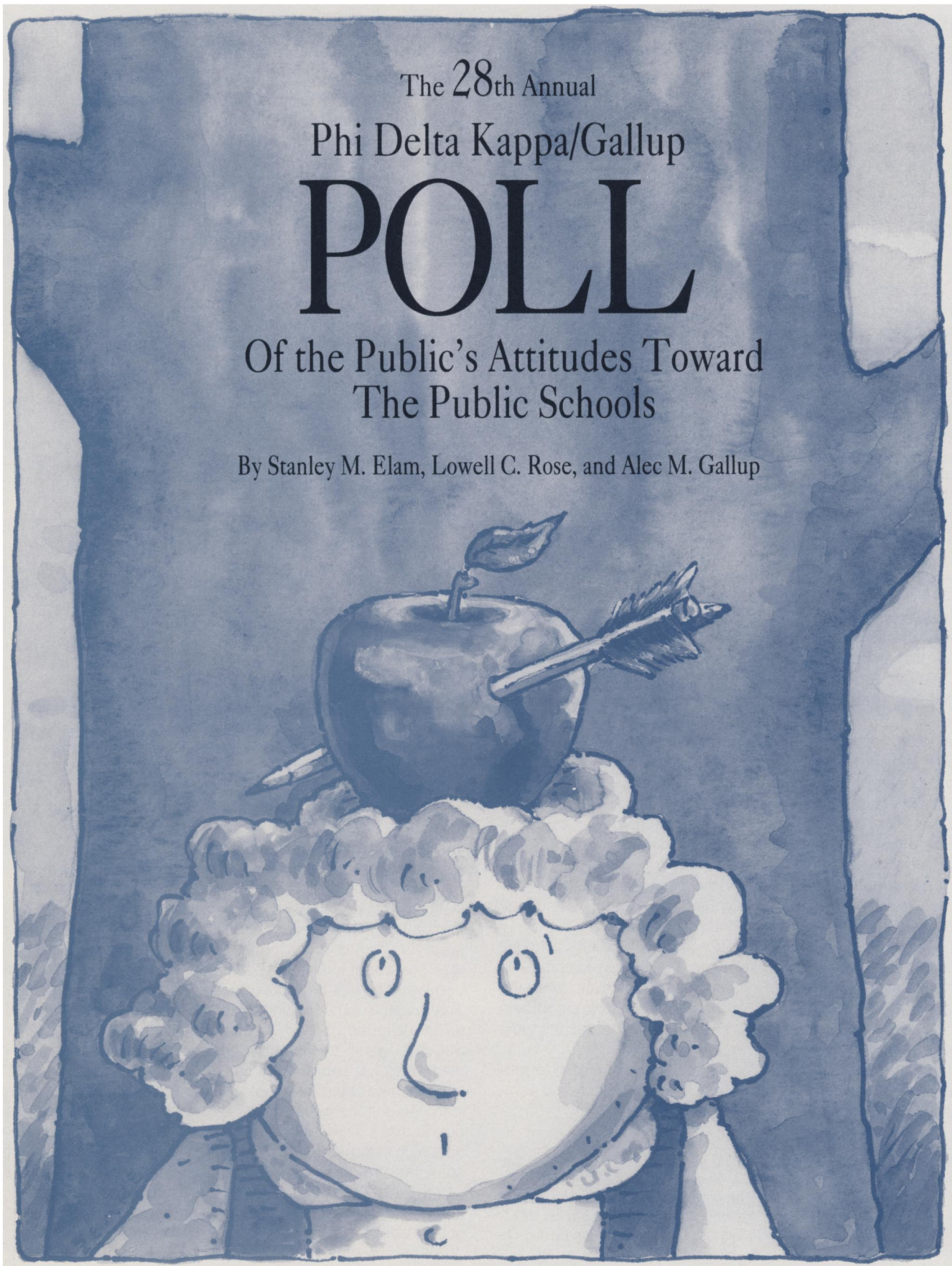

The 28th Annual
Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup
POLL

Of the Public's Attitudes Toward
The Public Schools

By Stanley M. Elam, Lowell C. Rose, and Alec M. Gallup



PRIVATE SCHOOLS and vouchers. Are these the magic bullets to transform — or annihilate — what some critics say is a monopolistic, bureaucratic, and ineffective public school system in America? The people do not think so. This is a central finding of the 1996 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. No matter how the question is asked, people oppose using tax money to support nonpublic schools. They also reject privatization of the basic instructional function of the schools, though they approve privatizing such ancillary services as transportation and maintenance. Moreover, the public flatly rejects the idea that the public schools should be replaced by a system of private and/or church-related schools.

While the public rates the local public schools as substantially less successful than their nonpublic counterparts, those closest to the situation — the parents of public school children — rate the public schools in their communities slightly higher than they rate the nonpublic ones.

Americans also believe that government and school leaders are committed to school improvement. This is especially true, they think, of public school teachers.

A summary of other major findings of the 1996 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll follows:

- Forty-three percent of people give their local public schools high marks, assigning them a grade of A or B, with almost eight in 10 giving them a C or higher. Two-thirds (66%) of parents assign a grade of A or B to the public school their oldest child attends.

- The importance the public attaches to its schools is reflected in the fact that people, by a margin of 64% to 25%, believe it is more important for the federal government to improve public education than to balance the federal budget.

- The public believes that the Democratic Party is more interested than the Republican Party in public school improvement and gives President Clinton more credit than the Republican Congress for school improvement. The public also believes that the Republican Party is more likely to take actions favorable to private schools than is the Democratic Party.

- People rate their local teachers highest in commitment to public school improvement, but they also give high marks to their school superintendents, school boards, governors, and legislators.

- If more money were available for public schools, then curriculum improvement, technology, and more teachers and staff would top the public's list of spending priorities.

- When the public is asked the purpose of the public schools, using an open-ended question, answers relating to economic self-sufficiency are most frequently given. However, when the public is asked about the purposes of the schools, aided by a list of potential purposes, "good citizenship" becomes the most frequent response.

- Eighty percent of the public believes it is important to provide the public schools with access to global electronic communications systems such as the Internet.

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- As indicated in previous polls, the public has gradually come to accept the idea of a longer school day or year, with the 1993 survey showing for the first time slight majority support for lengthening the amount of time spent in school. The current poll shows that, while the public supports the idea for high school students by a wide margin, it is evenly divided on a longer school day or year for elementary school students.

- While 64% of respondents favor retaining compulsory attendance laws, a surprising 30% would eliminate them.

- Overwhelmingly, the public approves of racial mixing in the public schools, and larger percentages than in earlier polls express the belief that integration has improved the quality of education for blacks (61% to 27%). Although less than a majority (45%) think that integration has improved the quality of education for whites, the percentage who feel this way has doubled since the first survey on the subject in 1971.

- People believe it is important that the percentage of black teachers be the same as the percentage of black students in public schools.

- Drug abuse has once again replaced discipline and inadequate financing as the major local school problem most frequently mentioned by respondents. And a majority of respondents would address the problem with such measures as random drug testing and the use of trained dogs to sniff out drugs in school.

- The public supports a variety of measures for maintaining order in school, including removing troublemakers from the classroom, requiring all students to remain on campus at lunchtime, banning smoking, and outlawing hugging and kissing on school grounds.

- A small majority of the public approves the fast-growing movement for requiring students to wear uniforms in public schools.

- People strongly endorse the idea of community service as a requirement for high school graduation.

- If forced to choose, a majority of respondents would prefer that children make average grades and be active in extracurricular activities rather than make straight A's and not be active.

- People would encourage "the brightest person they know" to become a teacher if that person revealed an interest in teaching.

- Respondents reject teaching about the gay and lesbian lifestyle in the public schools. If the subject is to be taught, a majority believe that it should be taught as "one alternative lifestyle" with no moral judgment made. A majority also believe that gay and lesbian students should not be allowed to organize a club as part of a school's extracurricular program.

- A number of this year's poll questions were designed to determine how well the public is informed on education issues. The results suggest that the public has been negatively affected by distorted, biased, or inadequate media coverage. The public believes, for example, that American student achievement does not compare favorably with that of students in other developed countries, even though recent studies show American students near the top in reading and no worse than average in math. The public also believes that the dropout rate is now higher than 25 years ago, even though government data show that the dropout rate has fallen steadily for the past 50 years. Finally, the public seriously overestimates the number of students enrolled in special education and underestimates the cost of educating such students.

Details on these and other findings follow.

Public Versus Nonpublic Schools

A series of eight questions, only two of which had been asked in earlier Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls, examined issues related to public and private schools. These two types of schools have existed side by side, often with ill-concealed hostility, for many generations. But more than ever before, certain policy makers and some critics of public education are advocating forms of competition by nonpublic schools that would, in many cases, involve the use of government funds to support private schools (including sectarian schools).

