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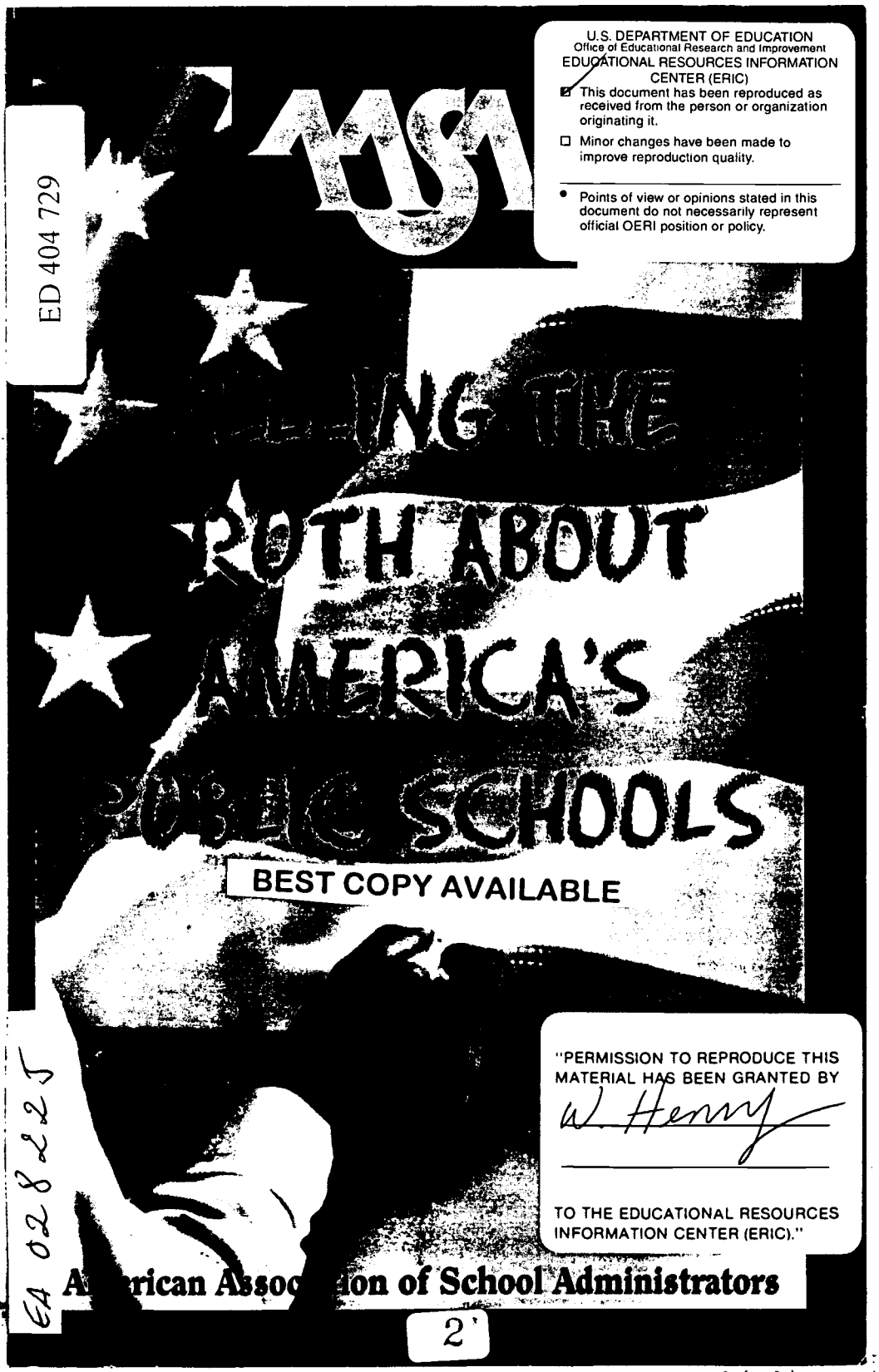
ABSTRACT

