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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the discovery that most voters believed that public schools were in need of improvement fueled the educational reform movement. This paper examines the public's role in education, with a focus on reasons for the public's failure to actively support educational reform. A review of recent surveys indicates that although most American citizens are uninformed, uninterested, and not actively engaged in the major educational reform issues, they may still play important, but less direct, policy-shaping roles. First, the public can be counted on to provide general support for almost any issue promising school improvement. Second, they believe strongly in the need for school improvement and can electorally punish political leaders. Third, public opinion may more directly affect the resolution of school issues stemming from broader societal and religious differences. Fourth, citizens can thwart the implementation of reforms. Fifth, citizens may become more directly engaged in local school-improvement issues than in national issues. Although most citizens are concerned about the state of American schools and support reform proposals aimed at improving schools, there is little evidence that they would demand a fundamentally restructured curriculum or school organization especially when costs became apparent. One figure and three tables are included. (LMI)

The Public's Role in School Reform

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THE PUBLIC'S ROLE IN SCHOOL REFORM

by

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During the last decade, the discovery that most voters believed that public schools were in need of improvement fueled the educational reform movement. Political leaders repeatedly called attention to the failure of the public schools to properly educate the nation's children and emphasized the importance of education to America's future. Many included various proposals for school improvement in their election campaigns, lest that issue be lost to the opposition. At the local, state, and federal levels, government officials also developed and initiated reform agendas and programs. These often shifted the focus of public education from equity to quality and emphasized themes of high standards, school choice, competition, devolution, and accountability. As the reform movement proceeded, some of its leaders fostered the impression that such changes had been sought by a public dissatisfied with the deteriorating condition of American education and demanding "break the mold" schools that would guarantee continued leadership for America in the global economy.

In this paper, we present the broad outline of public opinion as measured in recent surveys and find it remarkably consonant with the major themes of the current education reform.[1] Closer examination of that opinion, however, reveals some interesting qualifications. In our analysis of roles the public can and cannot play in the education reform movement, we present several caveats about citizens' apparent support for the reform and examine their knowledge of, and interest in, reform issues.

Although the present reform was instigated by *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and its supporting cast of federal officials, governors, and businessmen, it struck a responsive chord with a public already disturbed by reports of a breakdown of school discipline and

students' use of drugs. The public's dissatisfaction was clearly reflected in the annual ratings of public schools nationally, which had been on a downward trend at least since Gallup first asked the question in 1974 (Gallup, 1983, p. 35). Although the public was not favorably disposed toward most public institutions during the 1980s, *A Nation at Risk* confirmed the suspicion of many citizens that there were significant problems with the American public school system and, for a brief time, focused attention on the need for education reform.

The public's sense of the underlying problems of the nation's schools diverged markedly, however, from the assessment made by reform leaders. For most citizens, the challenge was to instill better discipline, solve the drug problem, obtain more adequate funding, and make it possible for schools to resume their traditional role and responsibilities. While proposals for greater accountability, higher performance standards, more rigorous course requirements, school choice, minimum competence testing, teacher competence tests, and many other measures claiming to improve schools received broad support from the public, that agenda did not address the public's main concerns.

Clark and Astuto correctly pointed out in 1990 that there was "no sense of crisis in the public's assessment of American education" and that, in fact, public opinion was still strongly supportive of the status quo (p. 18). Why has the public not demanded the reform it is getting? Why have not more citizens actively worked for the reform proposals they support? In what other ways may public opinion have influenced the political course of the reform? We shall address each of these questions in the remainder of this paper.

Public Opinion in the Context of the Current Reform

During the 1980s, the American public was inundated by a sense of school failure. Issued in 1983, *A Nation at Risk* called for wide-scale, sweeping reform of the public educational system. Schools were criticized for failing the nation's children and undermining the nation's security and international economic competitiveness. The report declared that the "educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). Almost all of the numerous educational reform reports which followed reiterated this message and warning. In addition to stimulating response and action from policy makers and educators, the flurry of reports reawakened the public interest in education in general and the importance of educational reform in particular.

The attribution of the cause of a declining economy to the failure of America's schools was the underlying rationale for the current reform movement. Reflecting the link between educational attainment and economic productivity, educational policy during the Reagan Administration focused on excellence, ability, and productivity. The pre-1980 priority on equity and access was set aside as policy-makers focused on standards of performance, individual competition, choice, and quality. This new emphasis was translated into a specific set of policy proposals. The federal education policy agenda included programs that attempted to foster competition both between schools (e.g., by publicizing student achievement scores by school, school districts, and states) and between individuals (e.g., by individual rewards and recognition to encourage excellence). Other elements of the Reagan education program included an emphasis on performance standards for teachers and students, protections of traditional academic areas of the curriculum, parental choice, and character development to strengthen traditional values (Clark and Astuto, 1990, pp. 13-15).

