

# Public Education as Public Space and Public Responsibility

Growing up in the 1950s in the suburbs of Philadelphia, the fight for civil rights and a pervasive fear of communism formed the backdrop of my everyday life and dominated the nation's consciousness. I listened to dinner conversations on Linda Brown's struggle to challenge "separate but equal" schooling in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case while learning to shield myself with my desk at school in case of a nuclear attack. ■ My parents believed that the threat to our way of life was greater from ignorance, intolerance, and complacency than

BY WENDY D. PURIEFOY  
PRESIDENT  
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from any outside menace. "You were born with the right to vote and be educated," my mother would tell us. "It's your responsibility to know what to do with your vote." ■ As Americans, we look to the ballot box as the place where we must pool our civic wealth, where citizens can maximize their power by investing their votes wisely with those of others. But it is the public school that is the central place from which our society transmits shared civic values. And it is through civic action that Americans have fought for and defended an education for all.

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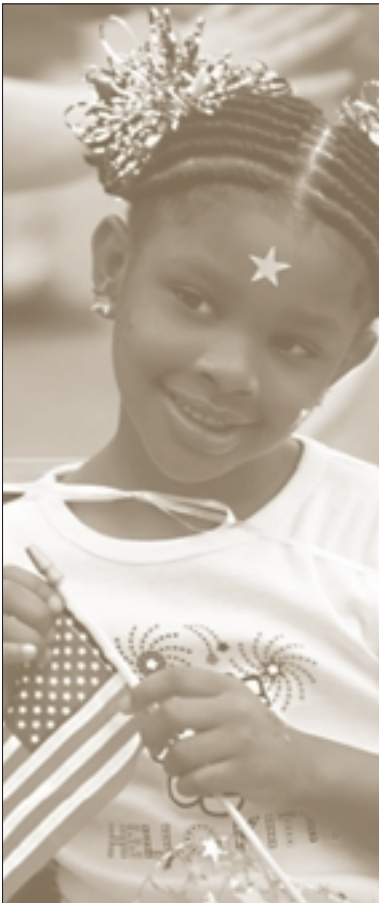
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## PEN/EDUCATION WEEK POLL MEASURES

## Public Responsibility FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

BY CELINDA LAKE

Celinda Lake is president of Lake Snell Perry and Associates, a national political research firm based in Washington, DC.



Americans believe that fulfilling their civic duties, such as paying taxes, voting, and ensuring their children are learning, is their primary public responsibility for public education. These are essential duties that can make other important actions, such as volunteerism and charity, more effective, according to a new Public Education Network/*Education Week* poll of 1,175 voters nationwide.

The poll, *Action for All: The Public's Responsibility for Public Education*, reveals that Americans are concerned for all children and believe this nation should guarantee quality public schools for every community and every child. In the past, improving education was a battle for parents, who were most concerned about their own children's school, while older or childless voters focused on issues that more directly affected them. But PEN's new research strongly confirms a recent shift to a much broader public investment in schools.

The poll indicates that parents are reaching out beyond their children, and non-parents are rallying for quality public education for all children nationwide, acknowledging the importance of a good educational system to the future prosperity of this nation.

Citizens recognize that the public school is the heart of the community. They are at least five times more likely to cite public schools rather than churches, hospitals, and libraries as the most important local institution. A quarter of voters define their community by their local school district or school attendance zone, and this is also true for voters without children in their homes.

The report also shows that, in a society where citizens have demanding family and work responsibilities, few have the time, expertise, or inclination to throw themselves into the challenge of making schools better. Americans seem content to watch a small, committed group of activists take the lead. In fact, only 22 percent of voters say people in their community take "a lot of" responsibility for insuring quality public schools while 51 percent say they are not really involved in making schools better themselves.

Many Americans do want to help, but only in limited ways and often motivated by a life-or-death crisis, such as a school shooting or a state takeover. While 55 percent say that they would act as a result of such a crisis, that is the only case in which a majority of citizens would act. Problems such as overcrowded schools, chronically low test scores, and young people without jobs would not motivate the majority of Americans to take action.

**CIVIC ACTION, NOT VOLUNTEERISM, IS THE PUBLIC'S PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY**

When asked to prioritize their responsibility for public education, about three times as many Americans cite ensuring that their own children succeed in school (25 percent) and paying taxes (22 percent) as their responsibility, over volunteering (8 percent) or making charitable contributions to schools (4 percent).

Becoming as informed as possible about education issues (14 percent), and pressuring elected officials to fix the schools (13 percent), were also seen as relatively high priorities.