The data provide cause for both rejoicing and concern on the part of public school advocates. A solid majority of 69% opposed the idea of replacing the public school system with private and church-related schools, while only 25% supported it. Indeed, the public continues to reject — by a 61% to 36% margin — allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense. Attitudes on this issue may be shifting, however; the same question brought 65% disapproval in 1995 and 74% disapproval in 1993. When the question is framed somewhat differently, i.e., to test attitudes toward allowing parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose, with the government paying all or part of the tuition, the opposition falls to 54%, and the support climbs to 43%.

The poll also sought to find out why about a quarter of respondents said that they would replace the present system of public schools with a private system. Nearly one-half stressed the quality of private schools, with 31% stating that nonpublic schools provide a “better education” and 14% saying that “private is better/better quality.” Others stated that nonpublic schools have more discipline, more control over students, and offer more attention to student needs. Some respondents simply believe that the public schools do not work.

Of the 69% who opposed “replacing the existing system of public schools,” 24% said they believe in public education and that the answer is to fix it or that the public system is okay and needs only a few improvements; 11% simply said that the public schools offer a better educational program and better teachers; 10% said that school costs less when funded by the government; 8% see the public schools as an instrument of democracy and believe that they promote equality; 8% believe there is too much segregation in private schools; 8% believe public money shouldn’t be used for the private schools; and 8% expressed the view that the public should be able to choose between public and private schools.

The most extensive and widely publicized school voucher program in the nation was inaugurated in Milwaukee in 1992. Vouchers worth \$3,209 were offered to low-income families who wished to enroll their children in a nonsectarian private school. The program was expanded last summer to include about 80 church-related schools. This expansion was immediately challenged on constitutional grounds as a violation of church/state separation.

To date, educational researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, have found no evidence that the Milwaukee program has improved academic achievement for students who use the vouchers, but parental satisfaction with the choice feature is high.*

*See Mark Walsh, “Religious School Vouchers Get Day in Court,” *Education Week*, 6 March 1996, pp. 1, 14-15.

To test public attitudes toward a Milwaukee-type voucher program, public school parents were asked in the current poll how they would use a \$3,500 voucher. A majority (54%) would keep their children in the school they currently attend, 19% would choose a church-related school, 18% would enroll them in a private school, and 6% would enroll them in another public school.

Choosing Private Schools at Public Expense

On three occasions, beginning in 1993, these polls have asked people whether they favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense. Although the percentage of the public favoring the idea has increased in the two most recent surveys, a solid 61% to 36% majority still opposes the idea.

The question:

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?

	National Totals			No Children In School			Public School Parents			Nonpublic School Parents		
	'96	'95	'93	'96	'95	'93	'96	'95	'93	'96	'95	'93
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Favor	36	33	24	33	30	21	39	38	27	60	44	45
Oppose	61	65	74	63	68	76	59	59	72	38	51	55
Don't know	3	2	2	4	2	3	2	3	1	2	5	*

*Less than one-half of 1%.

In the past, this poll has never shown a majority of any demographic group to be in favor of private school choice at public expense. This year’s poll shows a sizable majority (60%) of parents of children in nonpublic schools favoring the idea. For the first time, Catholics are evenly divided in their views — 49% in favor to 50% opposed.

The table above also indicates that opposition to the idea has eroded somewhat even among public school parents and those with no children in school.



Support for Vouchers

Although the American public opposes vouchers by 54% to 43% in the current poll, two groups favor the idea: nonpublic school parents (by 70% to 28%) and Catholics (by 55% to 43%).

Several groups are evenly divided on the subject of vouchers, including public school parents, Republicans, and people living in the West. Most opposed to vouchers are people over 50 years of age, 62% to 36%; college graduates, 60% to 39%;

Democrats, 61% to 37%; and rural residents, 62% to 35%.
The question:

A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this in your state?

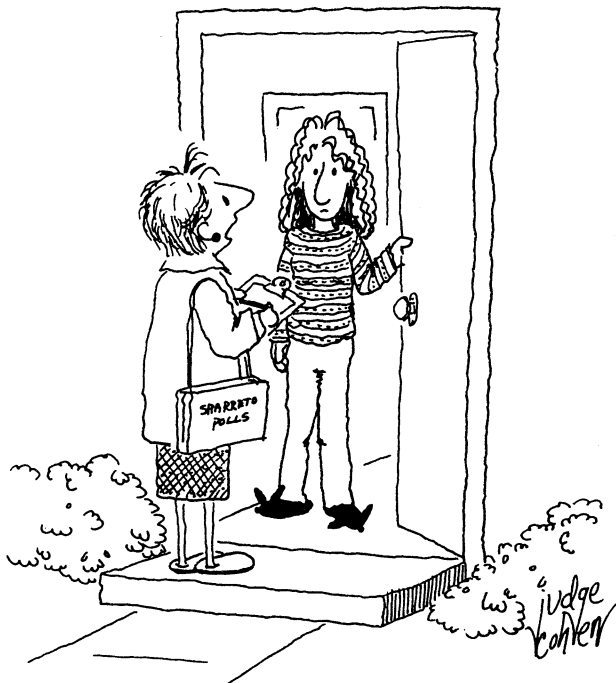
	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	'96 %	'94 %	'96 %	'94 %	'96 %	'94 %	'96 %	'94 %
Favor	43	45	38	42	49	48	70	69
Oppose	54	54	59	57	49	51	28	29
Don't know	3	1	3	1	2	1	2	2

Replacing the Public School System

By almost a 3-1 margin (69% to 25%) Americans oppose replacing the existing public school system with a system of private schools funded by vouchers. Similarly wide margins are registered in every demographic group — even among *non-public* school parents, who reject the idea by a margin of 57% to 37%.

The first question:

Some people suggest that the public schools be replaced by a system of private and church-related schools with parents selecting from among these



“And would you say you feel more empowered, less empowered or about the same?”

nonpublic schools, using vouchers paid for by the government. Do you favor or oppose replacing the existing system of public schools with a system of nonpublic schools?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	25	23	29	37
Oppose	69	71	66	57
Don't know	6	6	5	6

The second question (asked of those favoring a system of nonpublic schools):

Why do you favor a system of nonpublic schools?

The responses included: better education, 31%; private is better/better quality, 14%; more discipline, 9%; parents are allowed more choice/choice of schools, 9%; public school system doesn't work, 8%; less busing/government involvement, 7%; more control/more control of students, 7%; students get more attention, 7%; and religion is taught, 5%.

The third question (asked of those opposing a system of nonpublic schools):

Why do you oppose a system of nonpublic schools?

The responses included: believe in public education/fix what is in place, 16%; better education programs/better educators in public system, 11%; public system costs less/funded by government, 10%; everyone should get the same education/equality, 8%; too much segregation in private schools, less in public system, 8%; government/public money shouldn't be used for private system, 8%; public system okay/needs only a few improvements, 8%; and people should be able to choose public or private schools, 8%.

Parents' Choices If Cost No Factor

A majority of public school parents (55%) would keep their oldest child in his or her present (public) school even if cost were not a factor.

The first question (asked of public school parents):

If you could send your oldest child to any school and cost was not a factor, would you send the child to the school he/she now attends or to a different school?

	Public School Parents %
Present (public) school	55
Different school	44
Don't know	1

Nonwhite parents would be more likely than parents in other demographic groups to send their children to a different school. The percentages: present school, 45%; different school, 55%.

The second question (asked of the 44% of all public school

parents who answered "different school"):

Would you send your child to a private school, a church-related school, or to another public school?

	Different School %
Another public school	8
Private school	19
Church-related school	17

Public school parents reveal an overall preference for public over nonpublic schools. While 19% would opt for a private school, and 17% would choose a church-related school, 8% would select another *public* school for their child. Thus, regardless of cost, public school parents would choose a public over a nonpublic school by a margin of 63% (55% present school plus 8% another public school) to 36% (19% private plus 17% church-related).

Support for \$3,500 Voucher

When asked what school choice they would make if given a \$3,500 voucher, virtually the same percentage of public school parents (54%) as in the first question in this series (55%) say they would keep their child in the public school he or she now attends. Similarly, 18% say they would select a private school, 19% a church-related school, and 6% another *public* school. Thus 60% of public school parents (54% present school plus 6% other public school) would choose a public school, while 37% would choose a nonpublic school (18% private and 19% church-related).