As the "education president," George Bush essentially continued the educational policies, initiatives, and ideology of the Reagan Administration. Excellence, selectivity, productivity, competition, and devolution continued to dominate educational policy discussions in Washington. The Bush Administration's educational reform plan, *America 2000*, advocated choice, national standards, national testing, and greater involvement of states and local communities in improving the public school system.

The educational reform movement was warmly received by a public dissatisfied with the American educational system. In 1982, the year prior to the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, only one-fifth of citizens surveyed rated the performance and quality of the nation's public schools as above average (Gallup, 1982, pp. 39-40). Such negative perceptions of United States' public schools have remained relatively unchanged in recent years. When asked to grade the public schools in the nation as a whole, respondents in 1992 were slightly more likely to assign below average grades than above average marks. Whereas 22% gave the nation's schools a D or F grade, only 18% assigned an A or B grade (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, p. 36).

In addition, most individuals have been discontent with government officials' current efforts to better the American public educational system. In 1992, 46% of respondents rated then President Bush's attempts to improve the nation's public schools as below average, and only 15% of those polled gave the President an A or a B grade. The extent of the public's disenchantment with political institutions is reflected in the fact that 52% of respondents assigned a below average grade for Congress, 41% graded their governors a D or F, and 40% gave a D or F to their state legislators (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, pp. 204, 209, 215, 219).

Despite such dissatisfaction, the public's impact on the reform agenda and educational policy, particularly at the state and federal levels, has been marginal at best. Although the public occasionally has successfully united to promote reform, it more often has had difficulty organizing effectively to exert collective pressure on policy makers. This

is, in part, due to the fact that the public is comprised of peoples with varied interests, values, and views. As a result, American citizens often are divided on most educational issues and on the direction of reform. Moreover, lay groups, such as school advisory organizations or parent advocacy associations, which represent the "public interest" lack the political power and resources (e.g., money and access to key officials) to successfully compete in the policy process. Such groups also often do not have the expertise to understand the many facets of the political system or the time available to follow the educational policy issue through to the end.

Instead, government officials and powerful interest groups have determined the direction of education reform. Elected and appointed public officials have formed and participated in special educational task forces and commissions at the state and federal levels. These task forces have played a pivotal role in influencing and stimulating educational reform programs and legislation. Even *A Nation at Risk*, which ushered in the current reform movement, was the product of the federal government's National Commission on Excellence in Education. During the 1980s, Presidents Reagan and Bush, as well as state governors, established their own educational agendas and successfully enacted key aspects of their reform programs.

Of the various educational interest groups, business, in particular, has played a significant role in the current reform. Since the late 1970s, the business community has been highly critical of America's public schools, repeatedly linking the nation's economic problems to education. Business and corporate leaders have participated in the special task forces and commissions to develop educational reform programs and policies, lobbied for special educational causes, and given testimony before Congress. Between 1983 and 1985, the business community constituted thirty-one percent of the membership of the task forces sponsored by governors and state legislators (Timpane and McNeill, 1991, p. 21). Through such efforts, business has successfully shaped the reform agenda to serve its own economic objectives and interests.

The Public's Transcendent Beliefs about Education

Although the general populace is critical of the nation's public educational system, it continues to believe firmly in the value and importance of public education. Public opinion polls repeatedly have shown that citizens agree on the instrumental value of education (Gallup, 1983, p. 43). Most perceive elementary and secondary education to be a central determinant of an individual's life opportunities. They believe, for instance, that the nature and quality of an individual's schooling will affect his or her future earning potential.

Table 1

Factors Determining America's Future Strength, 1991

Level of Importance	Developing the most efficient industrial production system in the world	Building the strongest military force in the world	Developing the best educational system in the world
Very important	59%	41%	89%
Fairly important	32	39	9
Not too important	5	15	1
Not at all important	0	3	0
Don't Know	4	2	1
Total	100%	100%	100%

Note. From the 1991 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan Survey of the Public's Attitudes toward Public Schools.