**TEACHER QUALITY, RESOURCE ISSUES MOST IMPORTANT**

What do Americans want to take responsibility for? When asked to choose, almost a third of the public (30 percent) cite improving teacher quality as the highest priority for improving public schools, followed by 18 percent of Americans who believe that equitable funding will lift student academic achievement. Minorities, particularly African Americans, say that addressing the resource problem should come first. African Americans say that equalizing funding is their first priority.

Information that most concerns Americans about public education today focuses on teacher quality and test scores, indicators that other children, not just their own,

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## [president's message]

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

“Public schools are the centers of our communities and belong to all of us. It is in our school classrooms, auditoriums, and libraries where we invest in the future and ensure that our prosperity and democratic way of life will continue for all of us.”

Wendy D. Puriefoy  
President, Public Education Network

From the beginnings of our nation's history, our founding values of freedom and democracy were secured by the right to an education. Our leaders recognized that an intellectually engaged and civically active populace was the key to thriving communities and good government. The belief that building schools built democracy drove former slaves like Mary Peake and Northern schoolmarm like Laura Towne to establish “freedmen's schools.” Towne also lobbied state leaders to permit blacks to pay taxes to fund their own schools, and counseled school boards and political leaders to improve public education for all. These teachers measured their success not only in the number of students who could read, write, and cipher, but also in voter turnout—that percentage of the black population using the ballot box as a means of promoting social justice.

Public education is freedom's classroom. It is the place where we forge a sense of national identity and begin to develop a public narrative about our history. In our classrooms, Americans from all backgrounds learn what the nation stands for and what Americans fought for on the battlefields, in schoolhouses, in courts, and at lunch counters.

In a sense, public schools are the ultimate public spaces. Public schools are the centers of our communities and belong to all of us. It is in our school classrooms, auditoriums, and libraries where we invest in the future and ensure that our prosperity and democratic way of life will continue for all of us. The whole purpose of public schools, according to Horace Mann, is to protect and help shape shared civic values, unite Americans from different backgrounds, and provide an engine for opportunity and a balance wheel for democracy.

But consider what is happening to public schools as public spaces today. We are witnessing the results of years of neglect and lack of commitment to quality.

Every child deserves a caring and qualified teacher, but in the urban schools that educate students from our poorest communities, students have less than a 50 percent chance of getting a math and science teacher with a degree and a license in those fields. Nearly half the students from our most disadvantaged communities attend classrooms without the benefit of the textbooks, computers, and other tools necessary for success. Our antiquated funding mechanism for public schools puts those most in need at the mercy of an inadequate tax base that fails to provide quality education. Desperately needed funds to support all children's success are in danger of being siphoned away from public schools into private schools by well-funded and well-organized voucher campaigns.

Meanwhile, you can walk into almost any elementary school and barely detect the former majesty and fine craftsmanship, scrollwork, and architecture underneath falling plaster and slapdash attempts at maintenance.

Today, three-quarters of all public schools are in need of repair and renovation, according to a 1999 national survey. City halls—once tall, gleaming buildings that proudly served as the community's anchor and personified the public's commitment to good government and good schools—today may consist of nothing more than two or three floors leased in an inconspicuous commercial building. Parks, libraries, and other forms of public space are either poorly maintained or missing from many communities. Indeed, the pride that was once reflected in our public space is both physically and politically eroding.

#### PROMOTING QUALITY AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Today, Americans say they are willing to take greater public responsibility for public schools to guarantee that all students can succeed. In a new *PEN/Education Week* poll, the public says it is willing to take action in purposeful, powerful ways—such as paying taxes, becoming more informed, and voting for candidates based on their positions on education. Americans want to take action; they just need guidance, leadership, and convenient opportunities to do so.

Americans need better information about how well their schools are doing, what policies are effective in raising school and student performance, and what positions candidates are taking on crucial issues. Any effort to improve education requires that we all become more knowledgeable about the specific challenges that public schools face and that we pressure public and school officials to address these critical concerns. If we are to pool our power as citizens to encourage improvement in education, being an educated voter will increasingly mean being an education voter.

Meanwhile, we must use instruction, school curriculum, and school operations themselves as vehicles for societal improvement, offering special interventions when students fail, and fostering a sense of pride when our young people achieve.

At PEN, we believe in the power of public education to challenge and shape individual lives, to create a common ethic, and to enhance understanding. Most importantly, we believe in the role of individual citizens to create public institutions that reflect the best of our intentions and of our humanity. These reasons make public schools and public space worth fighting for.

*Wendy D. Puriefoy*

Wendy D. Puriefoy  
President, Public Education Network



Above: Wendy D. Puriefoy



Below: First Rock Elementary School for blacks. "Temporary" building in foreground.





## Communities, PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER

James Howard Kunstler is the author of *Home from Nowhere* and other books that address the issue of public space and the physical design of communities. This fall, Simon and Schuster will publish his next book, *The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition*.