Support for American public schools is ebbing at a time when it is needed most. This booklet outlines ways in which educators can counteract the criticisms leveled at public education and communicate its successes. It examines and presents data to refute the following charges: (1) SAT scores are falling; (2) students are taking too many "dumbed down" courses; (3) too many students drop out of school; (4) American public schools are not a good financial investment; (5) public schools fail to prepare students for the work force; and (6) businesses spend a great deal of money providing remedial education to employees. School leaders are recommended to get the facts, spread the word, disseminate stories of students' successes to the local news media, use every opportunity to talk about improving student achievement, and let students do the talking. Six figures are included. (Contains 15 references.) (LMI)



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Telling the Truth About America's Public Schools was written by Kristen Amundson, a leading education writer in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Her previous AASA publications include *101 Ways Parents Can Help Students Achieve, Getting Your Child Ready for School, Helping Your Child Communicate,* and *Speaking and Writing Skills for Educators.*

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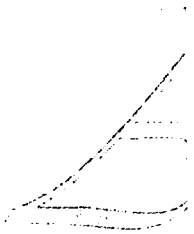
Telling The Truth About America's Public Schools



America's public schools are as enmeshed in the fabric of our lives as our governments, our places of worship, and our homes. To many children, the public school is the *only* place to find a safe haven from a violent neighborhood or a home racked with poverty and despair. It may be the only place some children receive health care. It may be the only place where they can count on eating breakfast and lunch. To many children, the public school is the only place where dreams can be nurtured, where diversity is embraced, where various learning styles and special needs are accommodated, and where cultural differences are celebrated.

Yet the public school as an institution is under attack. In fact, a study by the Public Agenda Foundation reports that almost six parents in ten with children in public school say they would send their children to private school if they could afford to do so.[1] To the dismay of educators, who toil long hours over jobs that seem to absorb new and increasingly complex responsibilities at a breakneck pace, support for public school is ebbing at a time when it is needed the most.

Public schools have become the repository for the public's growing anxiety over violence, the breakdown of the family and its traditional values, an employment picture that no longer ensures that each generation will be better off than the one before, and an international economy that threatens America's position among industrial nations.

So how do educators respond to this drumbeat of negative press? Some find the public's growing restlessness to be a motivating force that keeps them

[1] Public Agenda Foundation, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, 1995.

constantly searching for new tools to boost student achievement. These educators are the lucky ones. Others believe that the negative press gets in the way of their daily efforts to improve children's lives. Some eventually become so discouraged that they leave the education profession altogether.

What *can* educators do about the problem? There are only a few choices:

- ignore the negative press
- become defensive
- learn to communicate the positives about public education.

Ignoring the problem

Educators can continue to muddle through as if negative criticism does not exist. "After all," some say, "education is already a full-time job. Why give the critics the satisfaction of a reply? The arguments are ridiculous. They don't deserve an answer."

While these viewpoints are understandable, they are also potentially dangerous. Consider these points:

- The public's and the media's views are based on concern for children. If educators ignore their comments, they are sending a message that they don't care, or are satisfied with the status quo and aren't looking for ways to serve children even better.
- Educators can't "do it alone." Ignoring criticism has the potential to make those in the public schools an island unto themselves. If it takes an entire village to raise a child, the village won't provide support if it is filled with a restless populace.

Becoming defensive

Taking a totally defensive position is self-defeating. The fact is that there *are* some public schools that are in trouble. Ignoring this reality is not only intellectually dishonest, but also unpersuasive.

There is plenty of evidence to support the position that the quality of public schools is usually only as good as the neighborhood in which they are located or the socioeconomic level of its students. This is the fault neither of schools nor of citizens. One has only to read the works of Jonathan Kozol, with his vivid images of raw sewage flowing through the playgrounds in East St. Louis, Illinois, or children suffering from asthma because of the poor air quality in South Bronx schools to run headlong into the disparities that exist among districts across the nation. Inequities exist in all facets of school services, too, from field trips to science labs, technology, music and art, and more.

