

Public Attitudes Toward Education and Service-Learning

Prepared for the Academy for Educational Development and the Learning In Deed Initiative, Sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

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Introduction

In 1998, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation launched Learning In Deed, a national initiative to improve education by making service to others an integral part of classroom learning in schools across the United States. This approach to teaching, called service-learning, has garnered increasing support over the past decade.

The fundamental purpose of the groundbreaking research reported here is to explore the public's vision of what K-12 education in the United States should provide – and to explore how service-learning fits into that vision. This research was conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Key questions to be answered by this research are:

- How concerned are Americans about people having the education and skills they need to succeed?
- Where does education rank on Americans' list of priorities?
- What do Americans believe are the responsibilities of the public K-12 education system?
- How well do Americans think schools are meeting these responsibilities?
- Does the public think schools should encourage good citizenship?
- What do Americans think are the critical aspects of good citizenship?
- How knowledgeable are Americans about service-learning?
- Does the public support service-learning in local schools?
- To what features or benefits of service-learning are people most attracted?
- What are Americans' chief concerns about service-learning?

Methodology

This study was conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide via telephone, among a national sample of 1,013 adults 18 or older. The sample was collected September 10-27, 2000 using Random Digit Dialing and consists of 757 adults age 18 and older, and an oversample of 256 adults with at least one child under the age of 18. The average length of the interviews was approximately 24 minutes.

The sample was weighted by demographic factors including age, sex, education, income, and region to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the United States adult population.

Results based on the total sample of 1,013 are projectable to the entire adult population in the United States, with a sampling error of ± 3.5 percentage points. Results based on subgroups have a larger sampling error.

Highlights from the Findings

Education and Public Schooling

Virtually all Americans agree that one serious problem facing the United States is that people lack the education or skills they need to succeed (94%).

Most Americans agree that improving the public K-12 education system should be a very high priority in the United States (89%). What's more, almost half of Americans (49%) choose education as the highest priority for the United States, making it, by far, the priority on which there is the greatest public consensus.

Americans envision public schools teaching academics, social skills, tolerance, and good citizenship. This vision of education is much broader than just "the basics." More than 8 in 10 Americans (83%) strongly agree that "a good education is much more than just learning to read, write and do math."

The public wants schools to prepare students in practical ways for their lives outside of school and after graduation. More than two-thirds of Americans believe that public schools have a definite responsibility to:

- teach students skills that will help them succeed in the workplace (68%); and
- teach students how to use what they learn in the classroom for real-world projects and problems (66%).

The public also envisions public education developing students' social skills and sense of civic engagement. The majority of Americans say that schools have a definite responsibility to:

- help students develop their leadership skills (56%);
- teach students to work with people different from themselves (55%); and
- encourage good citizenship among students (54%).

Americans' conception of good citizenship includes:

- citizens' legal rights and responsibilities: obeying the law (92%), knowing your rights (83%), and voting (80%); and
- American values such as setting a good example for others (86%), being civil (84%), being a good neighbor (79%), respecting other people's opinions (79%), accepting people who are different (79%), and taking action when one sees a problem or an injustice (72%).

The vast majority of Americans believe that it is a definite responsibility of public schools to teach students in ways that will get them excited about learning (70%). In addition, more than 6 in 10 Americans (64%) believe that schools need to teach in different ways to reach different types of students.

The public is concerned that schools are not meeting many of their most important responsibilities. The main problem is that schools do not teach academics in ways that effectively engage students or that will translate into success outside of school.

Service-Learning

The majority of Americans are unfamiliar with the term service-learning (61%).

People overwhelmingly endorse service-learning when it is explained to them (90%). Parents of school-age children are particularly supportive of integrating service-learning into their local schools.

Americans are most supportive of service-learning activities that give students an opportunity to strengthen their academic skills in real-world projects helping other children and their communities. Some examples include:

- students in English classes tutoring younger kids to help them read better;
- students improving their science skills by testing the water quality of a lake and reporting the results to local officials; and
- students using geometry and math skills to design and lay out a playground for a local neighborhood.

Americans see service-learning as a teaching strategy that will help students transform their academic learning into success after graduation and will help them develop as confident individuals.