**Q.** In your book, *The Geography of Nowhere*, you explain that a community isn't something one can find or something one can purchase. What are the qualities of authentic communities that are missing from so many cities and towns today?

**A.** Well, "community" is not a commodity. You can't buy it by the pallet-load at Sam's Discount Club, and you can't achieve it by hanging cast iron eagles over your garage door. Communities represent networks of economic and social mutual interdependence. Economically, our communities have been destroyed by commercial activities scaled inappropriately for the long term. An obvious example is national chain retail, which has destroyed local commerce practically everywhere in the United States. This implies further to me that we are going to have to reorganize many regular activities on a smaller, more local and regional scale. I would include on this list especially schooling, commerce, and agriculture. Our schools are too big, too far flung, and they operate at a scale too large for meaningful relations between the faculty and the students.

**Q.** You blame the ethic of "extreme individualism" for weakening the once popular view that the private individual has a responsibility to respect public space. Is there a model of civic engagement that we can offer to the public that it is likely to embrace?

**A.** I was quoting Toqueville on "individualism." I would not necessarily hang my argument on that hook. What is damaged in our everyday world is the public realm—that part of our everyday world that is supposed to belong to everybody and which is supposed to honorably, justly, and beautifully support our civic life. Notice, by the way, the linguistic connection between words like civic, civil, citizen, and civilization. They are all concerned with the spirit of our culture. It is not quite clear whether the sort of "extreme individualism" you speak of is a cause or an effect of a degraded public realm in which civic life and civil behavior are not supported.

**Q.** When respect for public space and public institutions starts to decline, it seems logical that people's sense of responsibility for those institutions declines accordingly. What effect is this dynamic having on public schools?

**A.** I have slides, which I show regularly in my lectures, of school buildings so horrible that they look like maximum-security prisons. No windows. Chain link fence with razor wire on top. These schools are literally disgraceful. They disgrace literally the idea of education. In their design, they give the overt impression that school is punishment. We ought to be deeply ashamed of them, and our failure to even notice represents an even more ominous layer of disgrace to the whole picture. I think children ought to get the idea from their school building that the activity inside is an honorable and stimulating privilege. Instead, we send them into grim and dreary fortifications that generate tremendous anxiety and depression in children—and probably in their teachers, too. To send children into institutions scaled to thousands is to depersonalize children. We have certainly succeeded.

I think children ought to get the idea from their school building that the activity inside is an honorable and stimulating privilege. Instead, we send them into grim and dreary fortifications that generate tremendous anxiety and depression in children—and probably in their teachers, too.

—James Howard Kunstler

**Q.** How does the physical architecture of schools and other public buildings reflect the purpose and priority that a community attaches to education and other common values?

**A.** Have you noticed that our great-grandfathers, who lived in a far less affluent society, put up school buildings that spoke meaningfully to people of all ages, using the syntaxes, vocabularies, patterns, and rhythms of traditional architecture to inform everybody where their culture came from and what it represents. Culture is based on orders of unity—as indeed are all of the systems in nature. These are inherently hierarchical. That is one reason why Greco-Roman architecture was used so widely in 19th century America in institutional buildings. The three-part divisions of Greco-Roman buildings expressed a “top, middle, and bottom,” which are analogous, of course, to the head, body, and foot of the human figure. Greco-Roman architecture and all its emulations were therefore inherently humanistic. This is not a “style” issue. All classical architectures, pan-culturally, share this characteristic. It represents human self-knowledge painfully acquired over centuries. We threw this self-knowledge in the garbage after World War II.

**Q.** There seems to be this perception that “private” is better, and we see it reflected in housing, transportation, and now in education. As your book points out, it wasn’t always this way. How can we begin to reshape the dialogue?

**A.** I think the real issue here is the character of our public space. I have no doubt that we will not be using automobiles 25 years from now in the way that we have been accustomed to using them. Exogenous events will compel us to live differently whether we like it or not. The fragility of the so-called global economy, our potential loss of access to Mideast oil markets, the unsoundness of our financial institutions and debt infrastructure, and the ominous climate problems we face, all suggest to me that we will soon be overwhelmed with problems much more severe than the kinds we have been used to. This says to me that we will have to reduce the scale of many of our activities. We will have to re-create walkable communities. They will have to be much more psychologically and spiritually rewarding places—if only so we don’t feel impelled to flee from them constantly. They will also have to be scaled appropriately for sustainable economies. The organs of daily life—the shopping, the houses, the civic places, the schools—will have to be better integrated in the organism of the community, not rigorously separated as is the case today. ■



Above: James Howard Kunstler



# · [conversations] ·

## How Public are Public Schools?

### THREATS TO PUBLIC EDUCATION AS “PUBLIC SPACE”

To build greater understanding about how public schools serve our society as public space, and about the threats to the public nature of public education, PEN recently hosted a conversation between the prominent Washington, DC-based attorney, William L. Taylor, co-chair of the Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, and Ramon C. Cortines, one of the nation's foremost education leaders, who has served as superintendent of several major school districts including New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Following are excerpts from that discussion; the full transcript can be found at [www.PublicEducation.org](http://www.PublicEducation.org).