Reflecting the rhetoric and tone of the 1980s reform movement, citizens also feel that education is important to America's future and security. In 1991, respondents indicated that developing the best educational system in the world was at least as important in determining the country's future strength as developing the strongest military force or the most efficient industrial production system (Table 1). Ninety-eight percent of citizens

polled believed that developing the best educational system was either "very important" or "fairly important" to America's future (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 1, 6, 11).

The public also continues to possess a strong faith in their own local public educational system. Year after year, most respondents believed that the public schools in their community were performing better than those of the nation at large (Figure 1). Whereas 42% of respondents in 1991 rated the schools in their community either A or B, only 21% evaluated the schools nationally at this level. Conversely, only 15% of respondents assigned their community's schools below-average grades (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 36, 51).

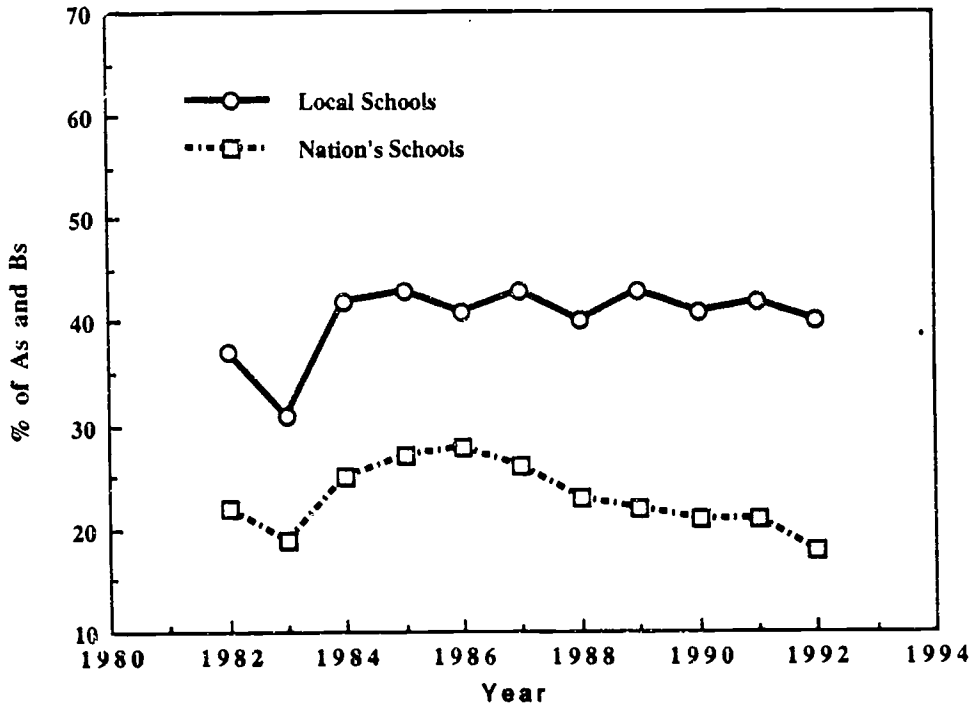

Figure 1. *Public ratings of local and national public schools*

Those polled in 1991 also expressed confidence in the public school teachers and principals and administrators in their own community. Nearly one-half of all respondents rated the performance of local teachers and of local principals and administrators as above average (53% and 50%, respectively) (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 56, 61). The

local school board, however, did not receive such high marks. Only one-third of the 1991 respondents assigned the school board in their community an A or B grade (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 86). The results of the 1987 and 1992 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan studies displayed similar patterns.

Moreover, parents, those who should know the public schools best, are highly satisfied with the local educational system. Nearly three-fourths of public school parents in 1991 rated the school their oldest child attended as above average. By contrast, only 6% believed that their child's public school was performing below average. Parents also positively evaluated their children's teachers and their school's administrators. Seventy-two percent assigned their children's teachers an A or B grade, and only 10% rated school principals and administrators as below average (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 578-579).

Most Americans see the need for reform and believe that almost any attempt at school improvement is good and beneficial. As in the past, people perceive better schools as the primary means to address and remedy larger societal ills, such as poverty and declining economic productivity. In particular, the public school system is looked to solve the problems (e.g., violence, teen pregnancy, and drug usage) which are preventing schools from performing their traditional roles.

Dissatisfaction with government officials' past and current reform efforts, as well as concern about the quality of schools nationally, has led to widespread public support for change. Across all demographic categories, citizens indicate that they desire and support most educational reform measures. In particular, public opinion polls reveal positive reactions to the main features of the federal educational reform agenda: standards, accountability, competition, choice, and devolution (Table 2). Notwithstanding their support of "excellence reform," citizens have not abandoned the value of equity. Their broad endorsement of a range of compensatory programs for the disadvantaged and for equalized funding across school districts has not wavered. A reform movement widely

characterized as shifting priorities from equity to quality may have public support for just half of its agenda.