About 9 in 10 Americans agree that service-learning will:

- help students build the skills they need to be successful later in life (90%);
- encourage active citizenship and community involvement among students (89%); and
- improve students' grasp of academic basics (85%).

Other potential benefits of service-learning that interest Americans are:

- reducing the likelihood of children getting involved in self-destructive behavior (66%); and
- helping students develop self-confidence (65%) or a sense of achievement (64%).

Americans do have concerns about whether schools have the time and money to make service-learning work.

Part One: Public Attitudes Toward Education

People Not Having the Education and Skills They Need to Succeed Is a Major Problem for the United States

Virtually all Americans agree that people not having the education and skills they need to succeed is currently a serious problem facing the United States (94%). Seven in 10 say it is a very serious problem (71%).

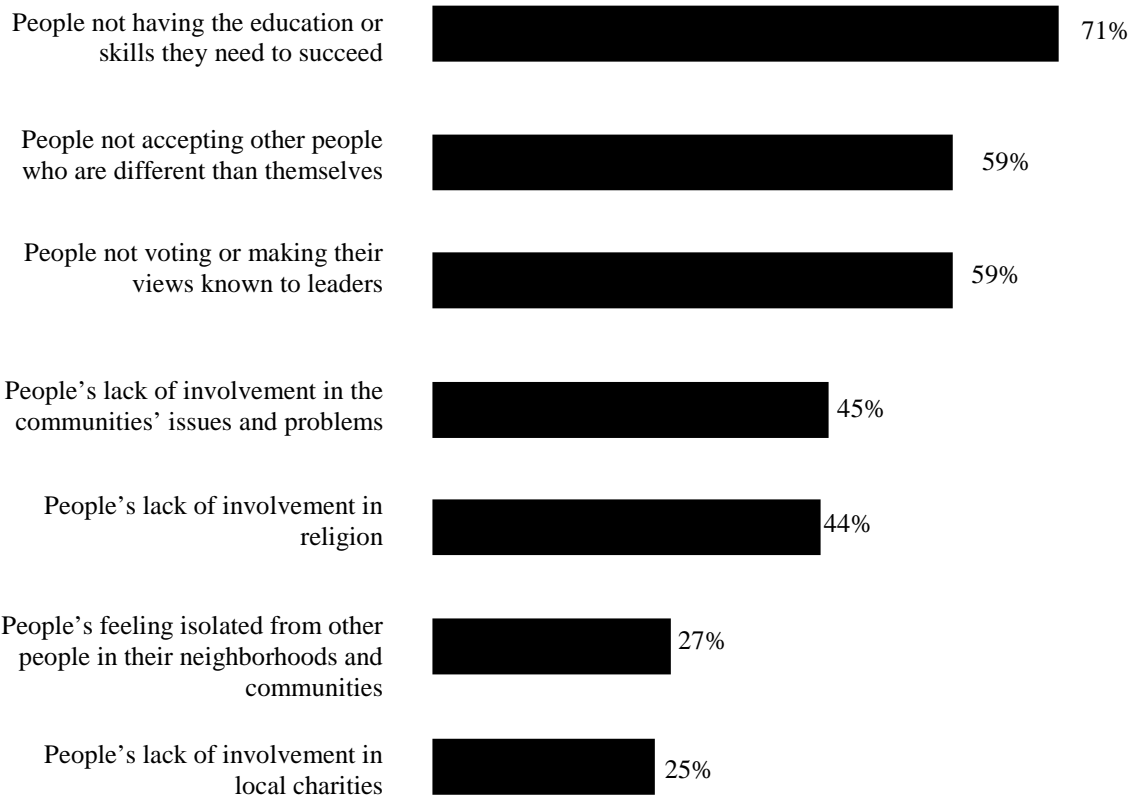
Other concerns that a majority of Americans cite include a lack of tolerance in the United States and voting apathy:

- 59% say that people not accepting other people who are different from themselves is a very serious problem; and
- 59% say people not voting and not making their views known to leaders is a very serious problem.