**CONNECTIONS:** Advocates for public education argue that public schools offer a unique space for molding a sense of American identity that transcends boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, and religion. How is public education a public space and what's distinctive about public education that needs to be kept public?

**MR. TAYLOR:** Americans may live in very different settings and climates, but public education is the common experience of the great majority of Americans. Also the fact that this experience is face-to-face for people of different backgrounds and ethnicities makes school a very important—and singular—institution in our society....So, I'll take my lead from Horace Mann who said that public schools, apart from being the equalizer in the conditions of people, are the balance wheel in the social machinery. Public schools promote a sense of belonging to a whole, a sense of national unity, a sense of being committed to doing the things that are embodied in our Constitution, such as providing for the general welfare. Learning by inquiry, by respecting facts and truths that you can establish, is, I think, a critical part of the experience of learning democratic values. On the other hand, some people have said that public schools are designed to foster excessive patriotism. I'm not sure I see too much danger of that today.

**MR. CORTINES:** I wish I saw more of it. To me, public schools offer a place where children and young people have the opportunity to develop their own value systems—systems that include respect for themselves and others; respect for property; issues of integrity; the ability, hopefully, to understand the importance of working together, of sharing common ideas as learners and teachers. These are many of the common and crucial things that public education has provided from the beginning.

**CONNECTIONS:** Some say that public schools help shape a cohesive society by transmitting knowledge that enables us to solve common problems and respond to new challenges.

**MR. CORTINES:** The word “cohesive” bothers me. If you're suggesting sameness, I think the greatness of this nation is the contribution of individuals with different ideas. What is “cohesive” for me is that

we learn to respect, to participate, and to accept the issues that divide us, as we have seen in the aftermath of the past presidential election.

**MR. TAYLOR:** The question gets to the heart of one of the largest problems the nation is facing: whether, out of diversity, can come understanding and a sense of belonging to something larger, or whether we are going to have fear and conflict. Within a very short period of time there will not be any one group that will dominate our political life in the way that white people—and white males, in particular—have in the past, so people are going to have to learn to cooperate, to work together, and to understand each other. This may or may not get promoted or hampered by new forms of communication. But, certainly, schools have a central role to play.

**CONNECTIONS:** Is it possible for the public space to accommodate both the religious and the secular?

**MR. TAYLOR:** Public schools, in some places, have shrunk from teaching about religion for fear that they were breaching the wall between church and state. I think that there's a lot that can be taught about the history and the role of religion in this country and society that wouldn't come anywhere near being a violation.

**MR. CORTINES:** You cannot teach literature, you cannot teach or cover history, you cannot cover social science, you cannot cover the arts, without including religion and the contribution that the various faiths have made to this country and its culture.

**MR. TAYLOR:** I do worry about court decisions that appear to be moving in the way of allowing the dominant religion in a community to have its way in the schools. The recent Supreme Court decision that allowed a faith group to be on the campus of an elementary school and preach the scriptures is troublesome. I wonder whether a very young group of students will be able to make the distinction between what is part of their public school experience and what is part of their “extracurricular” experience.

**CONNECTIONS:** What do you think are the greatest threats to keeping our public schools public?



“We always put accountability on the heads of kids. We need to start with accountability on the part of adults, whether it’s teachers or principals or central office people or superintendents or boards of education.”

—Ramon C. Cortines

**MR. TAYLOR:** I will start by saying, as Pogo once said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” The greatest threat, to me, lies in the question of whether the public schools can renew themselves sufficiently to take on important challenges. Can they provide the highest levels of education for our poorest children? I think we’re making some progress, but I would say the biggest obstacle that I see is the whole question of whether our political leaders can help establish the proposition that teaching is just a terribly important profession that deserves the pay and status of other important fields. We also still have this antiquated system of funding schools through property taxes, which discriminates against the lowest property-valued communities. And we still have a variety of other obstacles, including continued socio-economic and racial segregation.