The trouble is that while the public seems to accept the fact that poverty breeds an inevitable gap in the quality of services in other areas (health care, public housing, etc.), public schools are expected to rise above such setbacks and provide excellent services at all times. Equalizing services is no easy task, however. School leaders who try to level the playing field by taking away resources from wealthier districts face the wrath of parents who want their children to have all the advantages. Those who try to raise the quality of services for all children are accused of "throwing money at the problem" or of causing local tax increases.

Communicating positively

Communicating positively may be an educator's only recourse to build solid relationships with the community based on mutual respect. By learning the facts about public education, and by having accurate information available to disseminate in meetings, in dealings with parents, and in speaking with the news media, educational leaders will be able to change opinions—not just refute them.

That is what this booklet is designed to do. Rather than a rehash of lengthier publications such as *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner and Biddle, 1995) and *Exploding the Myths* (Schneider and

Houston, 1993), this booklet summarizes *specific* areas where the truth and the public's perception diverge . . . and lists several reasons why the common school concept is still a key to our democratic way of life. Throughout the book, you will also find questions about your own school district. Take the time to find the answers—they will give you the data you need when you are talking about schools to the people in your community.

Though written as a spirited offensive, *Telling the Truth About America's Public Schools* is also a practical guide about getting points across in a positive way. The goal of this booklet is to move the conversation forward so that everyone can do the real work that needs to be done—making our schools the best they can be for children.

Telling the Truth

Pick up any newspaper in America and you won't be surprised to see an article attacking public education. Most of us can recite the charges: America's schools are failing; the dropout rate is soaring while academic achievement is plunging; students are less prepared for the workplace than any previous generation. Meanwhile, billions of dollars are being wasted in an inefficient, top-heavy bureaucracy.

There's just one problem. None of it is true.

But how can educators tell that story? Only by having facts and figures at their fingertips. Let's examine the charges, one by one.

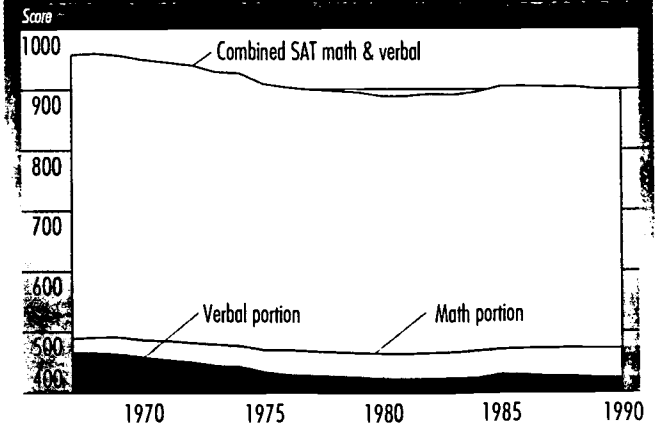
Charge: **SAT scores are falling.**

The truth: Much of the criticism of public schools comes from the belief that test scores—especially scores on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)—are falling. Each year when the test results are known, newspapers run front-page stories, usually informing the public that scores have continued to drop.

Aggregate SAT verbal scores *are* lower than they were thirty years ago (although they rose five points to 428 in 1995). Between 1963 and 1975, scores on the test dropped by about 30 points (although they have remained relatively stable since then). (See Figure 1)

However, in the 25 years since SAT scores began dropping, the number of students taking the exam has grown dramatically. Today, about 40 percent of all students take the SAT. That percentage is a third higher than the 1975 figure, which was in turn higher than the percentage of students taking the SAT in the 1960s. The increase is significant—if you test only a small group of the most able students, scores will obviously be higher than if you test a wider range of students. Not only are more students taking the test, but also the student population has