The question (asked of parents with children in school):

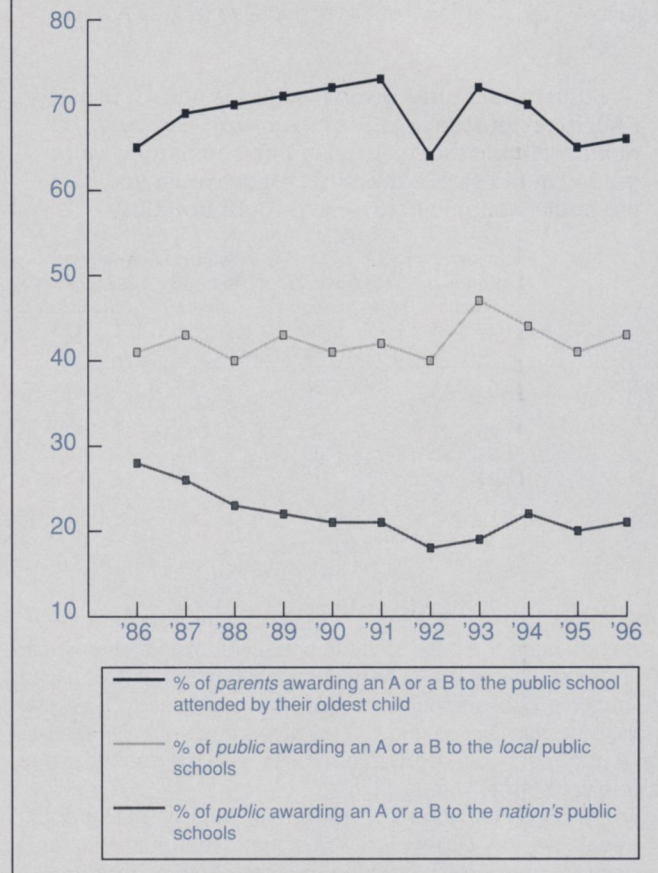
One city in this country is now offering vouchers worth \$3,500, which parents can use to enroll their children in any school — public, private, or church-related. Suppose you were given a voucher worth \$3,500 which you could use to enroll your oldest child in any school in your community. Would you use the voucher to enroll the child in another public school, in a private school, in a church-related school, or would you keep the child in the same school?

	Public School Parents %
Same (public) school	54
Another public school	6
Private school	18
Church-related school	19
Don't know	3

Grading the Schools

Since 1974 respondents to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup education polls have been asked to rate the public schools in their communities on a scale of A to F. After 1981, people were asked to rate the "nation's public schools" on the same scale. Then, beginning in 1986, parents were asked to grade the public school their oldest child was attending. Figure 1 displays fluctuations since 1986 in the percentage of respondents who answered A or B to these three trend questions.

Fig. 1. Public School Ratings: Percent Awarding Schools A or B Grades



Perhaps the most significant finding from this series of questions is the fact that the closer the respondent is to the schools, the higher the rating. Thus since 1986 the average difference between ratings of the nation's schools (which most respondents can know only from secondary sources) and ratings of local schools (where firsthand information is available) is about 20%, and the difference has tended to widen over the decade, a period in which criticism of the schools in the media has escalated. Over the last eight years this difference has averaged a surprising 23%. Even more startling is the difference between the percentage of A's and B's that parents give to the public school their oldest child attends and the percentage of A's and B's that the general public gives to the nation's schools. Here the average difference is an astounding 47 percentage points.

One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from these figures is that firsthand knowledge of the public schools breeds respect for the public schools.

Local Public Schools

As has been the case for two decades, about four Americans in 10 — 43% this year — award a grade of A or B to the public schools in their own communities. And almost eight in 10 — 77% this year — award them at least a grade of C. An even higher percentage of public school parents (57%) assign an A or a B to their community schools. This is a positive sign, since that figure is up from 49% in 1995.

Public school parents (57%) and people living in the East

(50%) are most likely to give local public schools a grade of A or B. Blacks (36%), those under 30 years of age (34%), those living in the West (32%), and urban dwellers (31%) are least likely to assign their local public schools a grade of A or B.

The question:

Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	'96	'95	'96	'95	'96	'95	'96	'95
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
A & B	43	41	38	38	57	49	24	23
A	8	8	6	6	15	12	2	6
B	35	33	32	32	42	37	22	17
C	34	37	36	38	29	34	43	40
D	11	12	12	11	9	12	13	23
FAIL	6	5	6	5	4	4	13	10
Don't know	6	5	8	8	1	1	7	4

Public Schools Nationally

As has been the case since this question was first asked in 1981, about half as many Americans give either an A or a B to the nation's public schools as give those grades to the local public schools. This year only 21% of respondents give the nation's public schools a grade of A or B, and only about two in three give them at least a C.

There is little variation among various demographic groups. However, blacks, who typically rate their local public schools lower than other groups, are the most likely to award the nation's public schools the two highest grades. About a third of blacks (32%) grade the nation's schools A or B.

The question:

How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	'96	'95	'96	'95	'96	'95	'96	'95
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
A & B	21	20	20	21	26	18	8	8
A	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	*
B	20	18	19	19	24	16	7	8
C	46	50	47	51	43	47	57	63
D	18	17	19	17	14	18	21	18
FAIL	5	4	5	4	7	4	3	4
Don't know	10	9	9	7	10	13	11	7

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Public School Oldest Child Attends

This year fully two-thirds (66%) of Americans give the public school attended by their oldest child a grade of A or B, with almost nine in 10 giving these schools at least a C. This wide margin occurs in virtually every demographic group.

The question (asked of parents with children in the public schools):

Using the A, B, C, D, FAIL scale again, what grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?

	Public School Parents	
	'96	'95
	%	%
A & B	66	65
A	23	27
B	43	38
C	22	23
D	6	8
FAIL	5	3
Don't know	1	1



Grading Aspects of the Public Schools

Just what features of a public school does a respondent have in mind when he or she assigns a grade? To find out, respondents were asked to rate 11 school characteristics on the familiar A-F scale.

Ratings are generally positive among all demographic groups, with parents of public school children making the most positive assessments. Almost seven in 10 public school parents (68%) give the curriculum offered an A or a B, and about six in 10 give the following factors an A or a B: the quality of teaching (61%), handling of extracurricular activities (61%), the books and instructional materials (60%), the physical plant and facilities (59%), and the education received by students (58%). About half of public school parents give the local public schools an A or a B for preparing students for college (51%) and for the way the schools are administered or run (49%).

However, only about one in three public school parents gives the way discipline is handled and the behavior of students in schools a grade of A or B. Parents give even lower grades to the preparation given to students not planning to go to college: only 28% give the public schools an A or a B for performance in this area — an area for which the public schools have consistently received poor grades in these polls.

Significantly, the grades given by public school parents for these same indicators of quality are substantially higher today than was the case in 1983. With the single exception of the "physical plant and facilities," a factor that scores lower today than in 1983, all characteristics are graded higher by public school parents in 1996 than a decade ago.

The question:

Using the A, B, C, D, FAIL scale again, please grade the public schools of your community on each of the following.

	A & B %	A %	B %	C %	D %	FAIL %	Don't Know %
Handling of extracurricular activities (sports, theater, etc.)	59	17	42	26	7	4	4
Curriculum (i.e., subjects offered)	57	16	41	29	7	2	5
Physical plant and facilities	56	18	38	29	8	3	4
Quality of teaching	53	13	40	32	9	3	3
Preparation for college for those who plan to attend	49	12	37	31	11	4	5
Education students receive	48	10	38	35	11	4	2
Books and instructional materials	48	10	38	29	9	4	10
Ways schools are administered or run	40	8	32	34	15	8	3
Way discipline is handled	25	7	18	29	23	18	5
Preparation for jobs for those who do not plan to attend college	25	4	21	38	19	11	7
Behavior of students in school	22	3	19	35	23	17	3

	Public School Parents A & B	
	1996 %	1983 %
Curriculum (i.e., subjects offered)	68	61
Quality of teaching	61	48
Handling of extracurricular activities (sports, theater, etc.)	61	53
Books and instructional materials	60	52
Physical plant and facilities	59	65
Education students receive	58	46
Preparation for college for those who plan to attend	51	38
Ways schools are administered or run	49	39
Way discipline is handled	36	32
Behavior of students in school	31	24
Preparation for jobs for those who do not plan to attend college	28	26

Nonpublic Schools

Nonpublic schools, both religiously affiliated and nonsectarian, serve approximately 6.1 million of the 54.1 million elementary and secondary school students in the U.S.* Because Phi Delta Kappa has traditionally focused on public schools, these polls have not until now examined attitudes toward the nation's nonpublic schools. The emphasis on school choice and vouchers in the current poll suggested the value of obtaining ratings of private schools, using the same grading scale applied to public schools.

Americans rate the nonpublic schools in their community substantially higher than the public schools. Sixty-three percent give the local nonpublic schools a grade of A or B, compared to 43% for the local public schools. Not surprisingly, Catholics are the demographic group most likely to give local nonpublic schools top grades (74%). The lowest ratings come from public school parents. Fifty-three percent give the nonpublic schools in their communities an A or a B — slightly lower, in fact, than the comparable figure for the local public schools (57%).

As they do with the public schools, the people grade the nonpublic schools nationally somewhat lower than they grade the

*Estimates from *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993).

local nonpublic schools. The difference is much less pronounced, however, in the case of nonpublic schools: 63% give the local nonpublic schools a grade of A or B, compared to 57% for the nation's nonpublic schools. A large difference emerges, however, when the grades given to the nation's nonpublic schools are compared with those given the nation's public schools. While 57% of Americans award the nonpublic schools nationally either an A or a B, only 21% give the nation's public schools such high grades.