Problems the United States Is Facing

% saying each is a “very serious” problem for the US

Base: All respondents



Q.2 – We would like your opinion about some possible problems facing the United States. Please tell me whether you think each is currently a very serious problem, somewhat serious problem, not very serious problem, or not at all a serious problem facing the United States.

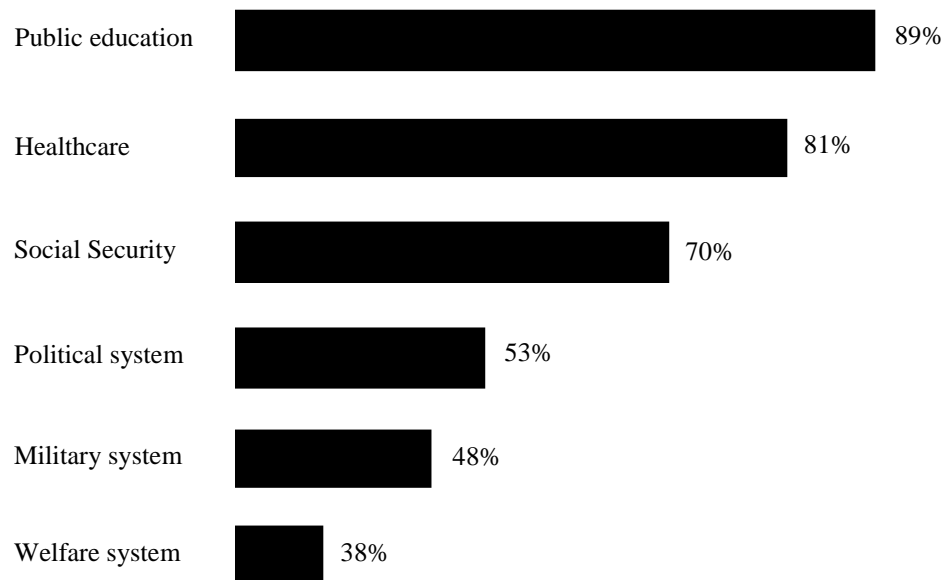
Most Americans Say Improving Public Education Is a Very High Priority

When asked to rate whether improving various national systems should be a very high, moderate, or low priority for the United States, the American public is most unified in its focus on education. Nine in 10 adults say that improving the quality of the public K-12 education system should be a very high priority for the United States (89%).

Priorities for the United States

% saying each is a “very high priority” for the United States

Base: All respondents



Q.1A – People have different opinions about how they would set priorities for the United States. Please tell me whether you think each of the following should be a very high priority, a moderate priority, or a low priority, for the United States.

