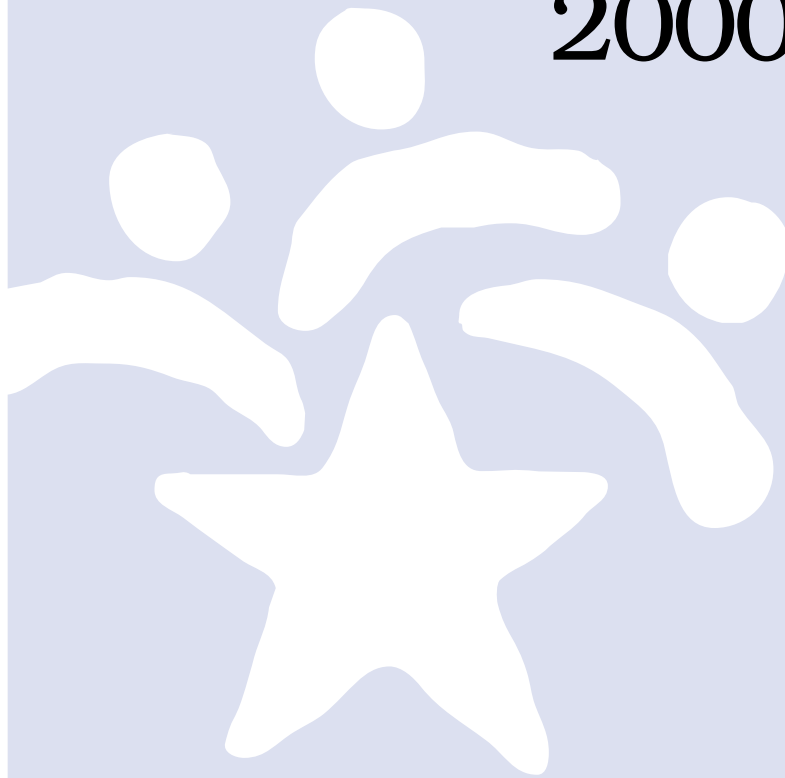


NIF Report on the Issues
2000



**Public Schools:
Are They Making the Grade?**

by John Doble Research Associates, Inc.



A Different Kind of Talk, Another Way to Act

Public Schools Are They Making the Grade?

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NIF is a nonpartisan nationwide network of educational and community organizations that deliberate about nationwide issues. NIF forums do not advocate a specific solution or point of view. Rather, deliberative forums provide a way for citizens to exchange ideas and experiences with one another, and make more thoughtful and informed decisions. For more information about NIF, contact NIF Research, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777. Phone: (800) 433-7834. www.nifi.org

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A Report on People's *Thinking* In National Issues Forums

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A Different Kind of Talk, Another Way to Act

To learn how citizens are thinking about the issue of education, Doble Research Associates analyzed the results of National Issues Forums (NIF) on the topic of “Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?”

What are National Issues Forums?

National Issues Forums bring together citizens around the nation to deliberate about, work through, and make choices about challenging social and political issues that face their communities. Thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as libraries, high schools, and colleges, have sponsored forums on issues such as the economy, education, health care, foreign affairs, and crime. The sponsoring organizations select topics from among each year’s most pressing public concerns, then design and coordinate their own forum programs, which are held throughout the year.

The Framework for Deliberation

Participants deliberated using the NIF issue book, *Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?* prepared by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. Rather than conforming to the ideas of any one advocate, each approach represents a distinct set of American priorities and views. The issue book outlines the issue in a nonpartisan way and presents four approaches to addressing the issue:

Approach 1: Give Parents a Choice of Schools

This approach says that parents are captive consumers of a failing education monopoly, one lacking competitive pressure to improve or hold costs down. No single system of education can meet the needs of 53 million schoolchildren – many systems are needed. We can improve public education by giving parents the widest possible choice among public schools, publicly chartered schools, private schools, religious schools, and for-profit schools.

Approach 2: Raise the Standards; Stress the Basics

This approach says that the public school system is no longer in sync with the needs of our economy and society. Public schools must be fixed by setting and enforcing high

standards for core academics and behavior. Clear, uniform standards provide a blueprint for remodeling public education, from training teachers to holding schools accountable for student achievement.

Approach 3: Make Education a Community Effort

This approach says education is a community activity, and efforts to improve education must start in the community and draw on the community’s strengths and resources. Inadequate citizen involvement in the schools helps explain why a variety of ideas for improving schools have produced unsatisfactory results around the nation. For schools to succeed, they must first become responsive to the community’s goals and plans for itself.

Approach 4: Provide Adequate Funds to All Schools

This approach says that the major problem with education today is unequal and inadequate school funding. Many schools are in disrepair, many classrooms are overcrowded, and good teachers are in short supply. As a nation, we are not investing enough in education, and more important, we are not sharing school revenues in a democratic way that ensures every child an adequate education.

Organization of This Report

This report is divided into seven sections.

The **Executive Summary** presents an overview of the themes that emerged from the forums.

In **Working Through**, we explain the public’s thinking as they deliberated about the issue.

In **Questions and Answers**, we address key questions about people’s thinking on the issue.

In **Questionnaire Results**, we show the results of the Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires.

In **Methodology**, we explain the research conducted for this report.

In **About National Issues Forums**, we describe NIF in greater detail.

Finally, in **About Doble Research**, we provide background on Doble Research Associates, Inc. and the researchers who worked on this report.

Finding the Public's Voice on Education

This report is an analysis of what happened in more than 60 NIF forums in 34 states and the District of Columbia, a sample of the hundreds of NIF forums that continue to take place across the country.

This analysis should not be confused with poll results, which are a snapshot of public opinion at a given point in time. Nor should forums be confused with focus groups in which a professional moderator, working from a script, interrogates respondents who receive an incentive to attend.

The report details people's thinking as they "worked through" the issue by deliberating together, considering other points of view, and weighing the costs and consequences of different approaches to the issue. It shows that people's thinking is complex and sometimes at odds with the policy debate. The concepts of "school choice" and "standards," for example, had different meanings to participants than they often do in policy terms.

Below is an outline of what happened as people deliberated about: "Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?"

Six Overarching Themes that Emerged from the Forums:

1. Despite deep concerns about the public schools, participants were overwhelmingly committed to the idea of a public school system that provides all children with a quality education along with a common, equalizing, democratizing experience.
2. Participants felt that parents should have control over, or a choice about where their children go to school. But, most were not sure that a voucher system is the way to ensure such choice.
3. Participants saw standardized tests as a useful indicator of performance and a means of articulating higher expectations for students. But they did not see such

tests as the way to determine how well students, teachers, and schools are doing, or as the definitive accountability measures.

4. Participants' thinking about "funding" is complex. On the one hand, they said roughly the same amount should be allocated to educate every child, and many favored more funding for smaller classes, higher teachers' salaries, and infrastructure repair. On the other hand, many said a lot of money allocated to education is not well spent, and they strongly felt that more funding, by itself, would not solve our problems with education.
5. Participants' fundamental concerns about education went far beyond the issues of choice, standards, and funding. The crux of the problem, they said, is the public's relationship with the public schools. The relationship, they said, is "broken" in that people do not feel connected to, or ownership of, the public schools. And, they said, the greatest obstacle blocking a closer relationship is the attitude of educators, especially administrators.
6. Though they wanted more connectedness to, ownership of, and community involvement with the public schools, participants did not want more control over day-to-day or administrative issues. Rather, they seemed – adults and students alike – drawn to smaller, neighborhood schools that would facilitate parental, student, and community involvement, along with more community service, school-to-work internships, and after-school, evening, and year-round activities. In brief, participants wanted the public school, which they saw as having great untapped potential, to become a hub of community life.

1. Despite deep concerns about the public schools, participants were overwhelmingly committed to the idea of a public school system that provides all children with quality education along with a common, equalizing, democratizing experience.

a) Participants had deep concerns about the public schools. Participants were deeply concerned about four issues in particular: learning the basics, school safety and maintaining an atmosphere conducive to learning, reinforcing basic values, and meeting the educational needs of students who are not going to college.

Learning the Basics: In forums everywhere, participants were concerned about high school graduates who cannot read, write, or do basic arithmetic. A man from Vallejo, California, lamented that “reading, writing, and math are not stressed in schools today.” A Michigan City, Indiana, man said, “Education must focus on teaching students the basics.” A man from Rapid City, South Dakota, said, “No matter where you are in the country, you need to be able to read and write and do basic math.” A teacher from El Paso told this story:

One of my students said, “I don’t have to worry about college because I’m going to be a plumber.” I said, “Good, you’ll probably make more money than I ever do in my lifetime. But you better get off your duff and start working because, as a plumber, you need to know how to add and subtract and estimate. So you better know your math and how to write.”

Some felt that U.S. students lag far behind their foreign counterparts. A man from Portland, Oregon, said:

My wife spent a month in South Africa. And it [brought] tears to her eyes to go to the villages and see people [who are] living in huts [but whose] fifth and sixth grade kids are already speaking English and doing high math [at higher levels than Americans kids].

Participants also objected to “social promotion,” promoting students even if they have not mastered classroom material. By a margin of three to one in the Post-Forum Questionnaire (59 percent to 21 percent), participants said, “We must require students to meet higher standards, even if this causes some to fail.” A man who himself had been “socially promoted” saw the practice as damaging. At a forum in a state prison in Chester, Pennsylvania, he said:

When I was in seventh and eighth grades, I got Fs. I didn’t learn a thing. But I got promoted anyway because my teachers didn’t care.