The first question:

What grade would you give the nonpublic schools in your community — that is, the private and church-related schools — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	63	67	53	87
A	19	20	17	34
B	44	47	36	53
C	14	14	13	10
D	2	2	3	*
FAIL	1	1	2	2
Don't know	20	16	29	1

*Less than one-half of 1%.

The second question:

How about the nonpublic schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give them — A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
A & B	57	59	48	77
A	12	11	10	21
B	45	48	38	56
C	19	19	22	5
D	2	2	2	2
FAIL	1	1	1	*
Don't know	21	19	27	16

*Less than one-half of 1%.



Race and the Public Schools

This year's poll included a number of questions designed to update the information previous polls have gathered concerning the impact of race on the public schools. Difficulties in desegregating the public schools were prominent in the minds of

respondents in the first 13 years of these polls, but by 1982 desegregation and busing for desegregation had dropped out of the top group of problems.

As this poll was being prepared, many districts and some states were on the verge of abandoning desegregation efforts. A number of large school districts across the country had been released — or were seeking release — from federal court orders to achieve desegregation. There was also some evidence that blacks have grown disenchanted with the efforts to achieve desegregation.

The current poll sought to determine where the public stands on the advantages of integration, on the need for and effect of mixing the races in school, and on the importance of having teachers from all races represented in the teaching force.

Effects of Racial Integration on School Quality

The current disenchantment with efforts to seek integration, if it exists, is not reflected in the poll findings. Today, 61% of Americans believe that integration has improved school quality for blacks, and only 27% disagree. Opinion is evenly split on whether there are benefits for whites: 45% say yes; 44% say no.

Significantly, however, the percentages who say integration has improved the quality of education for blacks and for whites have been increasing steadily since these questions were first asked in 1971. For blacks the number has increased from 43% in 1971 to 55% in 1988 to 61% today. For whites the number has risen from 23% in 1971 to 35% in 1988 to 45% today. The percentages of public school parents holding these views have increased correspondingly.

Those under age 30 are most likely to believe that integration has improved the quality of education for blacks, while those over age 65 are least likely to think so. Groups most likely to say that integration has improved the quality of education for whites are those under age 30 and blacks. Those over age 65 and residents of the South are least likely to believe that integration has improved education for whites.

The question:

How do you feel about school integration? Do you feel it has improved the quality of education received by black students? Do you feel it has improved the quality of education received by white students?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Improved Education For Blacks?				
Yes	61	61	61	64
No	27	27	26	26
Don't know	12	12	13	10
Improved Education For Whites?				
Yes	45	45	47	44
No	44	44	42	47
Don't know	11	11	11	9

Desirability of Racial and Ethnic Integration

While almost half of the population (44%) doubts that integration has improved the quality of education for white students,

the vast majority are convinced that having America's racial/ethnic mix represented in public school student bodies is a desirable goal. For the nation as a whole, 83% believe that a racial/ethnic mix is desirable, while 13% believe it is not. This proportion applies to nearly every population group, including public school parents. Only residents of the South diverge from this view — and then by only a small margin: 77% say that racial mixing is desirable, compared to 87% in the other three regions.

The question:

In your opinion, is it a desirable goal to have persons from the different races and ethnic groups that make up the U.S. population represented in the student bodies of the public schools or not?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Yes, desirable	83	83	84	85
No, not desirable	13	13	12	14
Don't know	4	4	4	1

Effects on Achievement

A slight majority of the public (55%) thinks that including people of different races, ethnic groups, and cultures in the student body will not affect student achievement. Nonetheless, 34% do believe that student achievement will improve. Only 7% think it will decline. Those between 18 and 29 years of age and those living in the East are most likely to think that the mixing of races and ethnic groups will improve student achievement; those living in the South are least likely to think that student achievement will be enhanced thereby.

The question:

How do you feel about the effect of this on student achievement? Do you believe that the inclusion of more people from different races, ethnic groups, and cultures in the student body of a public school will produce an increase in student achievement, a decrease, or will achievement remain about the same?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %
Increase achievement	34	36	33
Decrease achievement	7	7	7
Achievement will remain about the same	55	53	57
Don't know	4	4	3

Makeup of the Teaching Force

By the turn of the century, up to 40% of the children in the nation's classrooms will be nonwhite. Today, only one in four public school students in the 47 largest cities in the U.S. is white. Yet the nation's teaching force is overwhelmingly white and becoming more so. African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans now make up only about 10% of the teaching force.

Respondents were asked whether they consider it important for the percentage of black teachers in a public school to be

roughly the same as the percentage of black students in that school. A majority of whites (55%) and a much larger majority of blacks (76%) believe that this kind of balance is either very or somewhat important. Indeed, 45% of blacks, compared to only 19% of whites, say that this is very important.

The question:

In your opinion, how important is it that the percentage of black teachers in a public school is roughly the same as the percentage of black students in that school? Do you think it is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important?

	IMPORTANT			NOT	Don't Know
	Total	Very	Somewhat	IMPORTANT	
	%	%	%	Total	%
National Totals	58	22	36	39	3
Whites	55	19	36	42	3
Nonwhites	77	43	34	22	1
Blacks	76	45	31	23	1



Biggest Problems Facing Local Schools

This year "drug abuse" edged "lack of discipline" — 16% to 15% — as the most frequently mentioned "biggest problem" facing local public schools. This finding may be somewhat misleading, however, since a number of the problem categories relate to student control and behavior. If "lack of discipline" and "fighting, violence, and gangs" — the second- and third-place responses — are grouped into a general "control" category, it would reach 29%.

Over the past 10 years, drug abuse ranked first among local school problems seven times and once tied with lack of proper financial support. From 1969 to 1985, every poll but one ranked lack of discipline as the top problem. It is interesting that problems related to such critical matters as curriculum, quality of the teaching staff, and the academic performance of students never make it to the top of the list.

The question:

What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?

	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	'96	'95	'96	'95	'96	'95	'96	'95
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Drug abuse	16	7	17	7	14	7	12	8
Lack of discipline	15	15	16	17	12	11	18	18
Fighting/violence/gangs	14	9	14	9	15	8	17	17
Lack of proper financial support	13	11	14	10	13	12	7	3
Overcrowded schools	8	3	6	3	11	5	15	3
Pupils' lack of interest/truancy/poor attitudes	5	2	5	2	6	1	4	2
Lack of family structure/problems of home life	4	3	5	3	1	1	1	5
Crime/vandalism	3	2	3	2	1	2	3	2
Poor curriculum/low curriculum standards	3	2	3	2	3	1	5	1
Difficulty getting good teachers	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	*
Integration/segregation, racial discrimination	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	*
Lack of respect for self/others	2	3	2	3	1	4	2	6
No problems	3	3	2	2	7	6	3	2
Miscellaneous	9	4	8	5	10	3	11	3
Don't know	13	11	15	12	9	10	10	6

*Less than one-half of 1%.

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)

Ways to Maintain Order and Security

One of the principal goals of education is to produce individuals capable of clear moral judgment and self-control. But in the real school world, establishing a climate for the development of self-control as well as for academic achievement often requires the exercise of external authority and control. This year's poll asked a series of questions dealing with techniques for improving classroom order and school security.

Overwhelmingly, Americans believe in removing persistent troublemakers from the classroom so that order can be maintained. They would also ban smoking by students anywhere on school grounds, require that students remain on the school grounds during lunchtime, and even rule out kissing and hugging anywhere on school grounds.

To improve security and address the drug problem, the public would approve security guards in school, the use of trained dogs to sniff out drugs, and random drug testing.

The strength of approval given to these measures can be taken as another indication of the importance the public attaches to discipline and order in the public schools. With relatively minor differences, these percentages hold for all major demographic groups. Fewer nonwhites than whites (84% to 94%) approve of removing persistent troublemakers from the classroom, but the percentage is still very high. Blacks are less ready than whites to ban smoking and hugging and kissing on school grounds, but they are strong in their support for the use of security guards and random drug testing.

Nonwhites, blacks, and those between the ages of 18 and 29 are marginally less favorable toward the four measures for maintaining order than are other groups, except in the case of kissing and hugging. In this instance, the youngest adults oppose the measure by 60% to 39%. Blacks and nonwhites, although they are as likely as whites to favor all three *security* measures, are somewhat more likely to favor random drug testing.

The first question:

As I read off each of the following approaches for maintaining order in the public schools, would you tell me whether you favor or oppose its use in the local public schools? How about a) removing troublemakers from class? b) requiring students to remain on school grounds during lunchtime? c) banning smoking by students anywhere on school grounds? d) banning kissing and hugging on school grounds?

	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	% Fav.	% Opp.*	% Fav.	% Opp.	% Fav.	% Opp.	% Fav.	% Opp.
To Maintain Order:								
Remove troublemakers	92	7	91	7	94	6	91	6
Students remain on grounds at lunch	79	20	76	23	84	15	85	14
Ban smoking on school grounds	88	11	89	10	87	13	92	8
Ban hugging and kissing on school grounds	56	41	54	43	59	38	62	35

*The "don't know" responses have been omitted from this table.