Figure 1— **Decline in Average SAT Scores Slight Despite Increase in Number of Test Takers**



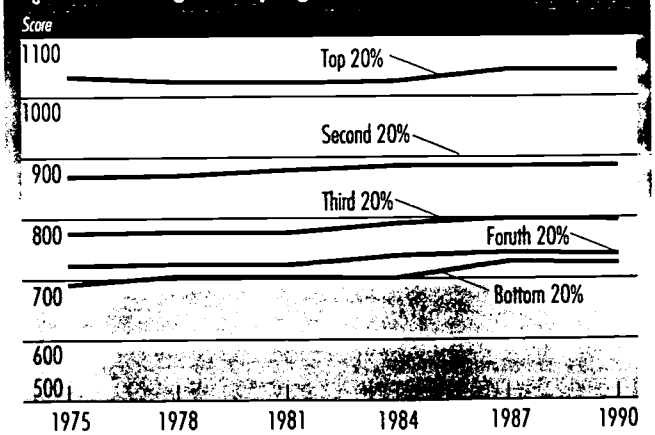
grown increasingly diverse, both in ethnic composition and in family income.

When SAT scores are *disaggregated* — whether by class rank or by ethnicity — there are increases in *all minority* subgroups. (See Figures 2 and 3). In this case, the whole *is* less than the sum of its parts! As David Berliner and Bruce Biddle say in *The Manufactured Crisis*,

> [A]lthough critics have trumpeted the 'alarming' news that aggregate national SAT scores fell during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, this decline indicates nothing about the performance of American schools. Rather, it signals that students from a broader range of backgrounds were then interested in getting into college, which should have been a cause for celebration, not alarm.[2]

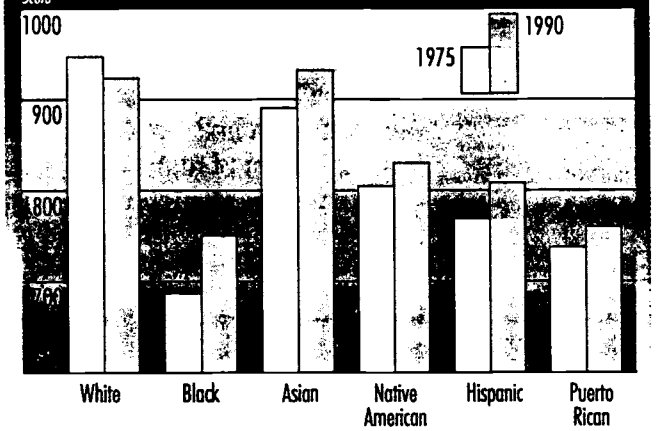
What would happen to SAT scores today if student composition had not changed so dramatically? Researchers at the Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque examined the SAT scores of students who shared the demographic characteristics of students

Figure 2— Average SAT by High School Class Rank



[2] David Berliner and Bruce Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attacks on America's Public Schools*, p. 23.

Figure 3— U.S. SAT Scores by Ethnic Groups (1975 and 1990)



who took the test in 1975. The result? The current 50th percentile on the SAT is where the 60th percentile was two decades ago.[3] In other words, without the dramatic increase in the numbers of test takers, SAT scores would have risen by nearly 25 points during the past two decades.

- What percentage of students took college entrance exams in your school district in 1975? _____
- What percentage take them today? _____
- What percentage of students in your school district went on to college or higher education in 1975? _____
- What percentage do today? _____
- Are there any success stories of which your district is especially proud — for example, a significant rise in scores among a particular ethnic group? _____

[3] Cynthia L. Patrick and Robert Calfee, "A Textbook Case of Hype," *The Washington Post*, April 7, 1996, p. C4.

Charge: **Students are taking too many "dumbed down" courses.**

The truth: This charge may have been true — in 1983. That was the year when *A Nation At Risk* sounded the alarm about the lack of rigor in the courses many students were taking in high school. The report noted that just 13 percent of high school students were taking a comprehensive curriculum—four years of English, math that included algebra and geometry, and so on.