School Safety and Maintaining an Atmosphere Conducive to Learning: A number of participants were concerned about safety in the public schools. A woman from Rock Island, Indiana, said, “There has been too much violence and shooting in the schools, and kids are scared to go.” A Dallas woman said, “When I think of public schools today, I think of violence.” A Philadelphia man said the public schools “must have more security to keep children safe.”

A man at a state prison forum in Chester, Pennsylvania said:

A lot of teachers feel threatened; [they're] afraid they'll get robbed or killed. Even in the classroom, where they're supposed to be the authority, they can't teach well because they're afraid.

Beyond safety, many said there is not enough discipline in the schools. "They don't enforce the rules," said a woman from Bangor, Maine. A Denver woman said, "Teachers are discouraged from sending disruptive kids to the principal's office." A man from Milwaukee said, "There's no discipline in schools today. And when there's no discipline, there's no learning."

Participants were also concerned, more generally, about maintaining an atmosphere conducive to learning. A Bridgeport woman said, "I'm appalled by the over-demonstration of affection that is allowed." A Philadelphia man called for "color-coded uniforms that would help children stay focused on their education." In a forum with college students in Wayne, Nebraska, participants worried about teenage drinking and about high school cliques, which can be, they said, "terribly alienating."

Reinforcing Basic Values: Participants were concerned that basic values and a sense of right and wrong, what parents should teach their children, are not reinforced in public schools. A man from Washington, D.C., said the public schools "don't teach morals or ethics." A Dallas woman said the public schools "should incorporate values into the school." A high school student from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, said schools should pay more attention to teenage pregnancies "because so many girls are getting pregnant and dropping out of school."

While many participants did not see a place for religion in the public schools, others regretted that prayer had been taken out of the classroom. A Sioux Falls, South Dakota, man said that while he was "not in favor of the Religious Right influencing my kid," he wished the Ten Commandments were still posted and used as guideposts for behavior. More generally, some saw a connection between prayer in school and a decline in basic values. A Dothan, Alabama, woman complained about the "lack of God in the public schools" which has led, she said, to a "low level of morality" among young people.

Meeting the Educational Needs of Students Not Going to College: Many were concerned that public schools do not meet the needs of students who do not go to college. In Naperville, Illinois, participants said those in a vocational training track need more educational choices and better career counseling. In Mission Viejo, California, people called for more technical schools because "not all students are college bound." In Blacksburg, Virginia, high school students complained that vo-ed students are "lumped together as a group" instead of being seen as having different interests and needs.

Others complained about the status assigned to vocational education. An El Paso woman said we should teach "vocational students that it is respectable to [prepare for] a vocation [in high school], that everyone doesn't have to be in college prep." In a Pittsburgh-area forum, participants said students in vocational education are unfairly and routinely overlooked.

b) Despite their deep concerns, participants were overwhelmingly committed to the idea of a public school system that provides all children with a quality education along with a common, equalizing, democratizing experience. As they deliberated, it became clear that participants strongly believed in the concept of a public school system. A moderator from Helena, Arkansas, said participants there felt that the “public schools are instrumental in the economic revitalization of the area and are important in bringing people together.” Participants there also supported a public school system because, as one man said, “We all depend on public schools to educate the majority of our children.” An El Paso woman said, “We don’t have to blow up the public schools, we just need to find out what’s right and change what’s wrong.” A Sun City, Arizona, woman said, “Public schools must be nurtured, protected, and promoted, not undermined.”

Sometimes support for the concept of a public school system was implicit in people’s comments about other ideas. For example, an Alabama high school student said a voucher system “could make the problems worse because rich schools will keep getting richer and the poor schools poorer.” In Naperville, a moderator reported that participants worried that a voucher system would “trap low-income, undisciplined, or slower students in denuded, lower-quality public schools.” A woman from Sun City said, “In our democracy, we should not have a two-tiered system of education delineated by the rich and poor.” A Portland woman asked:

Are we going to leave a bunch of disenfranchised people behind in the public school system and take the cream of the crop and put them into the private school system? And then we’ll have chaos in the United States. We’re going to have [schools filled with] worse underclassmen than we’ve ever had before.

Even some people who had taken their own children out of public school supported the concept of a public school system, saying we, as a society, need to ensure a quality education for all children. A man from Denver who was home-schooling his children said he and others from his church were tutoring youngsters from a nearby public elementary school. Another man in that forum said:

I’m a big supporter of the public schools. Our first two children went to public school. Then we adopted our daughter who had been abused and who has emotional problems. She didn’t do well in public school and so we put her into private school where she is doing great. But I am still a strong supporter of public schools. They just didn’t work well for her.

Others saw a public school system as a democratizing force. A New Hampshire man said young people “need a common experience.” A Vermillion, South Dakota, man said, “Education should be a great equalizer.” Another New Hampshire man said:

One common theme I heard [in our forum] is that the problem with our public schools is a problem of what’s happening in our society. We’re talking about democracy; we’re talking about equality. The fact that we talk about public schools as being critical for democracy, small “d,” and the idea that we need a common experience, shows how important this is to all of us.

2. Participants felt that parents should have control over, or a choice about where their children should go to school. But most were not sure a “voucher system” is the way to ensure such choice.

a) Participants said parents should have control over, or a “choice” about, where their children go to school. Some wanted parents to have a choice to ensure children receive an education that best develops their interests and talents. In Saint Cloud, Minnesota, participants said one high school might specialize in fine arts or foreign language immersion, which would enable young people to develop their different interests and talents. Some Bridgeport participants wanted more schools that specialize, including a woman who said we need more “alternative schools like the one with a preveterinarian program.” A man from Durham, New Hampshire, said:

[Suppose] we’ve got a 6-feet, 4-inch 240-pound strapping young boy who can run like a deer and our school [is so small] that we don’t have a football team. Should he be able to choose to go to [the neighboring high school] where they do have one? And if the answer is ‘yes,’ then what about a scrawny 120-pound computer nerd who looks at his school and says, It doesn’t offer [what I could get] in the school in the next town?

Others wanted parents to choose the right school for students with special needs. An El Paso woman said her special-needs child “could not survive” in public school, saying, “I had to remove my child because they were not meeting his needs.

Finally, some parents wanted to be able to take their children out of inferior or low-quality local schools. An Alabama high school student said, “My parents can’t afford to send me to another school and I’m worried that because I don’t go to the best school, I won’t get scholarships for college.” A woman from Portland said, “If I lived in a poor district and my child had the opportunity to go to a private school and get a better education, I’d want to be able to do that.” In the Post-Forum Questionnaire, 51 percent were very concerned that “too many parents are forced to send their children to substandard schools.”

b) But most were not sure a “voucher system” is the way to ensure such choice. As participants deliberated, it became clear that most had an incomplete picture of how a voucher system would work. Many did not know, for example, that a voucher would only cover part of a private school tuition. Even in places like Milwaukee where a voucher system is being tried, many were unfamiliar with the term.

As they deliberated, it became clear that participants saw the issue of “choice” through a different lens than the one used in the policy debate. In the policy debate, “choice” is often defined as competitive pressure that will spur public schools – as they vie with other public schools, private schools, religious schools, or for-profit schools – to improve or close. But in the forums, participants defined the issue in terms of parents’ ability to decide on the best school for their children. While they valued “choice” when defined in those terms, only a minority favored a voucher system. Indeed, many did not see “competition” as vital, with only 29 percent saying a very important principle on which to base policy is that “competition from private and charter schools should spur traditional public schools to improve.” Moreover, the idea that “without competition, public schools have little incentive to improve” ranked last on a list of eight educational concerns. Finally, in the Post-Forum Questionnaire, participants, by a margin of 49 to 33 percent, opposed allowing “parents to select the schools their children attend, even if that drains resources from the public schools.”

The more people deliberated about choice, the more concern they expressed that every child must be offered a quality education and the opportunity to receive a common, public school experience. Some wanted to make sure those at the bottom are not left even further behind. A Portland man worried that a voucher system would “create a worse underclass than we’ve ever had.” Others said competitive pressures might lead public schools to neglect certain children. A woman from Vermillion said, “To make themselves look good on paper, schools are only going to be concerned with the kids making the best grades, not about the [ones who need] nurturing or the special needs children.” Some felt that public money should only go to public schools. A Blacksburg man said, “If you want to send your kid to a parochial school, it shouldn’t be through public money.”

An Example of Deliberation about “Giving Parents a Choice of Schools”

(From a forum in Portland, Oregon, January 21, 2000)

Woman: I don’t see the benefits of [vouchers]. If we start diverting the limited number of educational dollars we have, we’ll weaken the [public school] system. I’m not saying it’s wrong to do this. I’m just saying we need to look before we leap.

Man: Education should be a great equalizer. And the U.S. is still a melting pot. The whole question is money. If there’s enough money for education where we can subsidize private schools, fine. But the public education system should get first priority.

2nd Woman: I’m not fond of the voucher system because it won’t get us where we want to go. But a charter school [might] get people invested in education.

3rd Woman: What we want is the ‘private school mentality.’ People say the private system works.

Man: I believe competition can be helpful. And I believe it’s not about money. We spend more money, per capita, than anybody else in the world. And have less to show for it. [With this choice], all principals and teachers are going to be judged on performance.

2nd Man: Can I say one thing? It is about money. Without money you cannot even get a glass of water in the U.S. Whose responsibility is it to educate our children? That’s a fundamental question because we’re tampering with something that’s supposed to equalize and protect the meek from the mighty.

3rd Man: Students may do better in private school. But if [a student there] acts up or acts out, what does the private school do? Makes him go back to public school. So we have a different set of rules for public schools. [Public schools] have more students with learning disabilities, learning problems, and behavioral problems. So here we are, vilifying the public school system. All we’re going to do [with a voucher system] is take the cream of the crop and leave a bunch of disenfranchised people behind.