The second question:

Do you favor or oppose the use of the following in the public schools in your community as possible ways to maintain security? How about a) security guards? b) trained dogs for sniffing out drugs? c) random drug tests to identify drug users?

	National Totals		No Children In School		Public School Parents		Nonpublic School Parents	
	% Fav.	% Opp.*	% Fav.	% Opp.	% Fav.	% Opp.	% Fav.	% Opp.
To Maintain Security:								
Employ security guards	81	18	80	19	82	17	84	15
Use dogs to sniff out drugs	75	24	72	27	82	17	78	22
Random tests for drugs	63	35	63	35	65	34	68	31

*The "don't know" responses have been omitted from this table.

School Uniforms

Will public school uniforms reduce school violence and other disciplinary problems? Will they improve the climate for learn-

ing by eliminating "label competition" and peer pressure with regard to clothing? Will they eliminate gang clothes and enable security guards to spot trespassers? A number of public schools and school systems are seeking to answer these questions.

Among the public school systems to document success with a mandatory uniform policy is the 83,000-student Long Beach District in California. A school district study there reports that assault and battery cases in grades K-8 dropped 34% in two years, physical fights dropped 51%, and suspensions dropped 32%.

The findings of this year's poll suggest that, in the court of public opinion, the jury remains out on the question of required uniforms in the public schools. Respondents endorsed mandatory uniforms by the relatively small margin of 53% to 44%. Highest support came from blacks (66% in favor, 31% opposed). College graduates were much more likely to approve (64% in favor, 34% opposed) than those with less education. Roman Catholics, a group with experience in requiring uniforms, were much more likely to approve than other religious groups (66% to 33%).

The question:

A few public schools are now requiring students to wear uniforms to school. Would you approve or disapprove of the public schools in your community requiring all students to wear uniforms?

	National Totals	No Children In School	Public School Parents	Nonpublic School Parents
	%	%	%	%
Approve	53	53	50	73
Disapprove	44	45	46	21
Don't know	3	2	4	6



The Politics of School Improvement

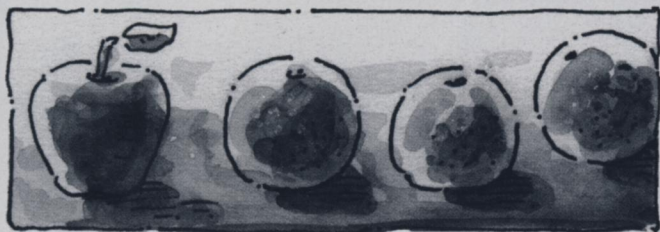
With a national election pending, it seemed appropriate for this year's poll to survey the public's view of its political leaders as proponents or supporters of school improvement. A series of questions was asked regarding the two major political parties and their actions at the federal level.

Americans — by a 44% to 27% majority — perceive the Democratic Party as more interested in improving public education than the Republican Party. This perception is shared across all demographic groups, with one unsurprising exception: Republicans view their own party as more supportive of public school improvement. Nonwhites are the demographic group with the most favorable attitudes toward Democrats on this question.

The first question:

In your opinion, which of the two major political parties is more interested in improving public education in this country — the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Democratic Party	44	45	41	32
Republican Party	27	26	29	36
No difference (volunteered)	15	15	14	23
Don't know	14	14	16	9



By a better than 2-1 margin the public views President Clinton as having done more than the Republican Congress to improve public education. Virtually all population groups, including public school parents, give Clinton the same margin over Congress.

The second question:

In your opinion, who has done more to improve public education in this country since taking office, President Clinton or the Republican Congress?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
President Clinton	49	50	50	27
Republican Congress	23	22	21	38
Don't know	28	28	29	35

To determine which party is perceived to be more likely to propose actions at the federal level that would benefit nonpublic schools, two questions were asked. The public is much more inclined to think that the Republicans would take action on behalf of nonpublic schools, assuming they win this fall, than would the Democrats, assuming they win. Specifically, almost six in 10 (59%) think it likely that the Republicans would take such action, including 27% who say "very likely." In contrast, fewer than four in 10 (37%) believe it likely that the Democrats would take action on behalf of nonpublic schools if they win the upcoming election, with only 11% saying "very likely."

The third and fourth questions:

Suppose the Republican Party takes over the Presidency, as well as the Congress, after the election this fall. How likely do you think the Republicans are to propose actions that favor private schools over public schools — very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

Suppose the Democrats win the Presidency again, and also take over Congress, in the election this fall. How likely do you think the Democrats are to propose actions that favor private schools over public schools — very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

	Republicans %	Democrats %
Favor Nonpublic Schools		
Likely to:		
Very	27	11
Somewhat	32	26
Not likely to:		
Not very	23	39
Not at all	8	15
Don't know	10	9

Some of the differences in the way the public views our political leaders at the federal level may be related to the priority the public attaches to education as a governmental responsibility. The Republican emphasis in recent months has been on the need for a balanced budget; however, in response to a poll question regarding the priority given to school improvement and the priority given to a balanced budget, the public expresses a strong preference (64% to 25%) for school improvement.

Significantly, Independents gave improving education a wide margin (65% to 23%) over budget balancing. There were some notable demographic differences in response to this question. For example, Democrats placed education ahead of budget balancing by a 75% to 15% margin, while Republicans gave education priority by a much smaller margin (50% to 40%). Those between 18 and 29 years of age, blacks and other nonwhites, college graduates, low-income respondents, and public school parents were all considerably above the average in giving education a higher priority than a balanced budget.



"I don't have all the answers, but you're in luck — my teenaged grandson is home!"

The fifth question:

In your opinion, which is more important for the federal government to do in the next five years — balance the federal budget or improve the quality of the education system of the nation?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Balance budget	25	27	18	32
Improve education	64	62	71	52
Equally important (volunteered)	9	8	10	15
Don't know	2	3	1	1

State and Local Officials

Finally, poll planners acknowledge that the federal role in education is limited and that most of the important decisions regarding schools are made in state capitols, at school board meetings, in superintendents' offices, and by teachers. It seemed important, therefore, to find out how committed the public feels leaders at these levels are to local public school improvement.

It may come as some surprise to educators that a majority of the public sees the governor, state legislators, the school board, the superintendent, and teachers as either "very committed" or "quite committed" to the improvement of public education in their local schools. However, it is not surprising to past readers of these polls that the public sees local teachers as the most committed to this goal. Legislators fare least well on the question, but even here 55% of respondents see their legislators as either "very committed" or "quite committed" to school improvement.

The question:

As I mention each of the following people, would you tell me how strongly committed you think each is to improving education in the public schools in your community? In your opinion, is each of the following very committed, quite committed, not very committed, or not at all committed to improving education in the local schools?

	Total %	COMMITTED		NOT COMMITTED Total %	Don't Know %
		Very %	Quite %		
Teachers	80	45	35	16	4
School board	73	35	38	21	6
Superintendent	70	37	33	20	10
Governor	65	30	35	29	6
State legislators	55	17	38	35	10

How to Improve the Public Schools

A number of questions in this year's poll probed opinion on ways of improving the public schools.

Ways Additional Education Funds Should Be Used

An open-ended question offered respondents an opportunity to suggest how additional money to improve education should

be used. No clear formula emerged from this question; suggestions fell into 20 different categories. Educators will welcome the fact that the larger categories include hiring more teachers and raising teacher salaries. Strong support was also evident for improving the tools available to teachers: buying more teaching materials, adding computers, upgrading equipment, and buying more school supplies. Only responses mentioned by at least 5% of respondents are listed.

The question:

Assume that, in your community, additional money became available to spend on your public schools. To bring about the greatest improvement in the schools, how would you spend the money?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Improve the curriculum/education/new books	23	21	28	30
Buy technology/computers/upgrade equipment	15	14	20	8
Hire more teachers/staff	14	12	16	16
Improve/add to facilities	12	11	15	11
Raise teacher salaries	11	12	9	8
Hire better teachers/improve quality of teachers/staff	9	11	6	8
Buy more school supplies/teaching materials	8	7	10	2
Reduce class size	5	4	7	3

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple answers.)

Lengthening Time Spent in School

Lengthening the time students spend in school is an issue on which the public's views have changed over the years. Only 37% favored extending the school year in the 1982 question that specified increasing the year from 180 to 210 days. By 1991, 55% favored this idea. The 1993 poll produced a small majority (52%) for simply extending the school day or school year, with no specific amount of time mentioned. In the current poll an attempt was made to determine whether the public felt differently about lengthening the school year or day for elementary school children as compared to students in high school. Findings reveal that the public supports lengthening the school year or day (60% in favor, 37% opposed) at the high school level but is evenly divided on this measure (49% in favor, 48% opposed) for elementary schools.

Nonwhites, blacks, and college graduates are more likely than other demographic groups to favor extending the school year or day at either level.

The questions:

Some public schools in the nation have increased the amount of time students spend in school by extending the school year or the school day. Do you favor or oppose increasing the amount of time children spend in the local elementary schools?