Out of the national concern about the report, however, both states and schools raised standards. Today, 47 percent of high school students take the comprehensive curriculum.

Many students are going a step further, taking one or more Advanced Placement (AP) courses. These rigorous courses allow high-achieving high schoolers to earn college credit in subjects ranging from calculus to chemistry to history and government. In 1978, 90,000 students took the test. By 1994, the number had increased 397 percent to 448,000. Yet the scores on the exams have remained essentially constant.

- What percentage of your students took Advanced Placement courses in 1983? _____
- What percentage take them today? _____
- What percentage of students took four years of math and science in 1983? _____
- What percentage do today? _____
- Are there any success stories of which your district is especially proud — for example, a rise in the numbers of females taking Advanced Placement math and science courses? _____

Charge: **Too many students drop out of school.**

The truth: Certainly the numbers of students completing school (about 75 percent) is not as high as anyone would like. But look at that figure in perspective.

As recently as the 1950s, only about half of all students completed high school. (In those days, however, no one worried much about the dropout rate. After all, it wasn't hard for anyone who was willing to work hard to get a job that paid enough to earn a living wage.)

Today, changes in the workplace have raised the stakes. Education is directly linked to earning power. And the number of students completing school has risen by fifty percent. In fact, if you count all those who return to school to earn a high school equivalency, or GED, the number of school completers rises to 86 percent[4], which compares favorably with Japan. For some parts of the population, especially for black males, the change in the dropout rate has been even more dramatic. In 1992, black males had the lowest dropout rate of any group.

- What percentage of your students dropped out five years ago?_____ What percentage do today?_____
- How many students in your district earn a GED?_____
- Adding these students as "school completers," what percentage of your students complete school?_____
- Are there any success stories of which your district is especially proud — for example, a significant reduction in the dropout rate of a particular group of students?_____

[4] 1995 *National Education Goals Report*, National Education Goals Panel.

Charge: **American schools simply cost too much. Americans are spending more on education than any other nation—and getting less.**

The truth: In a 1992 article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, researcher Richard Jaeger calculated the amount spent on education in two different ways—by per-pupil expenditure and by expenditures as a percentage of per-capita income—the United States ranked 9th and 14th, respectively.[5] (See Figures 4 and 5) The U.S. trailed virtually every industrialized nation—including Japan and Germany, whose students' performance on international tests is often cited as further proof of the failure of American education.

But these aggregate expenditures do not tell the entire story. The U.S. provides more services than schools in other countries either provide on a reduced basis or not at all: transportation, food, and special education. The Sandia study found that while regular education costs rose just 8 percent in a 15-year period. special education costs rose some 240 percent.

Does money matter? Yes. Several studies have shown a strong link between spending and student achievement. A comprehensive analysis published in *Educational Researcher* found that an increase of

Figure 4—Education Expenditures as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product

Denmark	4.6	Portugal	3.5
Sweden	4.6	France	3.5
Finland	4.6	United Kingdom	3.4
Luxembourg	4.5	Italy	3.4
Norway	4.4	Netherlands	3.1
Ireland	4.3	Spain	3.0
Canada	3.8	Australia	2.9
Switzerland	3.7	West Germany	2.6
United States	3.7	Japan	2.5
Austria	3.6		

Richard Jaeger. World Class Standards Choice, and Privatization: Weak Measurement Serving Presumptive Policy," *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1992, pp. 118-128.

Figure 5— **Expenditures for K-12 Education as a Percent of Per Capita Income (1985)**

$500 per pupil above the national average would boost achievement significantly — the equivalent of taking students at the 50th percentile and moving them up to the 76th percentile.[6]

As Iris Rotberg of the National Science Foundation points out, "Teacher expertise and experiences, class size, better science laboratories, and decent facilities do matter. If they don't, rich school districts haven't heard the message."