**MR. CORTINES:** I guess I’d say the same thing in a different way. We always put accountability on the heads of kids. We need to start with accountability on the part of adults, whether it’s teachers or principals or central office people or superintendents or boards of education. We blame K-12, but all of our teachers and administrators come out of teacher-training institutions that haven’t changed. And it is not that our kids don’t have the capabilities to achieve; it is that we do not know how to develop them. It was only until after the Second World War that we even worried about educating all children. We didn’t care if poor, or if African American or Latino children didn’t come—that wasn’t our problem. So we are educating a different group of children, many of whom are poor. The threat to public education is not educating these children to our highest capacity. I believe that the public education system should be a choice between public, parochial, and independent schools. And we’ve got to call it the way it is. You have to have unions to deal with capricious superintendents and boards of education. But unions are, in many cases, stumbling blocks to quality. And after we deal with all that, and the patronage that superintendents and board members bring to hiring for high-level jobs, we have to look at schools. I had a friend that told me once, “Every kid can learn complex math, even you could, with 20 minutes more twice a week.” I never forgot it, and changed the schedule to make sure that we didn’t try to jam everybody in the ticky-tacky box of 45- or 55-minutes per day to learn.

There are so many constraints that we’re still tinkering around the edges. Now there are some small models, but no critical mass, of improvement.

**MR. TAYLOR:** We have a law that went into effect in 1994 that establishes accountability as a principle. It says that all kids can learn to high levels. It’s about to be reauthorized with some improvements, including more freedom for children to move out of schools that are failing, more injunctions for those schools to get their fair share of qualified teachers. In many ways, I think this is our last clear chance on public education.

**MR. CORTINES:** Yes.

**MR. TAYLOR:** Vouchers have not been part of this current federal reauthorization, but there is a growing feeling—reflected by the polls—that private schools may be a better way to go. There’s certainly a growth in that feeling in minority communities. There’s a well-organized propaganda campaign going on that’s well financed, and you see it on your television sets. The real answer to this challenge is making improvements in public school performance.

**CONNECTIONS:** Are vouchers a threat to public schools as public spaces or are they a force to spark greater competitiveness that may cause schools to improve?

**MR. CORTINES:** I could go along with a form of voucher that would provide more opportunities for a percentage of the very lowest-achieving and poorest children that have no advocate.

**MR. TAYLOR:** I think the competitive, capitalistic model doesn’t work in the case of education, because these enterprises are competing for kids, and they want the easiest and least expensive kids to educate.

**MR. CORTINES:** In both New York City and in Los Angeles, I found that when kids and their families would be interviewed for slots, principal after principal would say, “Well, you know, there’s a better school for you and we’ll help you get placed.” They don’t want the poorest, most disadvantaged or learning disabled children in their schools, and I’m talking about *public* school choice.

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“THREATS TO PUBLIC EDUCATION” CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

**MR. TAYLOR:** With charter schools today, like the magnet schools of the past, we have an effort to organize around talented people and to inject more competition. But people have not been clear enough that charters are part of the public school system and that, in return for more flexibility, they must demonstrate more accountability and inclusion. I would be for introducing carefully regulated competition into public schools, making sure that it serves all and that it's accountable. I don't think we have any reason to believe that private school vouchers are going to be an answer.

**MR. CORTINES:** Also, consider that the value of the voucher doesn't pay for much of anything. Leaders of several prestigious private schools have said to me, “Hey, we're not going to ever deal with those children. We'll just raise our fees.” That's how insidious it is.

**CONNECTIONS:** Many say that the deterioration of public school buildings poses a threat to the role that public schools are meant to play, that kids really can't learn under those conditions. How important is constructing new schools and renovating existing spaces today?

**MR. CORTINES:** When young people have to go to buildings that leak, with broken windows and faucets that run for 15 minutes without getting clear water, we are saying to them, “We don't really care about you.” And we say the same thing to the adults we're asking to help these children...let's remember that these schools didn't get run down overnight. I don't think school leaders have done a very good job of letting the people in the community know that these buildings belong to them and that it will cost more if we delay repairs or construction. When I first went to San Francisco, we hadn't passed a tax for buildings for 15 years. And I took the senior citizens aside and showed them it was to their advantage, and they passed it for us. I think that you just can't go and say, “Give me some more money.” We've got to be stewards with the money, and many of us are not.

**CONNECTIONS:** To what extent, if at all, do you believe the presence of corporate America in schools through vending machines, fast-food sales, and advertising is a threat to the public nature of public schools?

**MR. TAYLOR:** I wouldn't put it as the single most important problem in American schools right now, but it is part of a whole commercialization and privatization problem that we're facing all over our society. Now, we've got naming rights issues on athletic facilities. And you talk about public schools as being value-bearing institutions. If the values that are being communicated are profits and more profits, that's a problem.