How about the high schools in your community? Do you favor or oppose increasing the amount of time students spend in the local high schools?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
More Time in School				
Elementary Level				
Favor	49	52	45	44
Oppose	48	44	54	56
Don't know	3	4	1	*
High School Level				
Favor	60	63	56	59
Oppose	37	34	43	41
Don't know	3	3	1	*

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Access to Global Electronics

There are those who feel that greater use of technology is the answer to many of the problems facing the public schools. The public expresses strong support for providing schools with access to global electronic communications systems. Eighty percent of respondents in the current poll believe this access is either very important (49%) or somewhat important (31%). With minor differences, this conviction holds across the demographic spectrum.

The public is in good company on this question. A recent Public Agenda study found that teachers place computer skills alongside the three R's, hard work, citizenship, and history and geography as essentials in the public school curriculum. President Clinton has proposed spending \$2 billion over the next five years on matching grants to help states pay for school technology. He would have "every classroom in the U.S. connected to the Internet by the year 2000."

The question:

The federal government and some states have attempted to provide all students with access to global electronic communication systems such as the Internet in their schools. How important do you think this would be for the public school students in your community — very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Very important	49	47	55	46
Somewhat important	31	31	31	29
Not too important	13	15	8	20
Not at all important	6	5	6	5
Don't know	1	2	*	*

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Required Community Service

Passage of the National Community Service Act of 1990 recognized the potential of "service learning" as a means of helping students develop a commitment to the ideal of service to others. These polls revealed public support for the value of community service as early as 1979, when 87% of respondents approved the idea of optional community service for high school students. In 1989 the wording was changed to "required" rather

than "optional," and community service still found strong support among all groups.

The current poll shows even stronger support for required service than did the 1989 poll. Women favor community service (76%) more than men (56%). Older and better-educated Americans and suburbanites also support the idea in somewhat greater numbers than the younger, the less well-educated, and urban dwellers.

The question:

Would you favor or oppose a requirement for high school graduation that all students in the local public schools perform some kind of community service?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	66	66	67	75
Oppose	32	32	32	25
Don't know	2	2	1	*

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Privatization of School Services

Poll respondents believe that school privatization is fine for their local schools, but only for ancillary services such as cafeteria operation, building/facilities maintenance, and transportation. This is not surprising, since these services have been supplied by private firms in many schools for decades with little public opposition. In this poll, 81% of respondents approved of school boards contracting out food service, 79% favored contracting out maintenance, and 75% favored contracting out transportation.

People's attitudes change, however, when they are asked to respond to the newest kid on the block, privatization of the entire public school operation. Only 34% favor this idea, while 59% oppose it. This represents a considerable opinion swing since 1994, when poll respondents were evenly divided (45% in favor, 47% opposed) in their support of "an idea now being tested in a few cities in which private, profit-making corporations contract to operate schools within certain jurisdictions." It may be that public attitudes are in metamorphosis as private entities, such as universities and the National Urban League, are entering the business of running public schools and as the idea of "charter schools" is being tested in more than 20 states.

The question:

Are you in favor of or opposed to the school board in your community contracting with local businesses to provide the following services?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
In Favor				
Transportation	75	73	75	87
Maintenance	79	78	79	85
Food	81	80	81	85
Running entire operation	34	33	35	43

Retired General as School Superintendent?

Seattle has contracted with a retired U.S. Army major general and former manager of Atlanta's county government to serve as superintendent of schools. He has no college training and no prior experience working in schools. Given the media attention this move has attracted, it seemed worthwhile to see whether the public believes it is important for the superintendent of schools to be a trained and experienced educator.

Respondents were not equivocal in their response: 73% consider such qualifications very important; 14%, quite important; and only 12%, not very or not at all important. Among the groups less likely to assign importance to education-related training and experience are college graduates, high-income respondents, Republicans, and professional and businesspeople.

The question:

A large city district recently employed a retired Army general with no training or experience in education as its superintendent of schools. How important do you think it is that the superintendent of public schools in your community be a trained and experienced educator — very important, quite important, not very important, or not at all important?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Very important	73	71	79	61
Quite important	14	16	11	27
Not very important	8	8	7	8
Not at all important	4	4	2	2
Don't know	1	1	1	2

Encouraging Bright People to Become Teachers

Some students of education believe that one of the best ways to improve the public schools of the future would be to bring more bright and energetic people into the teaching profession. Since people choosing a career are affected by the attitudes of friends, family, peers, and important adult role models, respondents were asked how they would react if "the brightest person you know" said he or she would like to be a teacher. With few variations among demographic groups, 73% said they would encourage that person. However, 23% said that they would suggest he or she consider other fields before deciding. These responses are consistent with those in the 1993 poll, in which 67% of respondents said they would like to see a child of theirs take up teaching as a career.

The question:

Suppose the brightest person you know said he or she would like to be a teacher. What would you most likely do — encourage that person, discourage that person, or suggest that he or she consider other fields before deciding?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Encourage	73	74	72	74
Discourage	2	2	2	2
Suggest other fields	23	22	23	24
Other	1	1	2	*
Don't know	1	1	1	*

*Less than one-half of 1%.

Compulsory Attendance

In current debates about the public schools, some people express the opinion that compulsory attendance laws should be eliminated. Although a strong majority of the public (64%) opposes such a move, educators may be surprised to learn that 30% support it. This support is strongest among nonwhites (38%), blacks (38%), and those between 18 and 29 years of age (43%).

The question:

Would you favor or oppose the elimination of compulsory attendance laws in the public schools in your community?

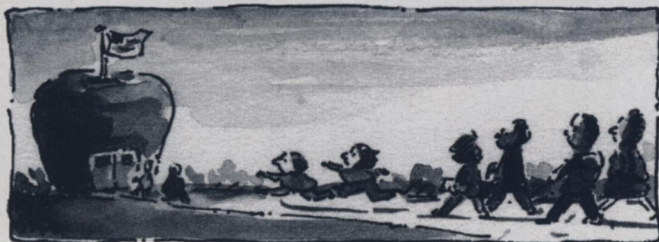
	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	30	30	32	23
Oppose	64	65	62	69
Don't know	6	5	6	8

Dealing with Homosexuality in School

By a 2-1 margin the public rejects teaching about homosexuality in the public schools. Should teaching about the homosexual lifestyle be adopted as part of the curriculum, fewer than one in 10 would want it to be taught as an acceptable alternative lifestyle. The public also opposes allowing gay/lesbian clubs to organize as part of a school's extracurricular program.

These issues were included in the poll following a Salt Lake City school board vote in February to eliminate all student extracurricular activities in the district. The vote came after the Gay/Straight Alliance petitioned for a club at East High School in that city. These and other issues involving homosexuals and the public schools are likely to be more insistently raised in the future.

The results in this poll are unequivocal: 63% of the respondents opposed teaching about the gay/lesbian lifestyle, while just 34% approved it. Although all demographic groups opposed the idea by wide margins, nonwhites, blacks, adults under age 30, Democrats, college graduates, Catholics, and people living in the East were least opposed. Republicans and those living



in the South were most opposed.

Probing further, the poll asked how the gay/lesbian lifestyle should be presented if it were included in the curriculum. Very few respondents (9%) would approve presenting it as an acceptable alternative lifestyle; 27% believe it should be presented as an unacceptable alternative lifestyle; a majority (57%) would simply present it as one alternative lifestyle with no moral judgment made. Although only one in 10 would treat it as an acceptable lifestyle, those most likely to think it should be taught as an acceptable alternative lifestyle are nonwhites, blacks, adults under age 30, Democrats, Catholics, college graduates, and those living in the East.



Regarding the formation of gay/lesbian clubs as part of a school's extracurricular program, 58% of respondents believe that such clubs should not be allowed, as opposed to 38% who would allow them. Those most likely to support such clubs are nonwhites, blacks, Democrats, college graduates, the youngest adults, those living in the West, and those living in the East. The only two groups in which a majority favors such clubs are adults under age 30 and those living in the West.

The first question:

Would you favor or oppose teaching about the gay and lesbian lifestyle as part of the curriculum in the public schools in your community?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Favor	34	35	33	23
Oppose	63	62	64	75
Don't know	3	3	3	2

The second question:

If teaching about the gay and lesbian lifestyle were included in the curriculum of the local public schools, in what way do you believe it should be presented in class — as an acceptable alternative lifestyle, as an unacceptable lifestyle, or as one alternative lifestyle with no moral judgment made?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Acceptable	9	10	8	8
Unacceptable	27	25	30	42
One alternative with no moral judgment	57	58	56	46
Don't know	7	7	6	4

The third question:

In your opinion, should gay and lesbian students be allowed or not be allowed to organize gay or lesbian clubs in those public schools in your community where club activities are part of the extracurricular program?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Be allowed	38	39	34	36
Not be allowed	58	57	61	61
Don't know	4	4	5	3

Purposes of the Nation's Public Schools

On several occasions these polls have explored public perceptions and beliefs about the goals of education and the role of public schools in reaching them. When open-ended questions are posed, respondents emphasize material goals, such as "to get better jobs," "to make more money," or "to achieve financial success." Good citizenship is not high among the public's priorities. But when a list of objectives is offered, a different set of priorities emerges.