Public Approval of the School Improvement Agenda

Regardless of how the question is worded, the public endorses educational standards. The vast majority believe that requiring higher academic achievement of students will result not only in better educated children, but also in better public schools. Of those citizens polled in 1987, nearly three-fourths felt that raising achievement standards would "help" the public schools in their community (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 12). Most respondents also believed that raising standards would encourage, rather than discourage, the academic performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 13).

Such underlying beliefs translate into widespread public support for reform measures emphasizing educational standards. Citizens overwhelmingly favor the development and implementation of higher educational standards for the public schools nationally. In 1991, 81% of those polled believed that their local public schools should conform to national achievement standards and goals (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 230). The majority of these respondents (68%) also supported the adoption and use of a national standardized curriculum for the schools in their community (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 235).

The public also concurs with the need for accountability and the use of standardized national examinations to achieve it. The vast majority of those surveyed in 1992 (71%) believed that the public schools in their community should be required to use standardized national tests to measure the overall academic achievement of students (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, p. 41). More specifically, the public agrees that national standardized tests should be utilized to measure students' abilities in various academic subjects. In 1991,

Table 2

Public Approval of the Educational Reform Agenda

Educational Reform Proposal	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
Requiring higher academic achievement of students (1987).[a]	76%	11%	12%
Requiring the local public schools to conform to national achievement standards and goals (1991).	81	12	17
Requiring the local public schools to use a standardized national curriculum (1991).	68	24	8
Requiring the local public schools to use standardized national tests to measure the academic achievement of students (1992).	71	20	9
Requiring the local public schools to use standardized national tests to measure student's knowledge in five core subjects: English, math, science, history, and geography (1991).	88	8	4
Requiring the local public schools to use standardized national tests to measure student's problem-solving skills (1991).	84	10	6
Requiring the local public schools to use standardized national tests to measure student's ability to write a clear composition or paper on some topic (1991).	85	10	5
The use of standardized national tests to identify areas in which teachers need to improve their teaching skills (1992).	79	14	7
The use of standardized national tests to identify areas in which students need extra help (1992).	85	9	6
The reporting of educational achievement results on a state-by-state and school-by-school basis, so that comparison can be made between comparable schools (1987).	70	14	16
Public school report cards to show what progress is being made toward achievement of the national education goals for the local public schools (1991).	73	22	5
Public school report cards to show what progress is being made toward achievement of the national education goals for the school district as a whole (1991).	76	19	5
Public school report cards to show what progress is being made toward achievement of the national education goals for each state as a whole (1991).	75	19	6
Public school report cards to show what progress is being made toward achievement of the national education goals for the nation as a whole (1991).	75	19	6
Increasing required courses in basic subjects and decreasing electives (1987).[a]	75	11	11

Allowing students and parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live (1987).	71	20	9
Allowing students and parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live (1991).	62	33	5
Giving the principals and teachers more say about how the local public schools are run (1991)	76	14	10
Allocating money to public education in this state from all sources equally to all students, regardless of whether they live in wealthy or poor districts (1991).	80	13	7
Court action to equalize expenditures per student if it were determined that certain school districts in this state were spending a smaller amount of money per student than other districts (1991)	62	24	14

Note. From the 1987, 1991, and 1992 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan Surveys of the Public's Attitudes toward Public Schools.

[a]Responses to these questions were coded as follows: "Improve Quality" = favor, "Hurt Quality" = oppose, "Don't Know" = Don't Know.

88% of citizens polled favored national standardized tests to measure students' knowledge in five core subjects: English, math, science, history, and geography (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 250). Most respondents additionally supported employing these exams to gauge students' achievement in problem-solving skills and to critique their ability to write a clear composition or paper on some topic (84% and 85%, respectively) (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 255, 260).

The public particularly favored the use of national standardized tests to improve student performance and the quality of education offered. Seventy-nine percent of respondents agreed that these examinations should be used to identify areas in which teachers needed to improve their teaching skills (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, p. 70). They (85%) also overwhelmingly favored utilizing the results of standardized national tests to identify areas in which students needed additional help (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, p. 76).