**MR. CORTINES:** It's what happens when you pit greed against a captive audience. I believe there's a role for corporate America and the business community, but I don't believe in giving them special privileges and I guard jealously my responsibility to the captive audience we educate. And it's very hard, because parents say, “Our schools don't have the money, and they'll give us funds.” I just think we have to be very, very careful, and there are not many that will stand up to them.

**MR. TAYLOR:** Let me throw in a quote that I think is applicable, not just to this part of the conversation, but to others; it's one of my favorites. It's from *Crisis in the Classroom*, which Charlie Silberman wrote 40 years ago and is still valid today. It says: *What educators must realize, moreover, is that how they teach and how they act may be more important than what they teach. The way we do things shapes values more directly and more effectively than the way we talk about them.*

**MR. CORTINES:** Students watch us and we are models. The way we got rid of all the bonehead math and science in New York when I was there was not because of a great study or because teachers wanted it. It was when the high school students came to me and said, “Mr. Chancellor, we aren't dumb. How come we can't take those courses? Those are important for us to get in college.” I just did it benevolently, arbitrarily—I got rid of all those courses. And, of course, we know that more African Americans and Latinos passed the next year than had ever passed the Regents before. And they are continuing to make progress. ■

“ More than 6 in 10 Americans would sign petitions on behalf of education issues or would vote against elected officials who want to make cuts in education spending. These are democratic actions crucial to supporting our nation’s public schools and students.”

## PARTNERSHIPS

“ PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY ” CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

are in trouble. The poll found 9 in 10 Americans were concerned that nearly half the students in urban districts do not get many of the textbooks and tools they need to learn. Eighty-nine percent of Americans were concerned that that most high school seniors score near the bottom in math and science compared with students from other industrialized nations. Equally as many were alarmed that over a quarter of new teachers have not met licensing requirements and 88 percent were concerned that, due to a growing student population, the nation will need to hire more than two million teachers in the next several years.

### BREAKING THE TIME BARRIER

According to the poll, the public says they have limited time to be involved in strengthening public education. Nearly 7 in 10 Americans say they have only 0–3 hours a week to help improve the quality of education in their communities.

Americans are willing, however, to utilize the few hours that they do have to take civic action on behalf of public education. More than 6 in 10 Americans would sign petitions on behalf of education issues or would vote against elected officials who want to make cuts in education spending. These are democratic actions crucial to supporting our nation’s public schools and students.

When asked about other civic actions to improve public education, voters say they are less likely to do anything (including writing letters, participating on committees, or going door to door) that they see as requiring time, skills, and knowledge they may not have.

### CONSUMERS RATHER THAN ADVOCATES

Americans are not experts on education and need better information and leadership from those who understand what is happening in schools.

To be better informed about public education, Americans most want information on candidates running for the school board (57 percent “extremely” or “very interested”) and comparisons of how their local school is doing compared to others in their state (54 percent).

To measure the quality of schools, Americans say they need information about the credentials of teachers in local schools (69 percent “extremely” or “very

useful”), data on graduation and college-attendance rates (63 percent), and state report cards on school performance (58 percent).

Americans most trust those closest to the issues and look to teachers, parents, the PTA, and principals to deliver information. The poll results show that Americans are more than twice as likely to trust teachers than business leaders; 59 percent of Americans trust teachers while only about a quarter trust business leaders and elected officials (other than school board members).

### WHO WILL ACT?

Those who are most inclined to support schools—a small group of committed parents—are the hardest pressed to become more involved and the least likely to take civic action.

The poll reveals that the Americans most likely to take an interest in supporting public schools are college-educated, married, upper income, younger adults, and parents of children under 18. Meanwhile, the desire to take civic action for education appears to decrease as people get older. A greater percentage of those under 45 said they were “extremely” or “very likely” to take specific actions than did those over 45.

The national survey, and a series of three focus groups with African American, Latino, and white adults, examined how the public is willing to take responsibility for better schools, what motivates the public to act, and what the public views as the most trustworthy sources of information. The survey reached 1,175 registered voters, with a base sample of 800 voters and an oversample of African Americans, Latinos, and 18- to 24-year-olds. The survey has a margin of error of +/-3.5 percent.

*Education Week* and PEN will conduct annual polls on public responsibility for public education over the next four years. This year’s poll report, *Action for All*, can be found online at [www.publiceducation.org](http://www.publiceducation.org). ■

Photograph from “Separate But Not Equal,”  
Virginia Commonwealth University.



Above: Green Bay Elementary School for whites in Green Bay, WI.



# · [making it happen] ·

## Standards: THE END OF THE SORTING MACHINE

BY MARC TUCKER

Marc Tucker is president of the Washington, DC-based National Center on Education and the Economy. The Center led the nation's largest effort to create internationally benchmarked, academic performance standards. The Center works with 200 schools that are implementing its America's Choice School Design, a comprehensive school reform model built around standards-based education. Tucker authored the award-winning book, *Thinking for a Living*, and, more recently, *Standards for Our Schools*.