- What has happened to per-pupil expenditures in your district, as compared with inflation, over the past five years?_____
  Over the past ten years?_____
- During that same time, how has your student population changed? What has happened to enrollment in special education, for example?

  _____
- Are there any success stories of which your district is especially proud? Have you installed a new administrative technology system that allows your district to provide better service at lower cost, for example?

  _____

  _____

  _____

[6] Larry V. Hedges, Richard D. Laine, and Rob Greenwald, "Does Money Matter? A Meta-Analysis of Studies of the Effects of Differential School Inputs on Student Outcomes," *Educational Researcher*, April 1993, pp. 5-14.

Charge: **American schools fail to prepare students for the workforce.**

The truth: American productivity is increasing—and the skills of American workers are one of the most important reasons for the increase.

An increasing number of U.S. schools are offering students the opportunity to develop job skills as well as academic knowledge. In fact, the National Assessment of Vocational Education found that 97 percent of all students will take at least one vocational education class before graduating.[7]

Some school districts have developed innovative programs to help students prepare for today's high-tech workplace. For example, The School District of Philadelphia has established ten career academies to prepare students for the world of work. The academies offer students opportunities to prepare for careers in subjects ranging from aviation and aerospace to health to horticulture. In inner-city Philadelphia, these schools have a 4 percent dropout rate and 85 percent employment rate after graduation. Their average daily attendance is 90 percent.

Are there employers who can't find enough skilled workers to fill the jobs they have available? According to a survey by the National Center on Education and the Economy, just 15 percent of businesses are having trouble finding skilled workers—and most of those reported shortages in "chronically underpaid women's occupations."

- What percentage of your students take at least one vocational education class before graduating?_____
- What steps has your district taken to prepare students for the new American workplace? For example, are you offering Tech Prep classes?_____

[7] National Assessment of Vocational Education, report to Congress, 1994.

Charge: **American businesses must spend billions of dollars offering remedial education to their employees.**

The truth: Only 14 percent of US companies offer any form of remedial education to employees, according to a 1991 Louis Harris poll. In fact, according to the American Society for Training and Development, nearly two-thirds of all training dollars are spent on college-educated, white-collar employees—hardly the "failures" of American public schools.

Businesses do have employee requirements they feel are not being met. But according to two different surveys, most of the skills employers are seeking are social, not academic. In two surveys, one taken in Rochester, New York, by the National Center on Education and the Economy, and the other conducted by the Michigan Employability Skills Task Force, employers were asked to rate the five most important skills that employees need to do their job—and the five they thought were least important. The skills they identified as most important—most of which could be grouped under the heading "developing a work ethic"—are things that were traditionally taught in families, neighborhoods, and churches. In both cases, the *least* important skills were academic basics like math, science, computer literacy and foreign language. Publications like AASA's *Preparing Students for the 21st Century* are also helping schools make sure students have the skills they need to be successful in a changing workplace.

■ How does your district work with the business community to ensure that students are prepared to enter the job market? _____

_____

_____

_____

What Are Businesses Looking For?

	Michigan[8]	New York[9]
5 Most Important Skills for Employment	No substance abuse Honesty, integrity Follow directions Respect others Punctuality, attendance	No substance abuse Follow directions Read instructions Follow safety rules Respect others
5 Least Important Skills for Employment	Mathematics Social sciences Natural sciences Computer programming Foreign languages	Natural sciences Calculus Computers Art Foreign languages

Telling the *Whole* Truth

Answering the false charges made by education's critics is only part of the story. It is also essential that school leaders tell the *whole* truth about public schools. As you talk about public education, here are some other things you need to point out.

Public Schools Teach *All* Our Children

Public schools were founded on the idea that all children deserved a chance to learn. Generation after generation of students from *all* backgrounds received their start at achieving the "American dream" in the public schools.