Citizens also support the publication of educational achievement test results to foster school improvement. Most respondents (70%) in 1987 favored the reporting of student achievement examination results on a state-by-state and school-by-school basis, so that comparisons can be made between schools of similar size, racial, and economic composition (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 13). Nearly 70% believed that the results of such comparisons would serve as an incentive for local public schools to perform better, regardless of whether the local schools scored better or worse than comparable schools elsewhere (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 14).

Further reform proposals promoting greater competition among schools for the purpose of improving educational quality also have received a positive response from the American public. The public overwhelmingly favors educational accountability measures such as school report cards. The vast majority polled in 1991, believed that public school report cards should be prepared and made public to show what progress is being made toward the attainment of the six national goals outlined in America 2000, the Bush

Administration's educational reform plan. Three-fourths of all respondents favored using public school report cards to measure both state and national progress toward achieving these goals (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 185, 190). Public school report cards at the local level also received strong support. Citizens, however, were slightly more in favor of report cards for their local school district as a whole (76%) than for each public school in the community (73%) (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 180, 175).

The public also believes that emphasizing the basics in the public school curriculum would improve the overall quality of education. In 1987, respondents were asked what the perceived effect of increasing required courses in basic subjects, such as math and science, and reducing electives would be on the public schools in their community. While 75% thought that increasing required courses and decreasing electives would "improve" school quality, only 11% believed such curriculum changes would "hurt" the quality of education offered (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 12).

Policy preferences regarding choice also are supported by the public. Most citizens agree that parents should have the freedom to exercise choice in their children's education. In particular, the public believes that parents should be allowed to choose which local schools their children attend. In both 1987 and 1991, the vast majority of those surveyed supported parental school choice (71% and 62%, respectively) (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 15; Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 285). The public also favors parental choice in curriculum-related matters. Nearly 80% of respondents in 1987 supported maintaining or increasing "the amount of say" that public school parents have concerning the courses and the books and instructional materials offered at their children's school (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, pp. 15-16).

Devolution of policy-making evokes a positive response from the general populace. While the public does not desire eliminating any level of government from the educational arena, it is most supportive of increasing the role of local government in educational reform. Asked whether they favored more or less government influence in the

improvement of schools, 37% of respondents in 1987 favored more federal influence in school reform, 55% favored more state influence, and 62% favored more local influence (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, pp. 11-12).

Similarly, citizens concur on the desirability of shifting more educational decision-making responsibilities to the local level, particularly to parents. The vast majority (76%) of those polled in 1991 would grant principals and teachers greater input into how their public schools are operated (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 475). When further asked which way they would prefer to have policy decisions made in the schools in their community, more than three-fourths favored a council composed of teachers, principals, and parents over the school board and its administrative staff (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 480).

In contrast to federal educational policy priorities, the public also supports reform measures designed to promote equity and fairness. The public believes that the existing gap between the amounts spent on pupils in wealthy districts and pupils in poor districts should be closed. A vast majority of those polled in 1991 (80%) favored allocating money to public education in their state equally to all students, regardless of whether students live in wealthy or poor districts (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 485). Although citizens are less supportive of measures to produce equality in educational funding, most favor some form of intervention to promote equity. A large proportion of respondents (62%) in 1991 supported court action to equalize expenditures per student if it were determined that certain school districts in the state were spending a smaller amount of money per student than other districts (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 490).

The public also supports almost any policy measure designed to improve the educational opportunities of low income and racial or ethnic minority students. In 1991, respondents were asked to rate a series of educational reform proposals which would assist disadvantaged students in school. The vast majority (84%) believed that preschool programs were an "excellent" or "good" way to help low income and minority students,

while only 4% rated this proposal as "poor" (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 390). A substantial proportion of those polled also considered "increased school funding" (71%), the "chance to choose from a variety of educational programs" (80%), and "more interesting and relevant coursework" (81%), to be either "excellent" or "good" means of assisting these students (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 420, 400, 415).

These major policy proposals for educational reform have received broad support across all segments of American society. On most issues, little or no difference was found in the extent of citizen agreement by demographic category. For instance, the strong support for a standardized national curriculum varied only slightly between public school parents (69%), non-public school parents (64%), and respondents with no school-age children (67%) (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 238). Although variance amongst population groups existed on certain issues, support for virtually all proposals remained strong across demographic categories. For example, although college graduates (82%) were more likely than high school graduates (75%) and those with a grade-school level education (70%) to favor giving principals and teachers greater input into the operation of the local public schools, the vast majority of each of the groups supported the proposal (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 476). It is, in fact, difficult to find reform issues that polarize the public along racial, income, religious, gender, education, or generation lines.