Few of us who, at the start of the last decade, called for clear and rigorous standards for what our students should know and be able to do, argued that setting standards, or even measuring results against them with tests, would be enough. New standards and assessments, by themselves, would only provide more accurate measures of student failure.

From the beginning, the National Center on Education and the Economy and others viewed standards and tests simply as prerequisites for the changes in curriculum, instruction, and school operations that needed to be made. As we have seen in our work with schools around the country, writing standards and test items seem simple when compared to the changes that are the essence of standards-based reform.

For most of its existence, this country's education system has been a very efficient sorting machine. To those deemed capable, we have offered challenging coursework to prepare them for college and then for professions or

management positions. For all the rest, schooling has been more an exercise in stamina than an education—12 years at a desk in math classes with no math, and science classes with no science, as the price of a diploma. The essence of the standards movement is the antithesis of this sorting system; it is a commitment to setting high standards of achievement for all students. Standards, viewed this way, become the engine of both equity and quality.

The demand that all students must reach rigorous benchmarks of achievement presents the greatest challenge for the students from whom this country has historically expected the least—disadvantaged children concentrated in our urban centers and scattered across our rural reaches. These children have been the most poorly served by the education sorting machine.

To be absolutely clear, these children can and must meet higher standards. This is not a pious wish. It is already happening. In a recent national poll of teachers conducted

Below: Farmville High School for whites.



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—Marc Tucker

for *Education Week*, 8 in 10 teachers in high-poverty schools said they had modified their lessons to reflect state standards, and the same percentage said their lessons were more demanding. Nearly two-thirds said students are writing more today, and half said students are reading more. But that is not good enough. Only half said all or most of their students are meeting state standards today.

The communities in which these students live are hard pressed to shower extra money on their low-performing schools. But it does not take a fortune. What it takes is a relentless focus on results and the courage to do what it takes to get them. Every decision, great or small, about everything from the time devoted to literacy instruction in the primary grades to the budget for cheerleading, from the amount to be spent on teacher aides to the structure of the master schedule, has to be viewed through the prism of its contribution to the bottom line—student performance against the standards.

To ensure that nearly every student in the urban high school she ran got a solid dose of algebra and geometry, my colleague Judy Coddling cut vocational and elective classes to free up teaching slots for more math instructors, resorted to a massive study hall to accommodate students who would have been in the courses that were eliminated, and paid top students to tutor after school and on weekends. All of these were tough choices and, ideally, none would have to be made by any school. But Judy had no alternatives if she was to expose students to the math shown to be the gate-keeper to college enrollment and success.

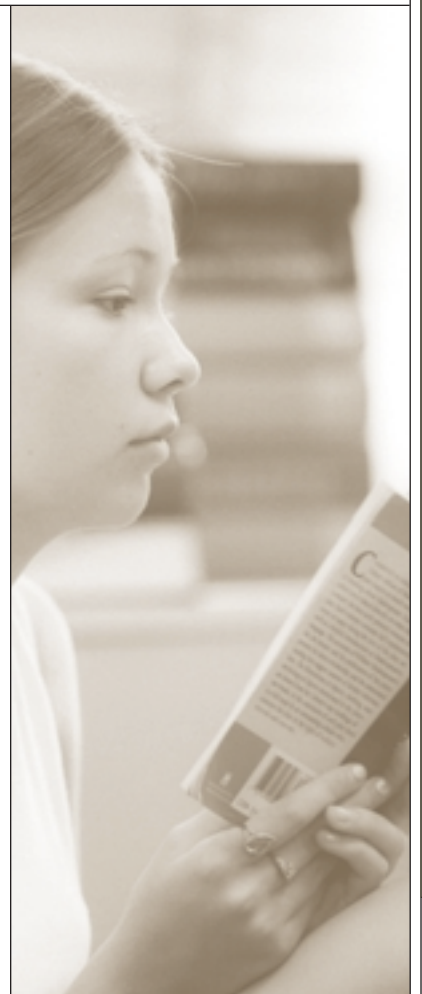
Parents and the public have to support these kinds of difficult decisions or the reforms will be short-lived. Community-based organizations such as local education funds (LEFs) have a vital role to play in this regard. Many of the controversies that swirl around the push for higher standards are best addressed when the community's voice is heard—how to help students who are falling behind, how to make sure students are being prepared for what real jobs and college courses require, what role interscholastic sports and other activities play, and how various linguistic and ethnic heritages will be honored.

Community-based organizations can have a crucial say in clarifying these issues, pointing the standards-based agenda forward, and supporting principals who are doing the right thing when the right thing is hard to do.