3. Participants saw standardized tests as a useful indicator of performance and a means of articulating higher expectations for students. But they did not see such tests as the way to determine how well students, teachers, and schools are doing, or as the definitive measurement to hold them accountable.

a) Participants saw standardized tests as a useful indicator of performance and a means of articulating higher expectations for students. Many participants saw standards as a way of setting higher expectations for students, not just measuring their performance by test scores. In the Post-Forum Questionnaire, 58 percent were concerned that “too little is expected of our public school students.” In Pittsburgh, the group felt that “what we need are higher expectations of what our students can do.” An El Paso woman said, “We need to raise the expectations we have of the students, teachers, and parents.” Another woman there said:

I was a public school teacher and now I'm a home-school teacher. The reason I started home-schooling my kids was because of the low level [of] academic expectations at the high school where I was teaching.

The more they deliberated, the more participants said that by setting higher expectations, students will learn to their full potential, not just become good at taking tests. A woman from Portland said:

It kills me to think that [because we rely so much on standardized tests], kids don't have the opportunity to show who they are [instead of] just writing the answer to a [test] question. [I favor] a holistic kind of education. [Learning] is not a robotic thing. It's not just about learning the answers.

b) But they did not see such tests as the way to determine how well students, teachers, and schools are doing, or as the definitive measurement to hold them accountable. In the policy debate, “standards” is often used as shorthand for the idea of using standardized tests to hold students, teachers, and schools accountable for their performance. But people in the forums said “standardized tests” should be only one of several indicators of how students are doing, not the ultimate, definitive measure of student achievement. As they deliberated, participants said that while they want to make sure students are learning, too much reliance on a standardized test does not guarantee a quality education for three reasons:

1. Standardized tests do not accurately measure what students learn. Many said that standardized tests, no matter how well designed they are, are imperfect measures of what a student has learned. Some students are simply “not good” at taking such tests, they said. Moreover, such tests may be culturally biased against students in different ethnic groups or from different parts of the country.

Young people were especially critical of standardized testing. High school students in Blacksburg said such tests are unfair because certain people “do not test well.” A high school student from Dothan, Alabama, said that because she was a slow reader, she had trouble on standardized tests, even though she knew the material. In Portland, a young woman talked about the other side of that coin:

I could excel at [standardized] tests. . . . You start to gear [yourself] toward performance, which can be different from learning. I became a very good performer.

In a forum with college students at Wayne State College, participants said standardized tests do not capture a student's abilities, motivation, and study habits – the skills that are the ultimate determinants of success. One student summarized his frustration with testing by saying, "Standardized tests don't describe me as a student."

Implying that test scores are less important than other skills, a Dallas woman said high school students "need to be taught how to think." A Durham woman agreed, asking, "Do we want children to learn certain facts, or do we want them to become critical thinkers and good problem solvers?"

Some had another concern – the impact on students who do not do well. A woman from Vermillion, South Dakota, said:

I'm really concerned about those people who are marginalized by our standards. We all fail in life from time to time. But failure for a child over and over and over again indicates that there is a need there that is not being met.

2. *Standards would cause teachers to "teach to the test."* Many worried that relying on standardized testing would lead teachers to "teach to the test" instead of providing the best possible instruction. Young people in particular said they knew from experience that standardized testing influences how teachers teach. High school students in Blacksburg said that too much class time is spent on "teaching to the test." In Bridgeport, participants said the local schools "practically shut down" to prepare for standardized tests, adding that while "kids learn and relearn the basics, they seldom move forward" beyond that. A Manassas, Virginia, high school student said the schools "don't care about the students; they only care about making sure we pass the standardized tests." A high school student from Dothan, Alabama, said:

The teachers aren't teaching. They're spoon-feeding us the information for [standardized] exams or their own tests. We don't actually learn anything!

Others worried about the impact of using standardized test scores to evaluate teachers' performance. In Naperville, participants said standardized tests take teachers away from real teaching because "being rated well means more than how much kids actually learn." In Rapid City, participants said that teachers whose evaluations are based on their students' test scores might give less attention to students who need extra help. Such a model, they said, could skew the efforts of even the most dedicated teachers if their performance and compensation are determined by how well their students do.

3. *People may not agree about what standards should consist of and who should develop them.* As they deliberated, some were hesitant about standards because of questions about what they should consist of and who should develop them. A New Hampshire woman said:

One thing I'm concerned about is who sets the standards. Do communities come together and work over a long period of time to set a standard of excellence for their children? Or does it come from the state or federal government?

Working Through

Some argued against a one-size-fits-all approach, including a man from El Paso:

If you're in a manufacturing environment, you need a different education [than] if you're in an agricultural environment. People in Iowa do not want to be educated the same way as people in Maine. A child of a migrant farm worker [should] be educated differently than a child in an urban environment.

But a woman in that forum disagreed:

[Just because] we live in a manufacturing community, my child has to be trained in a certain way? I don't think so. I want my child to be educated to reach his full potential If I'm a migrant work and my child wants to be a doctor – Hallelujah! Don't shortchange him.

A New Hampshire man advanced a similar view:

What if I live where our standard is that all high school graduates have to be computer literate? But a different community doesn't think that's important. So the kids who graduate from my school has computer skills but the kids who graduate from the other one don't?

An Example of Deliberation about “Raising Standards, Stressing the Basics”

(From a forum in El Paso, Texas, December 15, 1999)

Man: I strongly believe we should raise the standards. If we expect mediocrity, that's what we'll get.

Woman: Standardized testing causes teachers to teach to the test . . . [We should] teach students what they need [to know] . . . instead of having everybody in the same classroom with standardized tests and standardized curriculum and standardized everything.

2nd Man: I work with criminal offenders. And in the 20-odd years that I've been in [literacy education], I've seen people at the bottom improve. . . . At the bottom, standards [have been] raised.

2nd Woman: We need to raise standards. But we also need to raise the expectations we have of the students, teachers, and parents. We need to support teachers with additional tools and resources.

Man: We haven't discussed community standards A child of a migrant worker is going to be educated differently than a child who lives in an urban environment.

Woman: I totally disagree If I'm a migrant worker and my child wants to be a doctor: Hallelujah! Don't shortchange him.

Man: National standards should be at the minimum acceptable level, not the top.

Woman: I agree about national standards, they should be the minimum But the key is to motivate kids to want to learn, [help them] find their passion. That's the key.

2nd Man: I think we've lost focus of what education is about. If I thought the children in a manufacturing town should be trained only to be manufacturers, what will happen to great literature or history or geography? [Unless these are included], we will trap these children.

3rd Man: I believe that we got lost in that key word: “competition.” We're focusing on education like it's a race We're not necessarily competing against each other; we're running toward [the same] goal. If we look at education as a track meet, then we all lose. We've all lost sight of the goal. Which is the quality [education] we're all talking about.

4. Participants' thinking about "funding" is complex. On the one hand, they said roughly the same amount should be allocated to educate every child, and many favored more funding for smaller classes, higher teachers' salaries, and infrastructure repair. On the other hand, many said a lot of money allocated to education is not well spent, and they strongly felt that more funding, by itself, would not solve our problems with education.

a) Participants' thinking about "funding" is complex. On the one hand, they felt that roughly the same amount should be allocated to educate every child. Most participants said that education funding should be roughly equal for every child everywhere. In the Post-Forum Questionnaire, 82 percent said a very important principle for policy-making is that "all public schools should receive adequate funding, regardless of what they are," but only 34 percent said this is what we do. By a margin of four to one (60 percent to 15 percent), participants said we should increase federal and state funding to ensure equality, even if that means a loss of some local control.

Many said that to equalize per pupil expenditures, we must increase spending in low-income areas. In the questionnaire, 63 percent, and 78 percent of African-Americans, were concerned that "school taxing systems favor rich districts." In Hobart, Indiana, participants agreed that "we should equalize funding so that poorer communities have equal quality." In St. Cloud, people said we need "to bring poor schools up to the level of other schools in the state." The public schools near Helena, Arkansas, are participants there said, badly underfunded compared to other schools in the state. An Alabama high school student said, "We need to first build up the poorer schools before we can talk about equal funding." A woman from New Hampshire said:

My guess is that, if students from poor schools had the computers, books, the literacy-rich environment, and the well-paid teachers [that other schools have], and had the heat on in the winter, that students would achieve more than they do.

In some forums, people talked about sacrificing in order to equalize funding. The St. Cloud group felt that we should do more to equalize funding, even if that means higher taxes. A Portland man said, "We have to develop the collective will [and] the fortitude to say that all the resources should go equally to all the schools."

b) And many favored more funding for smaller classes, higher teachers' salaries, and infrastructure repair. As they deliberated, participants said more funding is needed to make three main improvements.

Smaller Classes: Many said we needed to reduce class size, especially in the early grades. A New Hampshire man said, "It's becoming clear now that smaller classes, especially in primary grades, make a huge difference." A woman from Clio, Michigan, said, "Smaller classes give the kids and the teacher a closer relationship." A man from Lake Forest, California, said, "The kids in large classes don't get the attention they need." In Naperville, participants complained that public school classes are "huge." A Portland man said:

In my daughter's economics class, there's over 40 [students]. Spanish has 30. Pre-calculus has 35. That's too many. Some schools have way too many in a class.

A look at young people's thinking about the issue...

Young people in communities across the country, including in Blacksburg, Virginia, and Dothan, Alabama, participated in NIF forums on the issue of public schools. In addition, young people from 4-H clubs across the country participated in the annual Citizenship Washington Focus (CWF), a 4-H youth leadership program. As part of this year's program, young people participated in NIF forums to deliberate about issues ranging from the environment to governing America. Nearly 125 students participated in 7 forums on the issue of "Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?"