Before the establishment of public schools, according to a recent publication by Phi Delta Kappa:

> Income and social class usually fixed a child's options. Youngsters from well-to-do families often had access to a fine, 'classical' education. In striking contrast, the children of farmers and day workers and the children in charity schools were lucky to receive even the most rudimentary education.[10]

[8] Michigan Employability Skills Task Force, cited in *Debunking Myths About Public Schools*, Association of California School Administrators, 1992.
[9] National Center on Education and the Economy, cited in *Debunking Myths About Public Schools*, Association of California School Administrators, 1992.
[10] *Do We Still Need Public Schools?* Phi Delta Kappa, 1996.

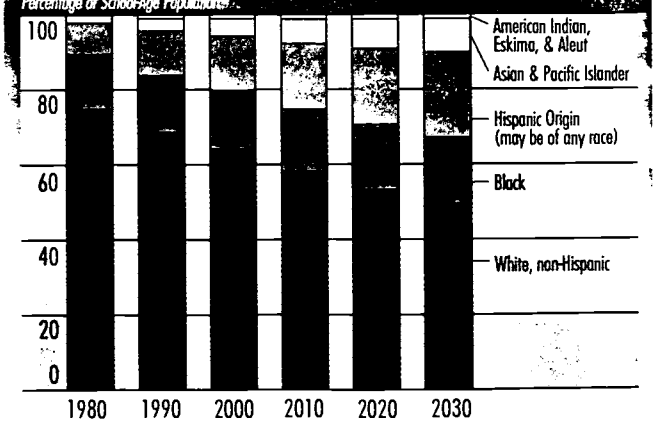
Today's public schools promote and embrace diversity. In a world that is becoming smaller—and increasingly diverse—the ability to deal with people from a variety of backgrounds is essential. Students learn those skills in public schools. In fact, 53 percent of Americans think that public schools do a better job than private schools of providing an environment that teaches kids how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds.[11]

In 1993, according to the U.S. Census Bureau[12], the population in American schools looked like this:

White	67.6%
African American	15.8%
Hispanic	11.9%
Other (e.g., Native American, Asian)	4.8%

By the year 2030, it is estimated that non-Hispanic white children will be a minority of the school-age population (see Figure 6).

Figure 6— Estimated and Projected School-Age Population by Race and Ethnicity for Selected Years: 1980 to 2030



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993), *Population Projections of the United States, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1993 to 2050. C.P.R. Series P25-1104, pp. xxv-xxvi;* U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993), *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1993, p. 22.*

[11] *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda Foundation, 1995.

[12] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *School Enrollments: Social and Economic Characteristics of Students*, October 1993.

Educating students from such diverse backgrounds has proved to be one of the major challenges for schools in the last two decades—a challenge the public schools are meeting. Minority students as a group have consistently done less well than white students on most measures of student achievement. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show the gap narrowing.

The RAND study, for example, notes that "the large gains in black scores have almost cut in half the gap in black/nonblack test scores that existed in the early 1970s."[13] Scores for Hispanic students have also showed gains since 1971. Although there is still room for improvement, the gains in student achievement of minority students is one of the success stories of American public schools in the 1990s.

Despite the public schools' mission of educating *all* children, the growing diversity in American schools is a cause of concern for some. Efforts to limit education for children of immigrants, or efforts to support public funding of private schools, should be seen as what they are—an attempt to turn back the clock to a time when education was the privilege of the few rather than the right of everyone. John Dewey said it best: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."

Yet, as AASA Executive Director Paul Houston points out, too many children are prevented by poverty from participating fully in American life. "In the richest country in the world, we spend more money on cat food than we spend on school textbooks," he observes. What will happen if education is no longer available to offer people hope that they can live out the "American dream?" Writer David Martin paints a bleak picture:

[13] RAND study, p. 13

If failing support for schools results in significant numbers of the next generation being barred from entry to the middle class, there will be hell to pay.