First, everyone must understand what resources are already available. Anyone who has ever read a school budget knows that the question of exactly what human and financial capital is on the table can be an unusually convoluted one. LEFs can offer clear definitions and road maps for school budgets and connect the budgets to what has to be done to raise student performance. Similarly, they can decipher results so that parents and the public can assess when a program or practice is working and when it is not.

Once schools make the transition to results-driven organizations, it is likely that genuine gaps in resources will emerge. These are the places where LEF activity can have the greatest benefit, whether it be in funding specific reforms such as teacher development targeted at certain standards or by coordinating greater community involvement to provide students extra help. As Judy found at her high school, some students need more time to reach standards than is permitted by the normal school day and week. Our mindset must be that every student has to get the instructional time needed to reach the standards, whether that time is before school, after school, on Saturday mornings, or over the summer. To that end, LEFs can offer leadership in developing tutoring, mentoring, and summer programs—whatever it takes—to support students who are catching up.

Finally, LEFs can play an important role in making sure the standards are, in fact, right—that they are rigorous; crystal clear to teachers, students, and parents; and closely connected to the assessments being used to measure them. Community-based organizations can speak out if the standards are full of jargon, or lack the specifics that should guide instruction, or if off-the-shelf tests do not align tightly with what the standards ask of students. Armed with well-crafted standards and meaningful results, LEFs are uniquely positioned to be critical friends to school systems, offering both the honest criticism and the helpful support that real change demands. ■



Above: Felden Elementary School for blacks.



Photograph from "Separate But Not Equal," Virginia Commonwealth University.

# [annual conference]

## Assessment & Accountability:

THE GREAT EQUITY DEBATE, NOVEMBER 11-13, 2001

The Public Education Network has worked to ensure the availability of high quality public education to all children in America, particularly the poor and disadvantaged. Increasing student achievement requires significant change in our nation's public schools, including implementing high standards, improving teacher quality, and building strong relationships between schools and the communities they serve.

Join the nation's largest network of community-based school reform advocates at the Park Hyatt in Washington, DC for this important gathering of the most dynamic and effective school reform leaders in America as we examine *Assessment & Accountability: The Great Equity Debate*.

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Well-planned plenary sessions, seminars, and presentations will inform you, challenge you, and excite your imagination as we prepare for the future. Visit the "PEN Marketplace"—a clearinghouse of local education fund exhibits and publications, including books authored by a variety of speakers as well as publications relating to testing and assessment. Take part in networking opportunities, hear renowned speakers from across the United States and around the world, attend affinity group meetings, and participate in many terrific events, including our opening celebration.

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Citizens and communities must play a role in creating learning environments that develop the whole child—environments that support rigorous academic preparation; exposure to different cultures; sustaining healthy minds, bodies, and spirits; and unleashing the imagination and creativity of children.

View the American experience from a unique perspective—that of Pulitzer Prize winner and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. As a novelist, Ms. Morrison has gained the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, her unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically charged and richly expressive depictions of black America. The Public Education Network is pleased to present Toni Morrison as she connects us all with the lives, hopes, and dreams of our children and our communities.

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If you have any questions regarding your conference registration, you may call PEN for conference information at 202-628-7460, Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. EST. ■

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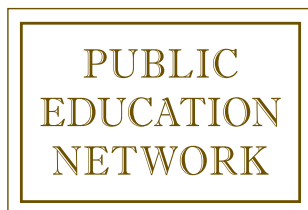
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## PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK

The mission of the Public Education Network (PEN) is to create systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child. PEN educates the nation about the relationship between school quality and the quality of community and public life. Equal opportunity, access to quality schools, and an informed citizenry are critical components of a democratic society. PEN's goal is to ensure that access to high-quality public education is the right of every child, not just the privilege of a few.

Improving public school systems is the responsibility of parents, individual citizens, and entire communities. PEN is a national association of local education funds (LEFs) working to improve public school quality and engage citizen support for high-quality public schools in school districts nationwide. Through 66 members in 28 states and the District of Columbia, the Network serves over 6 million children in 310 school districts.

*Connections* is published by PEN three times per year (winter, spring, and fall). Each issue includes short, thoughtful essays and informational pieces about important topics that help build understanding about what we mean by quality public education and how we can achieve it through active, vibrant citizen involvement. *Connections* focuses on effecting change—whether at a local, district, or national level—and shares the experiences and success stories of those working for quality public education. Other topics include perspectives on public leadership and public action, how we define public space and keep it public, and the enduring value of public schools. The publication has a distinct, yet non-partisan point of view. *Connections* is intended to create a new dialogue about public responsibility for education and the community response necessary to create a public education system that benefits all young people.



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