On School Choice

"I don't go to school with the kid across the street. We only see each other every once in a while."

"I'd like to go to another school, but there's no transportation available. I'm basically stuck at my school."

On Standardized Testing

"Standardized tests are good because that way kids don't 'fall through the cracks' but, I don't think kids should be evaluated only by tests. Some kids don't test well. There should be other ways of measuring learning."

"In history class last year, my teacher stopped the course for three weeks to prepare us for the standardized tests. We aren't learning what we're supposed to know. They are teaching us to pass a test."

"I don't think funding should be linked to test scores. Schools get more money if their students perform well on the tests. But shouldn't the schools with worse performance be getting the money? It's obvious they are the ones who need better textbooks, smaller classes, and more teachers."

On Community Involvement

"If our football team is in the state finals, then money pours in from the community – the whole team has new jerseys. But if we need new textbooks, then there's no money around."

"The stadiums at our school are crowded for a football game, but during a National Honor Society ceremony, there are a few parents scattered around."

On School Funding

"I think our schools have money, it's just that whoever decides how it's spent isn't spending it on the right things. We are still using old computers at our school, but we just got a brand new baseball field."

"We have out-of-date textbooks that we use and our schools are falling apart. We should at least have teachers who want to be there. They need to be paid more, so they'll care more."

"Our mechanics teacher is also our math teacher. We need more teachers who can teach."

Higher Salaries for Teachers: Many also said public education is suffering because public school teachers are underpaid. A man from Dothan said, "If teachers were paid more, they might be more excited about teaching." A woman from Mooresville, North Carolina, said, "Give teachers more money." A woman from Hebron, Nebraska, said, "Teachers are not valued or paid enough and therefore many people who would make excellent teachers choose other fields." A New Hampshire woman said:

When I was a teacher in the late 1980s, I was making under \$20,000. I had student loans and other payments, and I didn't have a family or a spouse to help me out. And so I left teaching because the balance sheet didn't work, and I ended up in a second career . . . I'd like to think you don't have to have a trust fund to become a teacher.

In the Post-Forum Questionnaire, 65 percent were concerned that "low pay scales discourage many good people from becoming teachers," ranking it first on a list of eight concerns.

Infrastructure Repair: A third area of concern was infrastructure and other basic needs. A woman from Hopewell, Virginia, said her local schools "are not up to levels that enhance learning." A man from Clio, Michigan, said, "Schools don't have the funding to fix things and buy things that are really needed." A woman from South Dakota said local schools badly need repair. "There are schools right here in South Dakota where the structure of the building isn't safe anymore," she said.

Working Through

Participants also talked about other fundamentals. A high school student from Alabama said, “We need more money to buy better books that are up-to-date.” A man from Mission Viejo, California, complained about the “lack of quality textbooks.” Many agreed with a Portland man who said:

Are we funding the schools adequately? Obviously no. What’s ironic is that this is happening at a time when every single state in the union and the federal government itself is reporting a budget surplus.

c) On the other hand, many said a lot of money allocated to education is not well spent. A number of participants said the public schools have adequate funding but that the money is not used efficiently or effectively.

Many agreed with a Chester man who said, “I think this very strongly – if public schools would spend money wisely, they wouldn’t have to ask for help.” Some singled out administrators. Participants in Mission Viejo said, “Money that should be spent on more teachers and smaller classes is wasted on highly paid administrators.” Others questioned educational priorities. In Hobart, Indiana, people said the local schools overspend on athletics but underspend on front-line education in the form of more and better quality teachers. An El Paso man made a similar point, saying, “You go to some schools and see that their sports program out rules their arts program.”

Then there was an El Paso man who described how a national initiative that was intended to correct funding imbalances had turned into a reverse incentive that kept schools from doing their best:

Our superintendent once told me – and I’ll never forget it – he said, “We want to be a poor community.” And I said, “Excuse me?” He said, “We want to be poor because we get more federal funding.”

d) And they strongly felt that more funding, by itself, would not solve our problems with education. While participants in many forums said increased funding might be a necessary condition for educational improvement, they also said it is not sufficient. A New Hampshire man said, “Education has the potential to be a bottomless pit.” A man from Rock Valley, Iowa said, “It’s not more money that would count, but how it’s used and what it’s used for.” Some felt that more spending could not possibly be what is essential because there are some schools in low-income areas where students learn beyond reasonable expectations. A New Hampshire man said:

Every once in a while we see an example of someone from inner-city Los Angeles [who is] teaching the poorest of poor kids. And half the kids that pass the advanced calculus test for the entire state of California come out of that class.

As we discuss at length (see #6, below), participants again and again returned to the idea that education will improve only when people are more connected to the schools. A woman from Portland said, “There needs to be adequate funding, but it has to go hand-in-hand with [community involvement].” A woman from New Hampshire made the same point:

It's not only money. It's creativity; it's commitment. It's the parent who comes and says, "I want to be part of what's happening in this school." It's the teacher who says, "I can make a difference." It's the businessman who says, "I will support what you're doing." And it's because [the public school] is a public institution that is central to our democratic way of life.

The policy debate about this issue often centers on a single question: Should funding be increased? But the public, as represented by people in the forums, has a complex set of views that might seem contradictory but are, in fact, logically consistent. While they favored increased funding, they also said spending is not the answer to the problems. A Dallas man said:

Columbine was one of the best-funded schools in Colorado. Being the best, the nicest, the newest didn't stop that tragedy from happening.

An Example of Deliberation about "Providing Adequate Funding to All Schools"

(From Vermillion, South Dakota, April 2, 2000)

Woman: There are schools in South Dakota where the structure of the building isn't safe. So when it comes to basics like having a safe building where students can go to school and not be worried about being crushed by a falling wall, this choice is very appealing.

Man: I agree. In some of the smaller communities, the schools are 80 years old And you're getting more and more students into [the same] classroom. When you have 30 or 35 seventh graders, they can be a bit unruly and hard to manage.

Woman: I think we've heard of both overcrowding and undercrowding in our region.

2nd Woman: [We need] adequate funding not only for structural things but also for our teachers.

Man: As an educator, I find it hard to disagree. My wife is a speech pathologist with an MA. She applied for a position in a South Dakota school and was offered \$22,000.

3rd Woman: I moved here from Georgia. Your pay scale is one of the lowest in the nation. But you have a very high cost of living. It's a double whammy.

Man: And then there is the brain drain.

2nd Man: But by increasing taxes, all we're doing is requiring parents to work longer and work more. Which, from what we were talking about earlier, leads to more problems with the children in the schools.

Woman: Maybe it's that education is not a top concern [in our state]. I watch the news in South Dakota and Iowa. They ask legislators, "What are your top concerns?" In Iowa, 90 percent [of the legislators] say education is their top concern. I'd say 10 percent [would say that] among our legislators.

2nd Woman: I think funding our schools based on property taxes has a lot to do [fairness]. Because if the school is located in a rural area, the property tax is not as high and they aren't getting the same money as other schools.

3rd Woman: But do we want to trade off local control? Because every time we get federal money, you know there's going to be red tape and bureaucracy.

5. Participants' fundamental concerns about education went far beyond the issues of choice, standards, and funding. The crux of the problem, they said, is the public's relationship with the public schools. The relationship, they said, is "broken" in that people do not feel connected to, or ownership of, the public schools. And, they said, the greatest obstacle blocking a closer relationship is the attitude of educators, especially administrators.

a) Participants' fundamental concerns about education went far beyond the issues of choice, standards, and funding. The crux of the problem, they said, is the public's relationship with the public schools. The relationship, they said, is "broken" in that people do not feel connected to, or ownership of, the public schools. As we explain at length below (see #6, below), one theme consistently emerged in people's comments about the public schools – that the public no longer feels a sense of connectedness to, or ownership of, the public schools. Participants' comments reveal that they believe the public's relationship with the public schools is "broken." A man from New Hampshire said, "I definitely see a disconnect between the community and the schools. An absolute disconnection."

b) And, they said, the greatest obstacle blocking a closer relationship is the attitude of educators, especially administrators. In forums everywhere, people said they felt "shut out" from the public schools. In Naperville, the group said community members are not welcomed to serve at the school. A New Hampshire man said the school's response to someone who wants to volunteer is, "Great! We'll call you in ten years or so." In Helena, Arkansas, people wanted to get involved but said the schools do not receive them well and that teachers are not comfortable with parents.¹ A county supervisor from Fairfield, California said, "The best argument I know of for vouchers is the impenetrability of the current system." Another New Hampshire man said:

I sometimes think that the school boards or the superintendent put up a wall and say, "Don't cross the line! Don't come over in my territory! Stay home, mind your own business, and we'll take care of our [business]."

Some, including participants in Blacksburg, said educators, and especially administrators, are "afraid of the public." A South Dakota woman said administrators do not welcome suggestions:

One thing that keeps the schools from opening their doors to [the] community is the fear that business people will see something that should be changed and think they had a right to say something about it. [But] that's a risk the school and the administration have to be willing to take.

¹ We should note that a mayor and some school board members, including a superintendent, were at the forum and afterward, made a commitment to participants that their concerns would be addressed. The moderator reported that the superintendent saw the group as saying, "We're all in this together" instead of an "attack" on administrators.

A South Dakota man said that teachers used to welcome community involvement:

Over time, things evolved into a hostile situation between the administration and the parents. . . . There are many parents who would love to work with the school to help raise standards and help students gain the enthusiasm they need to learn. It's as if the administrators feel threatened by parental involvement.