Often variation in citizen support simply reflected differences in intensity. While the vast majority of African Americans (82%), Hispanics (90%), and Euro-Americans (83%) agreed that preschool programs were an "excellent" or "good" way to help low income and minority students succeed in school in the future, African Americans were the most likely to rate the reform as "excellent." Sixty-nine percent of African Americans believed preschool programs to be an "excellent" suggestion, compared to 50% of Hispanics and 46% of Euro-Americans (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 390).

Three Important Caveats about Public Support of the Reform

Although most citizens are supportive of school improvement reform proposals in the abstract, that support is qualified in important ways. First, there are a few "education" proposals which address issues other than the dominant ones of making schools better for all or providing more opportunity to the disadvantaged. Citizen preferences with respect to sex education, condom distribution, character education, school prayer, school tax increases, and the federal role may be influenced more by their existing religious, economic, social, or partisan positions and beliefs than by educational considerations. As expected, we found the public more divided along predictable demographic lines on these issues which have grown out of long-standing social and economic divisions in the American society.

Second, even on proposals that target school improvement, the initial enthusiasm of many citizens falters as soon as the cost of the program is mentioned (Table 3). Only one-half of citizens responding to Gallup/*Phi Delta Kappan* questions in 1991 were willing to raise state income taxes for the public schools in the near future. Opposition to increasing state sales taxes to support the public schools or raising the salaries of local public school teachers was almost as widespread (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 546, 450). Moreover, despite the broad support for preschool programs (77% said such programs would help "a great deal" or "quite a lot" in 1992), only 49% of these same respondents favored extending "tax-supported" preschool programs to three and four-year olds (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, p. 87).

Nor are increased taxes the only kind of costs that may limit public support for reform proposals. In 1991, 51% of respondents favored one of the main planks of *A Nation at Risk*, extension of the school year by 30 days, and just 46% favored extending the school day by one hour (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, pp. 210, 215). Although inferences about the lack of strong support for these proposals are purely speculative, it is most likely that parents' calculation of the potential disruption to family schedules and

calendars, as well as citizens' premonitions about the increased tax dollars required for such measures, were contributing factors.

Table 3

Limited Public Support for School Reform Proposals Involving Cost

Educational Reform Proposal	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
A one-half of one percent state income tax dedicated to the public schools (1991).	50	44	6
A one percent state sales tax dedicated specifically to the public schools (1991).	55	40	5
Raising public school teacher salaries in the local public schools (1991).	54	32	14
Tax-supported preschool programs available to 3 and 4 year olds (1992).	49	42	9
Extension of the public school year by 30 days (1991).	51	42	7
Extension of the public school day by one hour (1991).	46	48	6

Note. From the 1991 and 1992 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan Surveys of the Public's Attitudes toward Public Schools.

Third, many of the school reform proposals involve contradictions that are not immediately apparent to the casual observer. It is entirely possible for citizens to favor both a national curriculum and increased local control as these items arise in different parts of an interview, without sensing the discrepancy. In the same way, many citizens find it possible to support the "back to basics" movement, even while urging more attention to foreign language and sex education (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, pp. 21, 22, 28).

Such contradictions are especially evident with respect to issues that place "quality" against "equity." It is abundantly clear that most citizens favor more rigorous academic standards in our schools, but equally clear that they want drop-out rates lowered and educational opportunity increased. The probability that greater reliance on standardized tests to raise standards will result in higher dropout rates and less opportunity for minorities

or the disadvantaged, is a dilemma that most citizens have never considered. These tradeoffs also have not been properly acknowledged or addressed by politicians or the media.

As reform proposals become more concrete, and the evaluations of their side effects become available, evidence about the costs and tradeoffs, as well as their effectiveness or ineffectiveness, may color public opinion in major ways. The danger, if that happens is that citizens may become even more cynical about the prospects of any worthwhile school change and increasingly distrustful of their political and educational leaders' reform efforts.

The Public's Detachment from Educational Issues

Given the public's undiminished faith in the efficacy of education for solving our nation's problems, together with their dissatisfaction with school performance, how can we explain the failure of most citizens to participate more actively in the reform movement? We believe that their detachment is attributable to: (1) the relatively small proportion of citizens who have direct contact with schools today, (2) the paucity of information about educational issues available to most citizens, and (3) the marginal interest most citizens display in educational issues.

