

Public Education Reform Survey

Summary & Analysis of Interview Responses

During the fall of 2005, students enrolled in *Education/Political Science 280: Re-envisioning Education & Democracy* interviewed 60 professionals, teachers, parents, and community activists, all involved in public education reform. Responses to individual interviews were summarized and then collated and analyzed by student working groups.

What do you think are the most important issues facing public education today?

General Patterns:

Funding: over 1/2 of people mentioned it, all of which mentioned a lack of funding, defunding over time
Inequality: race, class, access (to resources, good teachers, higher education, nonacademic services), urban issues, impact of inequality that exists outside of classroom, tracking
Diversity: education of students (differently abled students, immigrant students), challenging all students, reaching all learners, teacher prejudices
Teacher issues: teacher preparation, support for teachers from schools, high teacher turnover, public valuing teachers, low teacher salary, being passionate about teaching
Privatization / corporatization / capitalism: charter schools, vouchers, religious affiliation of schools, viewing schools as a free market
Standards/Accountability: teaching to standards, standardization of curriculum, teacher accountability (for and against greater accountability), NCLB
School as community centers: nonacademic services, public interest in schools, public trusting schools and children
Small schools/class sizes

Distinctive Insights:

Very few respondents mentioned the No Child Left Behind Act specifically; many spoke to programs within NCLB like charters or standards but few actually said NCLB
Importance of motivation and trust between students, teachers, and communities
Conflict resolution
Parental involvement
Ideology and indoctrination: contestation between schools as a site of citizenship development and fear of indoctrinating students
Schools do not compete enough

Commentary:

Respondents were really focused on the role of money in schools and school reform; most people mentioned funding in some way in their answers, yet No Child Left Behind (which has drastic funding consequences) was mentioned by only one respondent. Individual people were not seen as problems; lack of teacher support was an answer- but not teachers- and unsupportive policies were an answer- but not policy makers themselves. Issues of power--should administration, the community, or teachers have/share ownership of the classroom?--was never raised as a concern, but we were pleasantly surprised to see how often diversity and concern about class size appeared as answers. Finally, the idea of schools as centers of the community seems to be a potential answer to many of the other problems that were raised with this question.

What do you think are the most important issues facing democratic governance in the U.S.?

General Patterns:

- Non-participation (17 examples)
- Economic Problems (10 ex)
- Lack of Access (9)
- Marginalization/racism (6)
- Inequality (5)

Distinctive Insights:

- Essentially democracy doesn't exist
- Military too draining on financial resources
- Priorities are skewed – the issues most debated are unimportant
- Band-Aid government looks to solve immediate problems NOW, is not looking to the future

Commentary:

Our representational patterns were not mutually exclusive; they were highly interrelated. For example, non-participation can be linked to lack of access, marginalization/racism, inequality and economic policies. The main concerns of the interviewees spun around a lack of democratic principles applied into educational policies.

The distinctive insights expanded on the ideas of representational patterns with a particular focus on government performance. For instance, views radicalized to the extent of not considering the US as a democratic government. Other comments regarding partisan politics as a means of shifting misguided priorities.

Overall, the patterns and insights reflected a detachment of the interviewees from the process of government. Their answers seem to fit into a vicious cycle: racism and economic equality lead to lack of access for minorities and poor people, which creates a system of non-participation. These issues are especially concerning in the development of education policies since they are often perpetuated in our public school system, thus undermining the principles of a participatory democracy.

What, in your opinion, are the primary responsibilities of public education in a democracy?

General Patterns:

1. Prepare students for careers in the workforce.
2. Provide access to an equal opportunity for education
3. Develop life long-learners who will pursue knowledge after elementary and secondary education
4. Create active citizens who will participate in democracy/society around them

Distinctive Insights:

1. Schools should take on children's needs not met elsewhere, physical and emotional.
2. The purpose of education in a democracy should not be to reproduce the status quo, but to make independent thinkers; people who question the status quo.
3. To create self-pride and confidence.
4. To teach people how to access power.
5. To create global citizens.

Commentary:

Our country would be a revolutionary democracy if our schools could take on the responsibilities listed above. Indeed, we surely wish that they would. The four of us were particularly struck by several patterns and distinctive insights. Firstly, we relished the idea of public education's responsibility to teach students to be more than just good American citizens, but responsible global citizens. In light of heightened worldwide communication, limited natural resources, and increasingly international policy, we must teach students to be part of this world. The second unique response that drew our attention was *not* teaching students how to be good democratic citizens in the public education system. Instead, the interviewee suggests that public education should inform students about democracy and other systems of government and assessing their pros and cons without teaching a best form. This approach forces students to think critically and is interesting because it suggests that a) democracy is not so all-important that we should work to ensure its existence and that b) school is not a place to tell people what to think or what is best, but rather to present them with information and let them discern for themselves. That is a truly democratic approach to learning. But is it one we are willing to put our democracy on the line for? Another part that we thought posed an interesting conundrum for democracy reform was a conflicting set of values within constituents' responses. On one hand, many of the interviewees stressed the need for education to foster community growth, understand of community values and history, and provide equal access to an equal opportunity educational system. Yet other (or the same) responses stressed the need to address learners as individuals by encouraging students to become life-long, independent learners and teach towards paths of individual success and fulfillment of specific dreams. To us, this represents one of the key contradictions faced by educational reform: the need to focus on students as individuals while working in a community-learning system with a focus on teaching all students, not just individual students. Finally, we felt that the answers alluded to certain education levels of the diverse interviewees. Indeed, the prevalence of "equal opportunity" answers speaks largely to the high quality education of many of those interviewed. We know that our peers have all had successful educations in order to continue their studies at Macalester and many of those interviewed and whom we are connected with are most likely college educated as well. Recipients of high quality education are more acutely aware of the pervasive lack of opportunities available to others.

Reflecting on your understanding of the current situation and prospects for public education in the United States over the next decade, what is the worst-case scenario you can imagine?

General Patterns:

- Unfunded Federal Standards
- Widening Achievement Gap
- Segregation
- Privatization
- Underqualified Teachers
- Violence in Schools
- Vouchers

Distinctive Insights:

- Loss of identity for Students of Color
- Lack of global curriculum
- Bureaucratic, centralized control of schools
- Uninspiring Schools
- Regionalism
- Schools not being tied to community, increased crime in communities without schools
- Military spending using potential educational resources

Commentary:

Though several themes, such as the under-funding of federal standards like No Child Left Behind, the widening achievement gap, privatization of schools, and segregation repeated among our respondents, these issues may not be widely known. This question asked respondents to create their worst-case scenario, but in fact, many of these issues are already huge problems. Some of our more distinctive responses included loss of identity for students of color, the lack of a global curriculum, uninspiring schools and the bureaucratic, centralized control of schools. These point to a desire for more localized, personalized curricula, yet also illuminate the need to remain aware of the outside world, the global complexities faced by tomorrow's students. Mirroring this contradiction were the two responses citing regionalism and bureaucratic control as worst-case scenario; how can these two be reconciled? The lack of focused goals and a clear vision is a crucial problem facing education reform today. Finally, we also observed that the representational patterns seem to be the cause of distinctive insights.

Please describe your best-case scenario regarding the future of U.S. public education:**General Patterns:**

In describing the best-case scenarios, the participants focused largely on the following themes:

- Educational funding and increased resources
- Public and parental involvement
- Educational programs
- Creative and diverse curriculum and interaction
- Alternative modes of testing and accountability
- Increased educational equity

Distinctive Insights:

We would also like to highlight some unique responses such as using part of the defense budget to finance education, running public education as a business interest, and implementing a broad International Baccalaureate program.

Commentary:

We found that many of the respondents' insights were similar, indicating that there was a collective idea of what needs to be done to improve public education. However, a lack of action still exists which prohibits these ideas from becoming policy. There was an emphasis on the need for education reform to become a public enterprise. Because education affects everyone, whether through the economy, social, or political involvement, everyone should take part in creating the change necessary to make education the strong and positive foundation that this country needs. The ideas expressed by the respondents invite similar action. The representational patterns exhibit the main ideas of focus within the public education arena, and the distinctive insights, although unique to a few, are things that only contribute and build off of the foundation created by the other ideas presented. Those most conducive to creating change would be to create wider community involvement, increased funding to support teachers and schools, and a greater variety in teaching styles and school programs.

Reflecting on your responses to the prior questions, what would be the most productive approach (directions, strategies) to move toward your positive vision?

General Patterns:

Non-testing methods of evaluation (alternatives to standardization)
Community involvement and local control

- Parent involvement
- Community support for teachers

Increased funding
Keep schools/classrooms small
Teacher control in decision-making
Increase teacher salary

Distinctive Insights:

Civic engagement as a requirement in classrooms
Constitutional amendments
Create integrated schools through affordable housing programs
Separation of the country into separate, autonomous zones
Eradicate racism like sexism
More teaching staff, fewer administrative positions
Redistribute funds from military to education

Commentary:

Our group found seven patterns and seven distinctive insights in the responses to question 7. The patterns are more or less intuitive and recurred often. They addressed topics of local vs. national control, standardization, keeping schools and classrooms small, and increased funding both for salaries and also for school facilities.

The distinctive insights were sometimes surprising and other times very obvious, though they may have only been stated by one respondent. Constitutional Amendments came up as well as redistribution of funds and restructuring the funding and administration of schools.

These suggestions help in that when read by the public, they are more likely to be agreed with than not. In order for these various suggestions to be implemented or reform to take place, public discourse is necessary; which will raise awareness about these issues.