Some participants said educators have legitimate reasons to be hesitant about opening the doors to the public. In Denver, Dallas, and Fairfield, participants said educators have an overriding responsibility to protect children from what one man called "predatory adults." Others said that instead of working with and backing up their children's teachers, some parents work against them. A Dallas man said:

I know a lot of teachers. And what I hear them say all the time is that parents come to school to defend their child. And in a negative way. [They argue] with the teachers in front of the other kids.

But even when legitimate concerns were discussed, participants said educators should do much more to connect the public to the schools. A woman from Jacksonville, Florida said, "Schools need to know how to work with parents, they need training on how to work with parents." An El Paso man said, "Maybe the vice-principal should have, as one of his responsibilities, involving more of the community in the teaching process of our children." An El Paso woman said:

We need to get families much more involved. And the educators have to encourage them. Some parents are not well educated. Let's encourage them. Let's teach them as we teach their kids. [If we do that], we'll live in a much better community. **a) Though they wanted more connectedness to, ownership of, and community involvement with the public schools, participants did not want more control over day-to-day or administrative issues.** In the policy debate, "community involvement" is

6. Though they wanted more connectedness to, ownership of, and community involvement with the public schools, participants did not want more control over day-to-day or administrative issues. Rather, they seemed – adults and students alike – drawn to smaller, neighborhood schools that would facilitate parental, student, and community involvement, along with more community service, school-to-work internships, and after-school, evening, and year-round activities. In brief, participants wanted the public school, which they saw as having great untapped potential, to become a hub of community life.

sometimes interpreted as “the public wanting to take over the administration of the schools.” But while participants wanted more “connectedness,” they did not want to take over day-to-day administrative responsibilities. For example, while people in a Pittsburgh-area forum wanted to know what is going on in the schools, they also said “we pay experts” to make administrative decisions and they should be free to do so. In Mission Viejo, participants said the public “should not micro-manage” the schools because “we have paid administrators to make school decisions.” While people in Blacksburg wanted more communication, they did not want the public to manage or run the schools.

We should stress that the call for smaller, neighborhood schools was not code language for a return to a racially segregated public school system. And while people may want to have a voice about certain controversial issues, they were not calling for a “community-developed” curriculum. Instead, they were willing to delegate that responsibility to professional educators.

b) Rather, they seemed – adults and students alike – drawn to smaller, neighborhood schools that would facilitate parental, student, and community involvement, along with more community service, school-to-work internships, and after-school, evening, and year-round activities. People again and again talked about the need to connect the community to the public schools.

1. *Smaller, neighborhood schools:* People wanted smaller, neighborhood schools that would, they said, make it easier for people to be involved. Participants in Wayne, Nebraska, said, “It’s easier for a parent to walk two blocks to help out at school than to walk across town.” In Bridgeport, participants felt that “our kids have lost their sense of neighborhood” because of the size and structure of the schools. In Mission Viejo people said, “We have giant school districts that we need to break down to make them more responsive to the community they serve.” A man from Milwaukee asked, “How can you make education a community effort when it takes kids 45 minutes on a bus to get to school?” A Denver man said:

[Suppose you have] three kids. One’s at this school, one’s at that one, the third is way across town. [Today] everyone is working, mom and dad. A lot of [people] have two or three jobs. You have single parents, grandparents raising kids. You can’t be [connected to what a child is doing] if you have to take time off work and run all over town.

2. *More parental involvement:* Smaller, neighborhood schools would facilitate what participants saw as essential to improving public school performance – more parental involvement. A man from Dayton said, “We need more personal contact between parents, teachers, and administrators.”

The idea that a child’s education depends on parental involvement struck participants as indisputable. A woman from Dallas said, “Education begins at home.” An Alabama high school student said, “The more the family cares about education, the more excited [kids] will get about school.” An El Paso man said, “If the parent is not interested [in the child’s education], the child will not be interested.” In Blacksburg, high school students in 4-H clubs said parents should be involved not only at the elementary and junior high level, but at the high school level as well. Such involvement, they said, would help with the problems of teen alcohol and drug use. One said, “Parents would be around more, and more aware of what goes on in and after school.” A man from Vermillion said:

I was in [another town and saw] big, bright yellow signs on the side of buses and in big, black letters they said: “*Parental Involvement Equals Quality Schools.*” To me, that says it all.

Parental involvement can be vital, participants said, even if a parent is not knowledgeable enough about a subject to help a child with homework. An El Paso woman said:

In some of our poorer schools, they asked the parents, whether or not they could speak English, just to sit at the table with the child at night while they did their homework to show that [doing homework] is important to the parent. And those students’ grades went up.

In addition to higher academic achievement, a woman from Portland said parental involvement might lead to increased community involvement:

My son sees his mom [active] in school [and attentive to his schoolwork and so] he does well. He’s into it because he sees me [caring about] it. We also both volunteer at a homeless shelter. He’s grown so much just seeing me being involved in that, and seeing that I’m involved in the community.

3. *More community involvement:* Though participants saw parental involvement as necessary for educational success, it was not seen as sufficient. In the Post-Forum Questionnaire, 56 percent were concerned that “schools lack the community participation that would help them thrive. A woman from Westerville, Ohio, said “Both parental and community involvement are essential to children’s education.”

Community participation is vital, participants said, because school problems are a reflection of community problems and therefore cannot be addressed by the schools acting alone. A New Hampshire man said, “The problem with our public schools is a symptom of what’s happening in our society.” He added, “A sixth grader shooting up in elementary school is not a problem with our schools.” A Portland woman said:

The community has to be involved because the schools are a reflection of the greater community. . . . What’s going on in society comes right smack dab in the middle of our school system. Everything from drugs to sex to diseases to violence to whatever – it all ends up in our public school system. So there’s no choice but to get [the community] involved.

Getting the community involved is not only educationally important, a South Dakota woman said, it will increase the community's investment in education. "If community members are involved," she said, "they are more apt to give money and help with infrastructure." Others said community involvement might encourage students to stay out of trouble. A woman from El Paso said:

You wonder why so many students get involved in gangs or drugs. To deter that, you've got to bring in the community.

4. *More mentoring by volunteers such as the elderly:* Another way the community should be linked to the schools, participants said, is for people to serve as volunteer mentors. Several saw the elderly as an underutilized resource. A Vermillion man said, "Senior citizens are just yearning for ways to improve the community and to give something back to our schools." Older participants in Naperville said they would gladly go into the schools and work as volunteers if they felt welcomed. Others looked to employers. A Dallas man praised a local firm that pays employees who take time off to work as mentors and tutors in the public schools.

5. *More community service:* The idea of high school students doing volunteer work in the community was popular whenever it was brought up. A teacher from New Hampshire said community service enhances learning and nurtures a sense of responsibility. A Portland woman said, "Community service produces a sense of pride." A woman from Vermillion agreed:

Community service builds self-esteem in ways they can't get in the classroom. I've seen how even marginalized students can benefit when they get out and contribute something as a citizen of the community.

6. *More work-study programs and internships:* Many also wanted closer ties between the schools and local employers. An El Paso man described "the positive impact of programs like Partners in Education and Junior Achievement." In Columbus, Ohio, people said students could learn from numerous employers, including car repair shops. A Vermillion woman said, "My school had a school-to-work program where community members were asked if students could help in their business for a semester, and the students got credit for it."

In addition to getting students out into the community, participants wanted to get employers into the schools, not in any administrative capacity but as partners in education. A teacher from El Paso said, "We need to bring the business community in [via] symposiums to help students see how what you're teaching applies to real life." Professionals might tell students how their subjects apply to different occupations, said an Alabama high school student. "A doctor could come into an anatomy course and show us how what we're learning is applied in the real world." An El Paso woman who had gone into a local school to talk about her occupation said she'd had a favorable experience:

I talked about how we use math in our jobs. As a speech pathologist, you wouldn't think about me using math every day. . . . I think that talk helped make [the subject more] relevant to the students. We could do a lot more of that to make their classes more interesting to them.

Some saw another positive side-effect to having businesses linked to the schools. A South Dakota woman said that such linkage would give local businesses "a larger stake in the success of the public schools, which is a huge benefit."

7. *More connections to other educational resources such as libraries and museums:*

Participants saw other community resources that could enhance education if they were linked to the public schools. In Rapid City, participants said museums and bookstores could work more closely with the schools to help students learn. In the Post-Forum Questionnaire, 66 percent said the idea of schools using “a variety of community resources in educating students” was a very important principle for policy-making. Yet only 27 percent said that principle is strongly reflected in what we do.

c) In brief, participants wanted the public school, which they saw as having great untapped potential, to become a hub of community life. In addition to being smaller and nearby, the public schools should provide more after-school activities for young people, participants said. A woman from Panama City, Florida, said “After-school and extracurricular activities can have a huge impact on a child’s motivation to do well in terms of academics.” A man in a forum in a state prison in Chester said:

Once a child gets out of school, he needs something to do. When I was growing up, there was nothing to do. When kids leave class, they should have a little recreation time, something to do [to keep them occupied and out of trouble].

Participants also wanted the schools to be more accommodating to working parents. A New Hampshire woman said schools have not adjusted to the large numbers of single parents and families where both parents work full time:

We don’t have constructive opportunities for [working] parents and schools to get together. Schools are open when parents are at work. And you’re really asking a lot when you ask people to [leave work and] give up what’s putting food on the table for their kids in order to come in [to school for a conference].

Finally, many wanted what are often called “full-service schools” that offer space for educational programs and evening classes for adults and students and that are open year-round. Participants saw the schools as an underutilized resource. In Portland, people said the schools should be the hub of the community and should offer classes for adults at night. In Pierre, South Dakota, a participant said, “Our schools should be the center of everything that happens in the community.”