Today, only one in four households has a child in school, providing a stream of information about school matters and drawing many parents into direct contact with teachers and administrators (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 11). In the 1991 Gallup/*Phi Delta Kappan* poll, nearly 80% of the respondents with no children in public school claimed to have had no direct relationship or contact with their local schools over the most recent school year. Furthermore, almost all of the contact that was reported by non-parents involved attendance at athletic events, plays, or other non-issue-oriented forums (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1991, p. 573).

One manifestation of this detachment is that in 1987, Gallup found 41% of the national sample claiming they were "not well informed" about the local public school

situation. Even when one looks at parents of students in public schools, the part of the population most likely to receive information about schools, 23% admitted they were "not well informed" (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, p. 33). These low self-ratings of their own knowledge would seem to refute the oft-repeated conundrum that everyone considers themselves an expert in the realm of education.

This self-assessment becomes even more discouraging when one examines responses to questions asking citizens to identify the educational issues they had "heard or read something about." Nearly three-fourths of respondents in 1987 were aware of the proposal to include sex education in the public school curriculum and of the proposed Constitutional amendment which would allow organized prayer in the public schools (76% and 73%, respectively). Yet, less than one-half had heard or read about increasing the number of required courses in school, and only 27% had heard of school voucher proposals (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1987, pp. 34-36). Moreover, by 1992, the Bush Administration had succeeded in getting the word about its America 2000 initiative to less than one-third of the nation's citizens (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 1992, p. 224).

In examining the sources most citizens rely on for their information about schools, it is evident that major changes have occurred in recent decades. Parents still rely primarily on information relayed through their own children, but we have already seen that parents constitute a dwindling proportion of the public. Intermediate associations, such as church, labor union, political party, and neighborhood groups, may provide information about educational issues and even cues about what position to hold, but these organizations also reach fewer citizens today than in the past.

For most Americans, television and the local newspaper have replaced the opportunity to develop issue positions from personal or institutional associations (Gallup, 1983, pp. 42-43). Content analyses of television newscasts reveal that news about America's schools is relatively infrequent in the medium most people rely upon for information In network news coverage, education news follows coverage of wars, the

economy, sex, drugs, health, the environment, crime, superpowers, entertainment, transportation, sports and national disasters (McGill, 1991, pp. 20-21). Although the impact of major network reports or feature stories on the state of America's schools is widespread, it most likely results in relatively homogeneous, superficial opinions on educational issues, as compared with those developed on the basis of personal experience or association with interest groups. As a result, many citizens do not possess a sophisticated understanding of the problems confronting America's public schools or of the proposed solutions to such problems.

Not only are most citizens not very knowledgeable about education, they also are not very interested in educational issues. Voter turnout for most local school board elections, for instance, rarely rises above 30%. Responses to a national survey during the 1992 presidential election campaign further illustrate public disinterest. When prospective voters were asked to name the two issues that would be of most importance to them in determining which candidate they would support, education followed the economy, health care, jobs, the federal deficit, taxes, the integrity and character of the candidates, and abortion (Taylor, 1992, p. 3).

Conclusions about the Public's Role in Educational Reform

It should not surprise us that citizens who are uninformed about and uninterested in educational issues have not participated in the educational reform movement in any direct way. Governors, legislators, and even presidents are fond of claiming that their educational reform programs have been demanded by a public disturbed about the state of their public schools. A more plausible interpretation is that relatively few citizens were eager participants in the initiation of the reform. While many citizens are learning more about educational issues as a result of the reform, few are actively shaping the debate or participating in any direct way in the reform movement.

The apparent public support for most educational reform issues can be explained, in large part, by citizens' continued faith in the value of education and an enduring desire to support almost any change in schools aimed at improving the quality or fairness of those schools. Neither the reform leaders nor scholars have understood the ways in which that support is qualified when consideration of cost or possible tradeoffs is included in the discussion. We can rely on public support for almost any initiative that promises school improvement or more opportunity for less-fortunate youngsters, but only until the costs and contradictions become apparent.

By reducing the debate on educational reform to symbolic rhetoric (i.e., "school improvement"), we ignore the complexity of schools and the inevitable tradeoffs involved in many of the reform measures. By taking at face value the public support for certain reform measures as gauged by conventional survey questions, we may obscure the public's real position once those costs and contradictions are revealed.

