



THE MANY MEANINGS OF GOOD

By Rafael Heller | Oct 26, 2020 | Editor's Note

Almost every year since the mid-1990s, the PDK poll has asked American adults to grade both their local public schools and the country’s public schools overall. The findings have been remarkably consistent: Year after year, most parents tell us that the school their *own* child attends is quite good, but they believe most other schools to be mediocre or worse. In 2019, for instance, 76% of parents said they would give their child’s school a grade of A or B, but just 19% of respondents would give an A or B to schools nationwide.

What accounts for such sharply differing views about the quality of our public schools? The PDK poll doesn’t ask people to explain their opinions, but we can certainly speculate. When evaluating their own child’s school, parents can draw from a wealth of firsthand impressions: Their kid seems happy to go to school every day, the building was recently renovated, the school offers a lot of AP classes, the principal always calls to check in on sick students, and so on. But when asked about public schools in general, how much does the average American know, and how do they know it? Perhaps they’ve seen news reports comparing our supposedly no-good schools to the terrific ones in Europe and Asia, or they’ve heard politicians rant about the failures of “government schools.” That is, they must draw upon entirely different sources of information.

Of course, survey research can only reveal people’s opinions about the public schools; it can’t tell us how good or bad those schools *really* are. Then again, neither can student data reports, climate surveys, case studies, or any other kind of research. As the historian Larry Cuban puts it in this month’s interview, every measure of school quality depends on somebody’s idea about what ought to *count* as a good school. We must always remember to ask, “[Good] at what, for whom, and according to what criteria?”

For far too long, U.S. education policy has been dominated by a single, absurdly limited definition of what counts as a good school: Under both No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act, school quality has been determined almost entirely by students’ test-score gains in language arts and mathematics, on the theory that if young people make sufficient progress in these areas, they will be prepared to succeed in college and the workforce.

According to the contributors to this month’s *Kappan*, we can no longer afford to pursue such a pinched and narrow definition of success. But what *should* count as success is open to debate. Given the troubled state of our democracy, writes Jon Valant, we urgently need our public schools to excel at preparing young people for engaged citizenship. However, cautions William Bennett, schools cannot excel in preparing students for democracy, the workforce, or anything else unless they adopt a shared, content-rich curriculum. To Maxine McKinney de Royston and her coauthors, though, a rich academic curriculum is not enough; schools cannot be good unless they fully appreciate the complex and diverse ways in which children learn. But let’s be sure to include *all* children, urges Lauren Morando Rhim, arguing that no school ought to deemed successful if it excludes students with disabilities. At the same time, adds Jeremy Glazer, we must not overlook the professional needs of educators: A school cannot succeed unless good teachers want to work there.

I have no idea which, if any, of these arguments will prevail, or whether it’s realistic to hope that policy makers will seriously consider what else — beyond test scores and a few secondary measures, such as graduation rates and the results of school climate surveys — ought to define the quality of our public schools. But the debate itself strikes me as long overdue and far from finished.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RAFAEL HELLER

Rafael Heller is the former editor-in-chief of *Kappan* magazine.



SHARE:



< PREVIOUS

Structural racism and the urban geography of education

NEXT >

What makes the New York Times' education newsletter so good

RELATED POSTS



A better start for teachers

November 1, 2021



50 and 100: A pair of PDK milestones

August 24, 2018



A republic of dunces?

March 26, 2020



Accountability: The what and the how

October 24, 2022



Phi Delta Kappan, a publication of PDK International, offers timely, relevant, and provocative insights on K-12 education policy, research, curriculum, and professional development. Kappan readers include new and veteran teachers, graduate students, school and district administrators, university faculty members (researchers and teacher educators), and policy makers.

Email: kappan@pdkintl.org
Membership/Subscriptions: memberservices@pdkintl.org
Phone: 812-339-1156 OR 800-766-1156
Fax: 812-339-0018
Mail: P.O. Box 13090, Arlington, VA 22219
Submit a manuscript: manuscripts@pdkintl.org
Permission requests: [Copyright Clearance Center](#)
Advertising/Sponsorship Opportunities: [Media Kit](#)
Kappan weekly email: [Sign up page](#)