An Example of Deliberation about “Making Education a Community Effort”

(From a forum in Durham, New Hampshire, February 29, 2000)

Woman: It's easy [for people to say to themselves], “I've elected my school board. I'll let them make the decisions. I don't need to have any responsibility for the quality of education.” And the way the schools boards are set up really reinforces that attitude.

2nd Woman: Many people are involved on school boards that shouldn't be. . . . The [school boards] can't agree on anything. They make bad decisions. . . . Talk about raising standards. I think we need to raise the standards of the people making those decisions.

Man: I don't think the school board members are a bunch of dummies. A lot of them are very well educated. And they're sincere about what they're doing. But there's no representation below them. They don't know whom they are representing. They don't have any kind of forum they [must] answer to.

2nd Man: I definitely see a disconnect between the community and the schools. An absolute disconnection.

3rd Man: Just to respond to that, my goal is to educate students [so they] are able to live in a community. And that's messy and imperfect. . . . But I think we're trying to raise citizens, not necessarily the greatest academic persons. And I think bringing community members into the school might be very beneficial.

2nd Woman: I worry about the shifts in New Hampshire communities. This is a state in which town meetings, school board meetings, and school district meetings were very encouraged and very inclusive. And some communities have moved away from that.

4th Man: In my community, I think that the school boards or the superintendent have put up a wall and said, “Don't cross the line. Don't come into my territory. This is our territory. Stay home! Mind your own business! We'll take care of [everything].”

Woman: We don't get many constructive opportunities for parents and schools to get together. Schools are in operation when parents are at work. If [schools] ask, parents will come to volunteer. If there's an activity their child is involved in, parents will be there. But [parents] have to give up part of their salary to do that. . . . We need to think outside the box about how to get the community [more involved]. We need to be a little more realistic and creative on how we're going to bring these elements together.

The Public’s Approach to the Issue

Questions

Does the public connect to the issue of education as the “conventional wisdom” suggests?

Conventional wisdom holds that ever-increasing numbers of Americans are giving up on public schools, educating their children via home-schooling or sending them to private schools and looking to financial help through a voucher system. Moreover, it suggests that many students graduate without having mastered the basics, that public schools do not enforce discipline or maintain an atmosphere conducive to learning, and that they do not teach, or reenforce, the basic values parents instill in their children. In short, the public thinks the schools are falling short of their responsibility to provide all children with a quality education.

While it is true that education is Americans’ number one concern and that many believe the public schools come up short, there is much more to the story.

Americans have not given up on the idea of public schools. While people have deep concerns about education and, in some cases, favor wholesale change; the forums revealed that people have a deep commitment to maintaining a public school system. Participants from all walks of life, including those without school-age children, strongly believed in the concept of a public school education as a common, equalizing, democratizing experience that offers every child the opportunity to get a quality education.

How does the public approach the issue?

With real concern. Participants said we count on the public schools to educate the great majority of our children. And so, even people who do not have children, or children in public school approached this issue as one in need of immediate attention.

Are there other dimensions of the issue that people in the forums see?

Yes. Much of the policy debate centers on three issues: instituting a voucher system to give parents a choice of schools; using standardized tests to hold students, teachers, and schools accountable for their performance; and increasing education expenditures to reduce class size, repair infrastructure, and equalize per-pupil funding.

But the public, as represented by the diverse group of people who deliberated about this issue in more than 60 forums in 34 states and the District of Columbia, sees each of these issues differently.

While people in the forums wanted parents to have more choice about or control over the kind of school their children attend, most were unsure how to reach that goal. And, as they deliberated, people continually expressed their strong commitment to a common public school experience for all children.

Participants saw standardized tests as a useful indicator of performance and a means of articulating higher expectations for students. But they did not see such tests as the way to determine how well students, teachers, and schools are doing, or as the definitive measurement to hold them accountable. Over reliance on such tests would be a mistake because: standardized tests do not accurately measure what students

learn; teachers will teach to the test, especially if their evaluation is based on their students' performance; and people in different communities may not agree about what standards should consist of or who should develop them.

While many participants favored increased funding to raise teacher salaries, reduce class size, and repair infrastructure, most also said these improvements are, at best, only part of the solution to addressing our problems with public education.

While nearly all agreed that roughly equal amounts should be spent to educate each child, few felt that increased spending, by itself, was the answer to our problems with the public schools.

As they deliberated, participants kept coming back to their fundamental desire for a closer relationship with the public schools. The greatest obstacle to rebuilding such a relationship, they said, is the closed-door attitude of educators and administrators.

What mattered to people as they deliberated?

As people deliberated about the issue, they considered the following:

Essentials: Participants said all students should have to master the basics in order to graduate; and they said, all students should attend school in a safe environment conducive to learning.

Quality and Equality: Participants felt that every school should provide every student with the opportunity to get a quality education.

Fairness: Participants said that roughly an equal amount should be spent to educate every child. They also said we should pay more attention to the educational needs of all students, especially those who are not going on to college.

Educational Equity: People were fearful of developing a public school system that exacerbates the educational and economic gaps between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

Preparation: Participants wanted children to acquire the skills and attitudes necessary to succeed in higher education or the workplace.

Citizenship: Participants wanted students to be prepared to take their place in the community as citizens and contributing members of society.

Economic Health: People said a strong public school system is important for a host of reasons, including international competitiveness.

And most important to participants was:

Connectedness: Participants strongly valued the idea of small, neighborhood schools that are connected to the community.

Is a “public voice” recognizable? Distilling the public voice on issues related to education may be difficult because much of the education debate does not address what the public sees as the core, underlying issues. While many people said greater choice and standardized testing and equalized funding are important, they see these issues differently than they are often framed in the policy debate. And their concerns go beyond these issues.

When citizens have a chance to deliberate together, a public voice begins to emerge – people want wholesale, radical change – a redefinition of the relationship between the schools, parents, and the rest of the community.

Was any firm common ground for action revealed? Yes. After deliberating, many participants decided that they wanted to:

1. Provide more choice or control for parents to decide what school they wanted their children to attend;
2. Ensure that all high school graduates have mastered basic reading, writing, and mathematics;
3. End the practice of “social promotion”;
4. Make sure all children have an opportunity to get a quality education;
5. Establish more smaller neighborhood schools that make it easier for parents to be involved with their children’s education and students to feel involved personally;
6. Use more of the community’s resources, including mentoring, especially by the elderly, more partnering with local employees, more connections to other educational resources such as libraries and museums;
7. Make schools a hub of the community by offering more after-school activities and providing space in the evenings and in the summer for community meetings, classes, or other education opportunities.
8. Reestablish a public school system that provides a common, equalizing, democratizing experience and prepares young people to take their place in society.

What effect did deliberation have?	<p>As they deliberated, participants' perspectives broadened and they began to see the issue of education as a communitywide or national challenge, instead of just a problem for local educators and school officials.</p> <p>As they deliberated, participants began to see, as one man said, that they "could make a difference in education" and participants began exploring ways of addressing the issue together.</p>
What needs to happen next in the national dialogue?	<p>There are differences between the typical political framing of the issue – in terms of vouchers, standards, and accountability, and more funding to reduce class size, etc., – and how the public thinks, especially when people have a chance to deliberate. Instead of a <u>public</u> school system, many felt that we have a government, or a professional, or a school board school system – all a way of illustrating that people do not feel a sense of ownership over the issue of public education.</p> <p>The public is not looking for a "quick fix." Most saw the problem with our public schools as a symptom of what's happening to our society.</p> <p>The public's deepest concerns involve the <u>relationship</u> between parents and the community and the public schools. For the public to really tune in to the national dialogue, the issue of public education must be recast to involve these deeper concerns.</p>

NIF issue books include a Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaire that participants may fill out at the forum. In the tables below, we report the questionnaire results from 688 participants who sent in questionnaires by September 1, 2000. We should emphasize that those who filled out these questionnaires are a self-selected group and thus the questionnaire outcomes should not be construed as polling data using a probability sample that yields results within a statistically precise margin of sampling error. The outcomes should be considered in conjunction with the rest of this analysis as an indicator of how a diverse group of Americans feel about education before and after deliberating.

Table 1.
"Here is a list of principles on which policies for improving the schools might be based. How important do you think each one is?"

Very Important Principle	Pre-Forum %	Post-Forum %
All public schools should receive adequate funding, regardless of where they are.	82	82
Schools should use a variety of community resources in educating students.	63	66
More money must be spent on schools to make sure all children get a good education.	59	63
Students should be promoted only when they have learned the required material.	57	56
Our country needs high academic standards all students must meet.	54	53
Community members should have more say about what happens in their schools.	44	49
All parents should be able to choose the schools their children attend.	33	35
Competition from private and charter schools should spur traditional public schools to improve.	30	29

Table 2.
"Here is a list of principles on which policies for improving the schools might be based. How strongly is each principle actually reflected in our current policies?"

Strongly Reflected	Pre-Forum %	Post-Forum %
More money must be spent on schools to make sure all children get a good education.	22	32
All public schools should receive adequate funding, regardless of where they are.	20	34
Our country needs high academic standards all students must meet.	18	27
Schools should use a variety of community resources in educating students.	17	27
Students should be promoted only when they have learned the required material.	17	27
Community members should have more say about what happens in their schools.	14	22
All parents should be able to choose the schools their children attend.	14	20
Competition from private and charter schools should spur traditional public schools to improve.	10	17

Table 3.
"How concerned are you about the issues listed below?"