Because most citizens are generally uninformed and uninterested in school politics, relatively little mobilization of lay citizens on educational policy issues has occurred, even after ten years of educational reform. With rare exceptions, few substantial differences with respect to issue preferences by age, sex, race, religion, family income, political party identification, educational attainment, or even parental status exist. Where such differences do exist, they are on social or religious issues (e.g., school prayer, sex education, condom distribution), which reflect cleavages already existing in non-educational politics. On issues that address more directly the question of school improvement, there is less disagreement overall. When citizens do disagree, the differences are not along the lines of age, social class, education, religion, race, or sex.

The road to political effectiveness is through group activity. Yet, given the ambivalence of existing demographically-based interest groups on most issues of school reform, it is unlikely that the public will significantly influence the reform agenda or its implementation through active participation in interest groups. It also is unlikely that any

new national group(s) representing the public interest will have much impact on the direction of reform due to the difficulty they would face in mobilizing their membership on educational issues. Where new citizen groups have formed, it has been at the local level and limited to promoting or influencing local reform efforts. The Chicago school reform plan, for example, was initiated and propelled through the state legislature by several citizen groups responding to a sense of crisis not found across most of the nation.

While most citizens are uninformed, uninterested, and not effectively engaged in the debate over major issues of educational reform, they still may play important, but less direct, roles in shaping educational policy. First, the pubic can be counted upon to provide general support for almost any issue promising school improvement. State and federal politicians have interpreted this apparent national consensus, as reflected in public opinion polls, as a green light to push forward a staggering array of remedies.

Second, citizens believe strongly in the need for school improvement and retain the capacity to reward or punish political leaders electorally. Governors, and perhaps even presidents, who have not established a program to improve public schools, run the risk of being punished by voters at the polls on general grounds, rather than on the basis of their specific issue positions.

Third, public opinion may affect more directly the resolution of school issues that grow out of broader societal and religious differences. Citizens with allegiance to People for a Democratic Way or United We Stand may influence the nature and resolution of debates concerning outcome-based education (such as school prayer, creationism, or condom distribution) which affect schools in important ways, but which are not directly related to school improvement reforms.

Fourth, citizens can thwart the implementation of reforms. Initial public support of initiatives such as "authentic assessment" does not insure that citizens will relinquish the traditional grading system, or pay for the increased costs of evaluating portfolios, once that reform is implemented. Similarly, some supporters of national content standards in the

social studies may complain about the injection of "outside" values into their local curriculum, once those national standards are introduced.

Fifth, citizens may become engaged much more directly in local school improvement issues than they do in national issues. Although it remains true that most citizens sense little urgency about their local schools, in urban districts and some parts of the country (i.e., California), dismay and frustration about the quality of local schools has stimulated the organization and mobilization of citizen groups. Such groups have developed and often successfully implemented reform programs to improve the schools in their community.

Once engaged in these kinds of organizations, citizens are forced to confront the complexities of school policy issues, commit themselves to issue positions, and defend those positions. This is the primary way in which citizens become invested in educational policy issues, and we have done far too little to foster that kind of citizen participation in educational reform.

Although most citizens are concerned about the state of American schools, and support reform proposals aimed at improving those schools, there is little evidence that they sense a crisis that would lead them to demand a fundamentally restructured curriculum or school organization. Because public support of specific reform proposals is usually offered without consideration of costs or tradeoffs, it may dissipate when those negatives become apparent. Although rarely moved to participate directly, citizens may still shape the reform by providing a "zone of tolerance" for reform proposals, by reacting to the reform initiatives of politicians and educators, and by helping or hindering the implementation of reform measures.[2] Those among us who would like to see a more direct participation of the public in these critical matters will have to be content with the essentially ratifying role of citizens or find more effective ways to engage most adult Americans in the issue-by-issue battles of educational reform.

NOTES

[1]Data from the 1987, 1991, and 1992 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan polls of citizen's attitudes toward American public education served as the primary sources for this study. These three public opinion polls were selected because they provided variables, particularly demographic variables, and questions not previously published. Each of these polls interviewed approximately 1,600 adult respondents comprising a cluster sample of the adult population of the United States on a series of educational issues. Data from the 1987 survey were provided in raw form on diskette. All statistical analyses of this data were computed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Results of the 1991 and 1992 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan polls were not yet available on diskette but were made available in printed form. Cross tabulations of responses to all educational issue questions and all demographic variables were included in the printed reports.

[2]Joseph H. McGivney and William Moynihan (1972) defined the "zone of tolerance" as "the latitude or area of maneuverability granted to the leadership of the schools by the local community." William L. Boyd (1976) proposed that when authorities exceed the public's zone of tolerance, they come into conflict with citizens' values and most likely will encounter opposition and controversy.

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