The bill should arrive just about the time we are settling down for a glide into our golden years. Masses of the ill-educated and jobless could be all we have to comfort us in our old age. We will have to rely on them to staff our hospitals and nursing homes, patrol our streets and shores, maintain our roads and recreation facilities and build our retirement villages and foreign trade. If events go badly, the next generation of Americans might even supply the fuel for revolutionary fury.[14]

- How has the student population in your district changed in the last 20 years? _____
- How many limited-English speakers did your school district enroll in 1975? _____
- How many do you enroll today? _____
- What steps is your district taking to ensure that *all* students achieve?

_____

_____

_____

Public Schools Represent Democracy in Action

Not only are America's public schools among the most democratic institutions in society, but they are also the institution that best promotes and preserves our democracy. That was the intent of the founders of our country. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "Above all things, I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty."

[14] David Martin, "Wake Up: America's Dream is Fading, *American School Board Journal*, February 1988, pp. 21-25.

We live in an era of massive ignorance and distrust about government and, indeed, all public institutions. In an essay titled "Bowling Alone," Robert D. Putnam suggests that when people come together in groups ranging from PTAs to bowling leagues, they develop the "social capital" that leads to social trust. He continues:

> For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved.[15]

With the loss of social capital comes a loss of trust — and Putnam notes that the proportion of Americans saying that most people can be trusted fell by more than a third between 1960, when 58 percent chose that alternative, and 1993, when only 37 percent did. With a loss of trust in people comes a loss of trust in institutions generally.

However, education provides one antidote to this bleak picture. For example, there is a strong link between civic participation and education. In the 1992 presidential election, only 27 percent of high school dropouts voted, compared with half of high school graduates and 79 percent of college graduates.[16]

Where else but in the public schools will young people develop the ability to trust people who are different? Where else will they learn to get along with people from all segments of society? In an increasingly diverse society, it is even more essential that children develop the skills they will need to become responsible citizens in a democratic society.

Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone," *Journal of Democracy*, January 1995.
U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports, Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1992*.

How One School District Put The "Public" Back Into Public Schools

- The Bay Shore School District, Bay Shore, New York, offers one example of how a school district can reengage citizens with the need for quality education and once again help them feel connected to their community's schools. The district had suffered from generally declining fortunes—eroding tax base, a deteriorating downtown, and a lack of community support for schools. In 1994, the school board hired a new superintendent. Both the board and the new superintendent agreed that community participation needed to be the top priority.
- They scheduled a Bay Shore Summit, a town meeting. More than 1,200 people showed up. Out of the summit grew a variety of community committees addressing issues identified at the Summit. For example, a community cleanup sponsored by the beautification committee that formed at the Summit attracted more than 400 people. Another committee is now addressing the issue of redeveloping the community's downtown.
- The school district's Education Summit has had a significant impact on the school system. For example, the budget was passed on the first ballot. A growing number of parents are transferring students out of private schools and returning them to the public schools.

Conclusion

The criticism of public education is unlikely to abate any time soon. But school leaders do not have to sit back passively. Here are five things school leaders can do:

1. Get the facts. Answer the questions in this booklet. Make sure you know the facts about schools in your district. Make a list of 10 reasons to be proud of your school district.
2. Make sure others hear the truth. Buy copies of this booklet to distribute when you address community and parent groups. Consider printing a special insert with the facts about your school district to accompany the booklet.
3. Make sure the local news media get stories of your students' successes. Whether your students have done well on standardized tests or achieved success in a science fair, make sure

your local newspapers and television stations know.

4. Use every opportunity to talk about improving student achievement. Ask a local business to sponsor a billboard with good news about student achievement.
5. Let students do the talking. They are even more persuasive than adults. When you are invited to speak, bring along two or three students to share their perspective.

For over a decade, the news has been full of negative stories about America's public schools. The actions you take may not change attitudes overnight. But attitudes can be changed. How? By telling the truth about America's public schools.

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