Concerned	Pre-Forum %	Post-Forum %
Low pay scales discourage too many good people from becoming teachers.	64	65
School taxing systems favor rich school districts.	55	63
Too little is expected of our public school students.	55	58
Schools lack the community participation that would help them thrive.	47	56
Schools are not held responsible for how well their students do.	47	47
Too many parents are forced to send their children to substandard schools.	44	51
There is too little public direction in setting public school policies.	33	41
Without competition, public schools have little incentive to improve.	29	35

Questionnaire Results

Table 4.
"How do you feel about these approaches to making policy on improving the schools?" (Post-Forum Questionnaire)

Approaches to Policy	Favor %	Oppose %	Not Sure %
More states and federal money should be spent on public schools to ensure equality, EVEN IF more federal involvement results in a loss of some local control.	60	15	14
We must require all students to meet higher academic standards, EVEN IF that causes some students to fail.	59	21	15
Improving the schools should involve all citizens, EVEN IF that makes decision making a slower, more political process.	56	19	15
Parents should be able to select the schools their children attend, EVEN IF that drains resources from public schools.	33	49	15

Key Demographic Differences

Education

Participants with a high school or less education were more concerned about the parent's right to choose where their children attend school.

Table 5.
Differences in Views about the Importance on which Policies Might Be Based (Pre-Forum Questionnaire)

Very Important Principle	Total %	High school grad or less %	College grad or more %
All parents should be able to choose the schools their children attend.	33	48	23

Ethnicity

Participants who identified themselves as African-American or Hispanic were more likely than Caucasians to be concerned about a number of issues, especially those involving school funding.

Table 6.
Ethnic Differences on the Importance of Issues (Pre-Forum Questionnaire)

Very Important Principle	Caucasian %	African- American %	Hispanic %	Asian/Native American/Other %
More money must be spent on schools to make sure all children get a good education.	54	80	82	59
Community members should have more say about what happens in their schools.	38	53	74	54

Table 7.
Ethnic Differences on Concern about Issues (Pre-Forum Questionnaire)

Very Concerned	Caucasian %	African- American %	Hispanic %	Asian/Native American/Other %
School taxing systems favor rich school districts.	54	78	52	48
Too little is expected of our public school students.	53	66	59	65
Schools lack the community participation that would help them to thrive.	44	62	52	59
Schools are not held responsible for how well their students do.	43	74	48	52
Without competition, public schools have little incentive to improve.	23	45	48	41

Age

Younger participants were more in favor of increasing state and federal money in public schools, while older participants were more interested in competition.

Table 8.
How Do You Feel about Each of These Approaches to the Problem? (Pre-Forum Questionnaire)

<u>Favor</u>	Total %	17 or younger %	65+ %
More state and federal money should be spent on public schools to ensure equality, EVEN IF more federal involvement results in a loss of some local control.	53	66	35

Table 9.
Differences in Views about the Importance of Principles on Which Policies Might Be Based (Pre-Forum Questionnaire)

<u>Very Important Principle</u>	Total %	65+ %
Competition from private and charter schools should spur traditional public schools to improve.	30	46

Table 10.
How Concerned Are You about the Following? (Pre-Forum Questionnaire)

<u>Very Concerned</u>	Total %	65+ %
Without competition, public schools have little incentive to improve.	29	39
There is too little public direction in setting public school policies.	33	45

Questionnaire Results

Demographics

Table 11.
"Are you male or female?"

	<u>%</u>
Female	58
Male	37
No Answer	5

Table 13.
"How old are you?"

	<u>%</u>
30 - 49	28
18 - 29	22
50 - 64	18
17 or younger	13
No Answer	4

Table 15.
"Are you:"

	<u>%</u>
White	69
African-American	11
Hispanic	8
Other	5
Native American	2
Asian-American	<1
Not available	5

Table 12.
"How Much Schooling Have You Completed?"

	<u>%</u>
College grad or more	52
High School grad or less	23
Some college	20
No Answer	5

Table 14.
"Where Do You Live?"

	<u>%</u>
Midwest	35
South	21
Northeast	16
West	10
Southeast	7
No Answer	7
Other	4

In preparing this analysis of people's thinking about "Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?" Doble Research drew on a sample of more than 60 forums in 34 states from the hundreds of forums that took place across the country. Five research methods were used:

"A Public Voice" Forums

We transcribed and analyzed four forums videotaped for the annual PBS special, "A Public Voice," hosted by David Gergen. The forums took place in Durham, New Hampshire; Portland, Oregon; Vermillion, South Dakota; and El Paso, Texas.

Moderator and Convenor Interviews

We conducted 20 one-on-one telephone interviews for 45-60 minutes with forum moderators and convenors. We asked them to describe people's main concerns, their starting points on the issue, the costs and consequences they took into consideration, and the shared understanding or common ground for action that emerged. The forums were held at:

1. Borders Bookstore, Rapid City, South Dakota
2. Bridgeport Public Library, Bridgeport, Connecticut
3. Chamber of Commerce, Pierre, South Dakota
4. Civic Life Institute at The Ohio State University, Columbus
5. Cooperative Extension Office, Blacksburg, Virginia
6. First United Methodist Church, Vallejo, California
7. Lake County Public Library, Hobart, Indiana
8. Marketplace Community Center, Helena, Arkansas
9. National 4-H Conference Center, Chevy Chase, Maryland
10. Nequa Valley High School, Naperville, Illinois
11. Northern Tier Regional Library, Gibsonia, Pennsylvania
12. Northland Public Library, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
13. Northpark Baptist Church, Bridgeport, Connecticut
14. Private Residence, Petersburg, Virginia
15. Saddleback College, Mission Viejo, California
16. Senior Community Center, St. Cloud, Minnesota
17. Southeast Regional Library, Jacksonville, Florida
18. Sylvania Campus of Oregon State University, Portland
19. Wayne State College, Wayne, Nebraska
20. WH Over State Museum at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion

A special thanks to the convenors and moderators who shared their forum reflections with us: Ike Adams, Tom Cook, Naomi Cottoms, Patty Dineen, Tina Frank, Mark Furukawa, Michelle Goebharter, Joyce Hanna, Linda Havir, Jeanmarie Heriba, Sarah Monroe, Neal Naigus, Mary Olson, Carole Patterson, Dave Patton, Russell Petty, Barbara Reese, Paul Sunderland, Anne Wolford, Ruth Yellow Hawk.

Forum Observations

We observed three National Issues Forums, listening to initial concerns and learning how deliberation influenced people's thinking. In addition, we interviewed two participants and the moderator after each forum. The forums were held at:

1. Chester State Correctional Center, Chester, Pennsylvania
2. Rehoboth High School, Dothan, Alabama
3. University of California at Davis, Cooperative Extension Office, Fairfield, California

Questionnaire Results

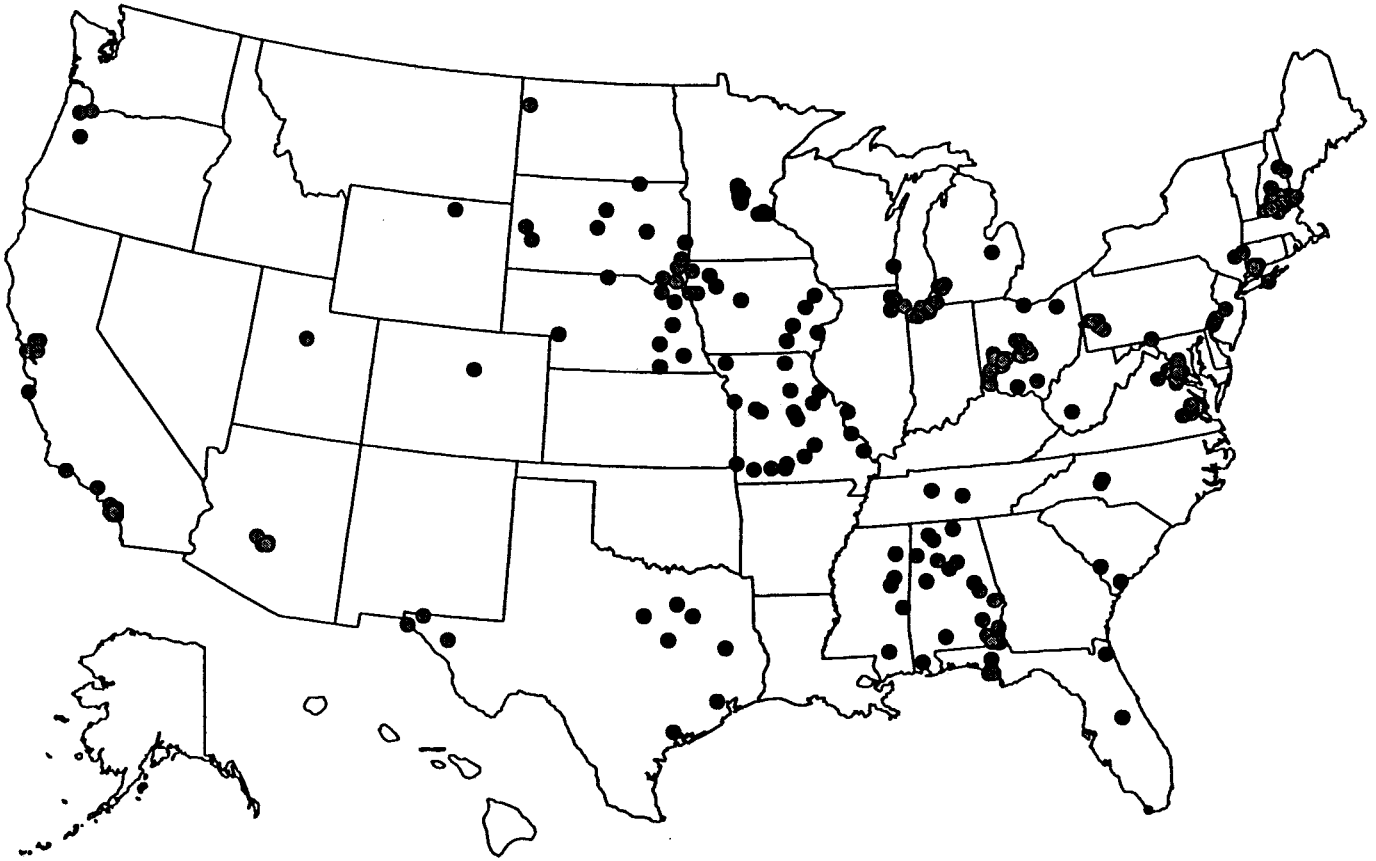
Before and after a forum, participants are asked to fill out a questionnaire that frames the issue and identifies key trade-offs for different choices. This report analyzes a total of 688 Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires.