In the current poll, six goals were suggested with respondents asked to indicate the importance of each. It should be noted that the public, by large majorities, rated all six goals as either very important or quite important. Therefore, it is necessary to look for differences by comparing the "very important" ratings only.

A subtle change in people's beliefs may be emerging. "To prepare students to be responsible citizens" was considered "very important" by more people than any of the other goals. Material success or "to help people become economically self-sufficient" was, however, the next most important goal. The only goal that did not receive a "very important" rating from a majority of the public was "to minimize current inequities in education for certain minority groups." However, even here, 76% gave this purpose either a "very important" or a "quite important" rating.



Certain differences by political party were evident. For example, Democrats were considerably more likely than Republicans to perceive improving social conditions, promoting cultural unity, and minimizing inequalities for minority groups as

“very important” goals for the public schools.
The question:

Here are some possible purposes of the nation’s public schools. Apart from providing a basic education, would you tell me how important you consider each is as a purpose of the nation’s schools — very important, quite important, not too important, or not at all important?

	Purposes of Public Schools				
	Very Important %	Quite Important %	Not Too Important %	Not at All Important %	Don't Know %
To prepare students to be responsible citizens	86	12	1	1	*
To help people become economically self-sufficient	78	18	2	1	1
To promote cultural unity among all Americans	63	23	10	3	1
To improve social conditions	58	28	10	3	1
To increase people’s happiness and enrich their lives culturally and intellectually	55	29	12	3	1
To minimize current inequities in education for certain minority groups	44	32	14	5	5

*Less than one-half of 1%.

	Percent Responding “Very Important”			
	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
To prepare students to be responsible citizens	86	86	86	88
To help people become economically self-sufficient	78	77	80	78
To promote cultural unity among all Americans	63	62	65	56
To improve social conditions	58	55	64	49
To increase people’s happiness and enrich their lives culturally and intellectually	55	52	61	52
To minimize current inequities in education for certain minority groups	44	41	46	53

Academic Excellence Versus Social Skills

In a question designed to reveal basic attitudes on the issue of academic excellence versus social and other skills as desirable outcomes of schooling, 60% of respondents came down on the side of average grades combined with extracurricular activities for their children, while 28% would prefer top grades (A's) without extracurricular activities.

Obviously, top grades and extracurricular activities are not mutually exclusive. Many students have both, and respondents resisted choosing between them. Hence, 9% volunteered “both” in response to this question.

The question:

Which one of the following would you prefer of an oldest child — that the child get A grades or that he or she make average grades and be active in extracurricular activities?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Get A grades	28	26	33	34
Average grades and extracurricular activities	60	63	56	55
Both (volunteered)	9	8	9	9
Don't know	3	3	2	2

Accuracy of Public Perceptions

These polls occasionally expose misconceptions and misinformation among Americans with respect to the public schools. The implications for policy making are obvious. Critics can perpetuate these misconceptions and exploit the misinformation to further their own agendas. The dual burden of separating fact from fiction and communicating fact to the public is a responsibility that education leaders too often neglect. Five questions in the current poll revealed widespread public misinformation on dropout rates, on how the academic achievement of U.S. students compares with that of students in other developed countries, and on the scope and cost of special education in this country.

Dropout Rates

The dropout rate in the United States has been on the decline for many years for both majority and minority students. The best data currently available place the dropout rate for all students at 12% and the dropout rate for black students at 17%. These percentages are down significantly from 25 years ago. However, 64% of respondents to this year’s poll said that they believe the dropout rate is higher than it was 25 years ago, while only 15% said that they believe it is lower. Interestingly, those at the highest socioeconomic levels — i.e., college graduates, professionals, and businesspeople — are more likely to think (incorrectly) that the dropout rate is increasing than are their less-educated counterparts.

The question:

Just your impression, do you think that the national dropout rate of students in high school is higher today than it was 25 years ago, lower today, or about the same as it was 25 years ago?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Higher	64	62	66	73
Lower	15	15	15	8
About the same	18	19	17	16
Don't know	3	4	2	3

International Comparisons

The difficulties involved in making international comparisons of student performance are such that research data must be approached with great caution. One must ask whether national differences in goals have been considered; whether comparable student groups have been tested; whether the tests (given in various languages) are comparable, valid, and reliable; and whether those who assess the test results are unbiased.

Despite these problems, critics of the public schools frequently point to one international comparison or another to show that the public schools in this country are failing. But not all the reports — questionable as they may be — reflect unfavorably on American schools. In the Second International Assessment of Educational Progress, conducted by the Educational Testing Service in 1991, the 95th percentiles of almost all participating nations were virtually identical in science and mathematics for both 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds. Top-ranked Korea did not finish notably higher than the rest in math, and American eighth-graders who had taken algebra scored higher than the top 20% of Japanese students. In addition, the assessment conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in 1992 placed American 9-year-olds in second place in reading in a study of 31 countries.

In spite of the inconclusive nature of the data and some reports showing that American students do quite well, many Americans are persuaded that American children do less well than their counterparts in other developed nations on tests of achievement in math and reading. Ironically, it is the better-educated segments of the population who are the most likely to believe that student achievement in both mathematics and reading is lower in the U.S. than in Great Britain, Germany, and Japan.

The questions:

Now, here is a question about student achievement in mathematics. Just your impression, do you think student achievement in mathematics in U.S. public schools is higher than that for students in public schools in other developed countries (such as Germany, Great Britain, and Japan), lower than in these countries, or about the same?

How about student achievement in reading? Just your impression, do you think student achievement in reading in U.S. public schools is higher than that for students in public schools in other developed countries (such as Germany, Great Britain, and Japan), lower than in these countries, or about the same?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Mathematics Achievement				
Higher in U.S.	7	6	9	3
Lower in U.S.	69	71	65	74
About same	19	18	21	19
Don't know	5	5	5	4

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
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Reading Achievement

Higher in U.S.	8	6	9	15
Lower in U.S.	54	55	53	54
About same	34	34	33	29
Don't know	4	5	5	2

Cost and Extent of Special Education

Three questions in this year's poll explored opinions about the cost of special education and perceptions of its prevalence in America's public schools. The public does not believe that too much money is being spent for the education of students with special needs resulting from mental and physical disabilities. At the same time, few people realize the size of the financial burden that special education places on the system.

Only 5% of respondents think too much is being spent on special education. And in no demographic group — even Republicans — does the percentage holding this view extend beyond single digits. The issue, therefore, is whether the public believes too little is being spent on special education or about the right amount.

Groups most likely to say that too little is being spent on special education are blacks (67%; about the right amount, 29%), nonwhites (63% to 31%), public school parents (53% to 35%), residents of the South (52% to 37%), and urban dwellers (51% to 37%). Groups most likely to say that about the right amount is being spent on special education are persons over age 65 (54% to 30%), rural residents (50% to 37%), and Republicans (48% to 36%). Interestingly, even among that small segment of the population (9%) that is at least reasonably aware of both the percentage of public school students receiving special education and the additional costs, only 16% think too much is being spent on special education, compared to 36% who say too little.

The first question:

How do you feel about spending for students with special education needs, such as those with mental and physical disabilities? In your opinion, is America spending too much of its total education budget on students with special needs, too little, or about the right amount?

	National Totals %	No Children In School %	Public School Parents %	Nonpublic School Parents %
Too much	5	5	6	9
Too little	47	43	53	46
About right amount	41	44	35	39
Don't know	7	8	6	6

Most of the public is unaware of the percentage of public school students in the country who receive special education in its various forms. Only about a quarter (26%) can estimate the percentage reasonably closely — within a range of 6% to 19%. (The "official" estimate is 12%.)

The 74% who mention some percentage outside this 6% to 19% range include 15% who estimate figures lower than the of-

ficial estimate, 44% who offer a higher estimate, and 15% who do not hazard a guess.

The second question:

Just your best estimate, about what percentage of the public school students in the nation do you think receive special education?

Estimated Percentage	%
1% to 5%	15
6% to 19%*	26
20% to 29%	16
30% to 39%	12
40% to 49%	6
50% to 59%	5
60% and over	5
Don't know	15

*"Official" estimate is 12%.

The public is even more uninformed about the additional amount required to educate a special education student than about the percentage receiving special education. Only 7% are aware that it costs at least 100% more to educate a special education student than it does to educate an average public school student. Although 17% of Americans do not venture a guess as to the additional costs for special education, fully three-quarters mention a percentage even lower than the estimated 100% — most of them, *much* lower.

The third question:

Again, just your best estimate, about how much more, as a percentage, do you think it costs to educate a student receiving special education than a regular student?