Research Forums/Focus Groups

We conducted three research forums each with a demographically representative cross section of up to a dozen people. The sessions paralleled NIF forums in that, participants viewed the starter tape, filled out the Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires, and deliberated together about the four choices. The research forums were held in Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Methodology

People who participated in the NIF forums analyzed for this report are a sample of the thousands of people who continue to deliberate about this issue in communities across the country. Forum participants represented in this report came from the following states:



Alabama
Arizona
Arkansas
California
Colorado
Connecticut
District of Columbia
Florida
Illinois
Indiana
Iowa
Maine

Maryland
Massachusetts
Minnesota
Mississippi
Missouri
Nebraska
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New York
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio

Oregon
Pennsylvania
South Carolina
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Virginia
West Virginia
Wisconsin
Wyoming

National Issues Forums bring together citizens to deliberate and make choices about challenging social and political issues of the day. They have addressed issues such as the economy, education, health care, foreign affairs, poverty, and crime.

Throughout the nation, thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as libraries, high schools, and colleges, sponsor forums. The sponsoring organizations select topics based on citizens' concerns, then design and coordinate their own forum programs.

A different kind of talk

There is no "typical" forum in length, number of participants, or frequency. They range from small study circles to large gatherings modeled after town meetings, but all are different from everyday conversations and adversarial debates.

Since forums seek to increase understanding of complicated issues, participants need not start out with detailed knowledge of an issue. Forum organizers distribute issue books such as this one, featuring a nonpartisan overview of an issue and a choice of several public responses. By presenting each issue in a nonpartisan way, forums encourage participants to take a fresh look at the issues and at their own convictions.

In the forums, participants share their opinions, their concerns, and their knowledge. With the help of moderators and the issue books, participants weigh several possible ways for society to address a problem. They analyze each choice, the arguments for and against it, and the trade-offs, costs and consequences of the choice. Moderators encourage participants, as they gravitate to one option or another, to examine their basic values as individuals and as community members.

Common ground for action

In this deliberative practice, participants often accept choices that are not entirely consistent with their individual wishes and that impose costs they had not initially considered. This happens because NIF-forums help people see issues from different points of view; participants use deliberation to discover, not persuade or advocate. The best deliberative forums can help participants move toward shared, public judgments about important issues.

Participants may hold sharply different opinions and beliefs, but in the forums they discuss their attitudes, concerns, and convictions about each issue and, as a group, seek to resolve their conflicting priorities and principles. In this way, participants move from making individual choices to making choices as members of a community — the kinds of choices from which public action may result.

Building community through public deliberation

In a democracy, citizens must come together to find answers they can all live with — while acknowledging that individuals have differing opinions. Forums help people find the areas where their interests and goals overlap. This allows a public voice to emerge that can give direction to public policy.

The forums are nonpartisan and do not advocate a particular solution to any public issue, nor should they be confused with referenda or public opinion polls. Rather, the forums enable diverse groups of Americans to determine together what direction they want to take, what kinds of action and legislation they favor and what, for their common good, they oppose

Moving to action

Forums can lead to several kinds of public action. Generally, a public voice emerges from forums, and that helps set the government's compass, since forum results are shared with elected officials each year. Also, as a result of attending forums, individuals and groups may decide individually, or with others, to help remedy a public problem through citizen actions outside of government.



How to start a forum

Forums are initiated at the local level by civic and educational organizations. For information about starting a forum and using our materials, write the NIF Institute, P.O. Box 75306, Washington, D.C. 20013-5306, or phone 800-433-7834. On the Internet: <http://>

Each year, Doble Research Associates, a nonpartisan, public interest research firm located in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, prepares a report on how citizens across the country are thinking about difficult issues in the National Issues Forums. Doble Research specializes in exploring people's thinking about complex public issues before and after people learn more about them.

Previous "NIF Reports on the Issues" include:

Our Nation's Kids: Is Something Wrong? (2000); **Protecting Our Rights: What Goes on the Internet?** (1999); **Governing America: Our Choices, Our Challenge** (1998); **How Can We Be Fair? The Future of Affirmative Action** (1997); **The National Piggybank: Does Our Retirement System Need Fixing?** (1997); **Mission Uncertain: Reassessing America's Global Role** (1996); **Pocketbook Pressures: Who Benefits from Economic Growth?** (1996); **The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm?** (1995); **Contested Values: Searching for Shared Purpose** (1995)

Clients and Partner Organizations:

Foundations

The Center for Crime, Communities & Culture (Open Society Institute/The Soros Foundation)
The Chiesman Foundation
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation
The Community Life Foundation of Owensboro
The Englewood Community Foundation
The Fetzer Institute
The Walter and Elise Haas Fund
The Hager Educational Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The Kellogg Foundation
The Kettering Foundation
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
The Peninsula Community Foundation
The Pew Charitable Trust
The Seva Foundation

Government Agencies

The Board of Pardons and Parole, State of Georgia
The Department of Corrections, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
The Department of Corrections, State of Indiana
The Department of Corrections, State of Vermont
The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
The Governor's Family Council, State of Delaware
The National Institute of Corrections (NIC)
The National Institute of Justice (NIJ)
The National Parks Service, Nebraska
The Vermont Commission on Public Healthcare Values and Priorities

Public Service Organizations

The American Judicature Society
The Audubon Area Community Services, Owensboro, Kentucky
The Buckeye Association for School Administrators
The Center for Effective Public Policy
The Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM)
The Cleveland Summit on Education
The Council of Governors' Policy Advisors
The Council of State Governments, Eastern Regional Office

The Educational and Social Science Consortium
The General Federation of Women's Clubs
The Harwood Institute
The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)
The National Conference of State Legislatures
The National Academy of Social Insurance
The National Environmental Policy Institute (NEPI)
The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI)
The Oklahoma State-Centered Project
The Pennsylvania Prison Society
The Points of Light Foundation
Public Agenda
The South Carolina State-Centered Project
The Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB)
The Southern Regional Council
The Study Circle Resources Center (SCRC)
Weavings, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life
The West Virginia Center for Civic Life
The Western Governors' Association

States

The State of Indiana
The State of New Hampshire
The State of North Carolina
The State of Oregon
The State of South Carolina
The State of Vermont

Colleges and Universities

The College of DuPage
The Institute on Criminal Justice, University of Minnesota
The Mershon Center at The Ohio State University
The University of California at Davis
The University of Delaware

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John Doble is founder of Doble Research Associates, a public interest consulting firm that specializes in exploring, from a nonpartisan perspective, public and leadership opinion about complex public issues including crime and corrections, education, health care, and teenage pregnancy. Clients include the Kettering Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Public Agenda, the National Institute of Justice, the Delaware Governor's Family Council, and the Vermont Department of Corrections, among many others.

Mr. Doble, a political scientist who graduated *cum laude* and then received a master's degree from the University of Delaware, was, prior to founding Doble Research Associates, vice president and research director at Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and educational institute founded by Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich.

His articles about public opinion have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Technology Review*, *Judicature*, *Public Opinion*, *The Kettering Review*, *The Public Understanding of Science*, *The Scientist*, *The California Journal of Law Enforcement*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*, among many others.

He has presented results to scores of professional audiences, including at the White House, on Capitol Hill, at numerous press conferences at the National Press Club, to The Institute of American Studies at Beijing, The Western Hemisphere Exchange in Santiago, at annual national conferences of the American Probation and Parole Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Association for Public Opinion Research, and the International Society of Political Psychologists, among many others.

Iara Peng, senior research associate, has coauthored studies on public opinion about the Internet, America's youth, the China-U.S. relationship, and crime and corrections. Ms. Peng has presented findings to numerous clients including the Pennsylvania Prison Society, the Kettering Foundation, the Center on Crime, Communities, & Culture (Open Society Institute/Soros Foundation), and the College of DuPage. Ms. Peng is author of "The Effects of Public Deliberation on High School Students: Bridging the Disconnect between Young People and Public Life" in *Education for Civic Engagement in a Democracy* published by ERIC and the APSA.

Prior to joining Doble Research, Ms. Peng was a researcher/editor at the Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan research organization, where she worked in the areas of deliberative democracy and civil society, and the role of the public and institutions in public life. Fluent in Portuguese and conversant in Spanish and French, Ms. Peng graduated *Magna cum laude* from Rollins College where she majored in political science and minored in communications.

Courtney Gorgone, research associate, is a graduate of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where she had a double major in political science and anthropology. Ms. Gorgone also studied cultural anthropology at the University of Yaounde in Cameroon. At Doble Research, she has observed and analyzed the results of National Issues Forums (NIF) with inmates at two Pennsylvania correctional facilities.

Hazel Straughn Williams, office manager, has nearly 25 years of business experience. While at Doble Research, Ms. Williams has worked on studies of public opinion about education and teen pregnancy.