Estimated Percentage	%
1% to 9%	8
10% to 19%	8
20% to 29%	18
30% to 49%	14
50% to 59%	19
60% to 99%	9
100% and over*	7
Don't know	17

*"Official" estimates are all higher than 100%.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate to close this report of the 1996 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools with some thoughts about the collective responsibility we all have for communicating with the public. The public is largely dependent on the mass media for information about the public schools. If people are not well informed, it seems likely that media gatekeepers are not functioning as well as they might. This puts an added burden on public school leaders, for their responsibility for communicating complete and accurate information to the public becomes heavier. If the information the public receives is accurate, comprehensive, and balanced, people are in a position to do what people are supposed to do in a democracy: decide what the future of the public schools will be.

In Appreciation

Special thanks to Stanley M. Elam for his 28 years of service to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll — first as editor of the *Phi Delta Kappan* (1956-81) and director of publications for Phi Delta Kappa (1976-81) and then as polling coordinator for Phi Delta Kappa (1981-96), a position from which he is now retiring. As polling coordinator, he oversaw development of the surveys and wrote the annual reports of the findings. We will miss his knowledge of the field, his wisdom, and his perceptive commentary.

Research Procedure

The Sample. The sample used in this survey embraced a total of 1,329 adults (18 years of age and older). A description of the sample and methodology can be found at the end of this report.

Time of Interviewing. The fieldwork for this study was conducted during the period of 2 May to 22 May 1996.

The Report. In the tables used in this report, "Nonpublic School Parents" includes parents of students who attend parochial schools and parents of students who attend private or independent schools.

Due allowance must be made for statistical variation, especially in the case of findings for groups consisting of relatively few respondents, e.g., nonpublic school parents.

The findings of this report apply only to the U.S. as a whole and not to individual communities. Local surveys, using the same questions, can be conducted to determine how local areas compare with the national norm.

Sampling Tolerances

In interpreting survey results, it should be borne in mind that all sample surveys are subject to sampling error, i.e., the extent to which the results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole population surveyed had been interviewed. The size of such sampling error depends largely on the number of interviews.

The following tables may be used in estimating the sampling error of any percentage in this report. The computed allowances have taken into account the effect of the sample design upon sampling error. They may be interpreted as indicating the range (plus or minus the figure shown) within which the results of repeated samplings in the same time period could be expected to vary 95% of the time, assuming the same sampling procedure, the same interviewers, and the same questionnaire.

The first table shows how much allowance should be made for the sampling error of a percentage:

Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of a Percentage

	In Percentage Points (at 95 in 100 confidence level)*						
	Sample Size						
	1,500	1,000	750	600	400	200	100
Percentages near 10	2	2	3	3	4	5	8
Percentages near 20	3	3	4	4	5	7	10
Percentages near 30	3	4	4	5	6	8	12
Percentages near 40	3	4	5	5	6	9	12
Percentages near 50	3	4	5	5	6	9	13
Percentages near 60	3	4	5	5	6	9	12
Percentages near 70	3	4	4	5	6	8	12
Percentages near 80	3	3	4	4	5	7	10
Percentages near 90	2	2	3	3	4	5	8

*The chances are 95 in 100 that the sampling error is not larger than the figures shown.

The table would be used in the following manner: Let us say that a reported percentage is 33 for a group that includes 1,000 respondents. We go to the row for "percentages near 30" in the table and across to the column headed "1,000."

The number at this point is 4, which means that the 33% obtained in the sample is subject to a sampling error of plus or minus four points. In other words, it is very probable (95 chances out of 100) that the true figure would be somewhere between 29% and 37%, with the most likely figure the 33% obtained.

In comparing survey results in two samples, such as, for example, men and women, the question arises as to how large a difference between them must be before one can be reasonably sure that it reflects a real difference. In the tables below, the number of points that must be allowed for in such comparisons is indicated. Two tables are provided. One is for percentages near 20 or 80; the other, for percentages near 50. For percentages in between, the error to be allowed for lies between those shown in the two tables.

Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference

In Percentage Points (at 95 in 100 confidence level)*

Size of Sample	Percentages near 20 or percentages near 80					
	1,500	1,000	750	600	400	200
1,500	4					
1,000	4	5				
750	5	5	5			
600	5	5	6	6		
400	6	6	6	7	7	
200	8	8	8	8	9	10

Size of Sample	Percentages near 50					
	1,500	1,000	750	600	400	200
1,500	5					
1,000	5	6				
750	6	6	7			
600	6	7	7	7		
400	7	8	8	8	9	
200	10	10	10	10	11	13

*The chances are 95 in 100 that the sampling error is not larger than the figures shown.

Here is an example of how the tables would be used: Let us say that 50% of men respond a certain way and 40% of women respond that way also, for a difference of 10 percentage points between them. Can we say with any assurance that the 10-point difference reflects a real difference between men and women on the question? Let us consider a sample that contains approximately 750 men and 750 women.

Since the percentages are near 50, we consult Table B, and, since the two samples are about 750 persons each, we look for the number in the column headed "750" which is also in the row designated "750." We find the number 7 here. This means that the allowance for error should be seven points and that, in concluding that the percentage among men is somewhere between three and 17 points higher than the percentage among women, we should be wrong only about 5% of the time. In other words, we can conclude with considerable confidence that a difference exists in the direction observed and that it amounts to at least three percentage points.

If, in another case, men's responses amount to 22%, say, and women's to 24%, we consult Table A, because these percentages are near 20. We look in the column and row labeled "750" and see that the number is 5. Obviously, then, the two-point difference is inconclusive.

Design of the Sample

For the 1996 survey the Gallup Organization used its standard national telephone sample, i.e., an unclustered, directory-assisted, random-digit telephone sample, based on a proportionate stratified sampling design.

The random-digit aspect of the sample was used to avoid "listing" bias. Numerous studies have shown that households with unlisted telephone numbers are different in important ways from listed households. "Unlistedness" is due to household mobility or to customer requests to prevent publication of the telephone number. To avoid this source of bias, a random-digit procedure designed to provide representation of both listed and unlisted (including not-yet-listed) numbers was used.

Telephone numbers for the continental United States were stratified into four regions of the country and, within each region, further stratified into three size-of-community strata.

Only working banks of telephone numbers were selected. Eliminating non-working banks from the sample increased the likelihood that any sample telephone number would be associated with a residence.

The sample of telephone numbers produced by the described method is representative of all telephone households within the continental United States.

Within each contacted household, an interview was sought with the youngest man 18 years of age or older who was at home. If no man was home, an in-

terview was sought with the oldest woman at home. This method of respondent selection within households produced an age distribution by sex that closely approximates the age distribution by sex of the total population.

Up to three calls were made to each selected telephone number to complete an interview. The time of day and the day of the week for callbacks were varied so as to maximize the chances of finding a respondent at home. All interviews were conducted on weekends or weekday evenings in order to contact potential respondents among the working population.

The final sample was weighted so that the distribution of the sample matched current estimates derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) for the adult population living in telephone households in the continental U.S.

As has been the case in recent years in the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll series, parents of public school children were oversampled in the 1996 poll. This procedure produced a large enough sample to ensure that findings reported for "public school parents" are statistically significant.

Composition of the Sample

Adults	%	Undesignated	23
No children in school	66	Income	%
Public school parents	32*	\$40,000 and over	37
Nonpublic school parents	5*	\$30,000-\$39,999	16
		\$20,000-\$29,999	17
		\$10,000-\$19,999	14
		Under \$10,000	7
		Undesignated	9
Sex	%	Region	%
Men	47	East	24
Women	53	Midwest	24
Race	%	South	31
White	84	West	21
Nonwhite	13	Community Size	%
Undesignated	3	Urban	29
Age	%	Suburban	35
18-29 years	22	Rural	20
30-49 years	45	Undesignated	16
50 and over	32	Education	%
Undesignated	1	Total college	57
Occupation	%	College graduate	22
(Chief Wage Earner)		College incomplete	35
Business and professional	32	Total high school	42
Clerical and sales	8	High school graduate	30
Manual labor	34	High school incomplete	12
Nonlabor force	2	Undesignated	1
Farm	1		

*Total exceeds 34% because some parents have children attending more than one kind of school.

Conducting Your Own Poll

The Phi Delta Kappa Center for Professional Development and Services makes available PACE (Polling Attitudes of the Community on Education) materials to enable nonspecialists to conduct scientific polls of attitude and opinion on education. The PACE manual provides detailed information on constructing questionnaires, sampling, interviewing, and analyzing data. It also includes updated census figures and new material on conducting a telephone survey. The price is \$55. For information about using PACE materials, write or phone Phillip Harris at Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789. Ph. 800/766-1156.

How to Order the Poll

The minimum order for reprints of the published version of the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup education poll is 25 copies for \$10. Additional copies are 25 cents each. This price includes postage for delivery (at the library rate). Where possible, enclose a check or money order. Address your order to Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402. Ph. 800/766-1156.

If faster delivery is desired, do not include a remittance with your order. You will be billed at the above rates plus any additional cost involved in the method of delivery. Persons who wish to order the 511-page document that is the basis for this report should contact Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402. Ph. 800/766-1156. The price is \$95, postage included.