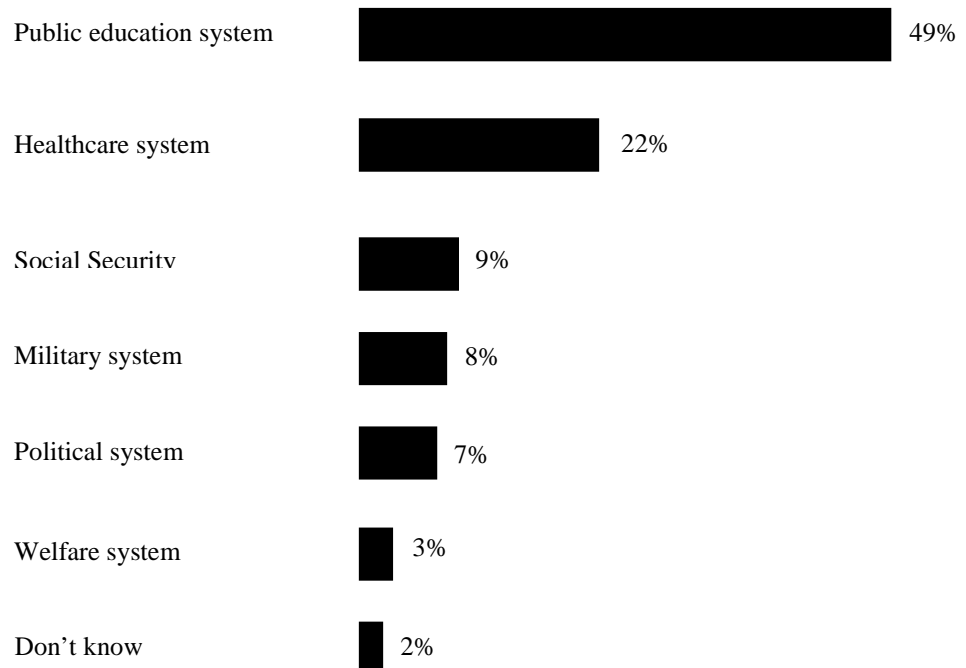
Education Is the Top Priority

When forced to choose the one highest priority, Americans choose education. Forty-nine percent of adults believe that improving the quality of the public education system should be America's top priority. That is more than twice the proportion of people who choose the healthcare system. In fact, more people choose education as the top priority than choose all of the other issues combined.

Issue Priorities for the United States

% saying each should be the "highest priority" for the United States

Base: All respondents



Q. 1B – You just told me that _____ are all high priorities. Which one of these do you consider the top priority for the United States? (If the respondent only indicated one item was a high priority in Q1A, that answer was automatically entered.)

Parents and Younger Adults Are More Likely to Name Education as Top Priority.

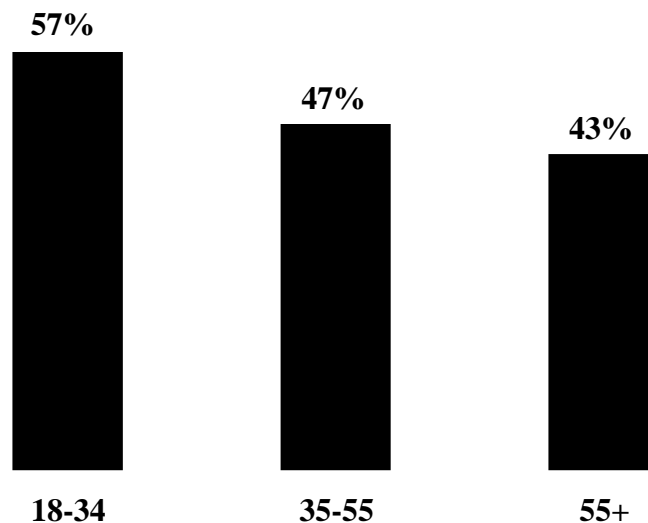
Predictably, parents of school-age children are particularly focused on education. Fifty-six percent of parents with at least one child under age 18 believe that education should be the highest priority for the United States. In comparison, 46% of all other adults (either nonparents or those without school-age children) believe that education should be the top priority. While fewer of these other adults choose education, their proportion is still twice that of people who choose healthcare, which comes in second (23%).

Younger adults are more likely than older adults to name education as the top priority for the United States. This is, in part, because younger people are more likely to be parents of children under age 18. However, 43% of older Americans choose education as the highest priority— three times as many as choose Social Security.

Education's Importance – By Age

% saying each should be the "highest priority" for the United States

Base: All respondents



Q. 1B – You just told me that _____ are all high priorities. Which one of these do you consider the top priority for the United States? (If the respondent only indicated one item was a high priority in Q1A, that answer was automatically entered.)

What Is a Good Education?

The 3 R's alone do not define a good education. Nearly all Americans (94%) agree that education is more than just learning to read, write, and do math; 83% strongly agree with this statement.

Attitudes Toward Education

% who agree with statement

Base: All respondents

A good education is much more than just learning to read, write and do math



Strongly agree Somewhat agree

Q.11 – Now I'm going to read to you a list of statements that some people have made about schools and service-learning. For each, tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

What Are the Public Schools' Responsibilities?

The vast majority of Americans believe that schools should be teaching students the academic skills they need (78%), and should do so in a way that will get students excited about learning (71%). But Americans do not believe that there is one teaching approach that can accomplish this for all students. The majority of the public strongly agrees that “schools need to teach in different ways so they reach different types of students” (64%).

Beyond teaching academics, the public wants schools to prepare students in a practical way for life after school. More than two-thirds believe that public schools have a definite responsibility to:

- teach skills that will help them succeed in the workplace (68%);
and
- teach students how to use what they learn in the classroom for real-world projects (66%).

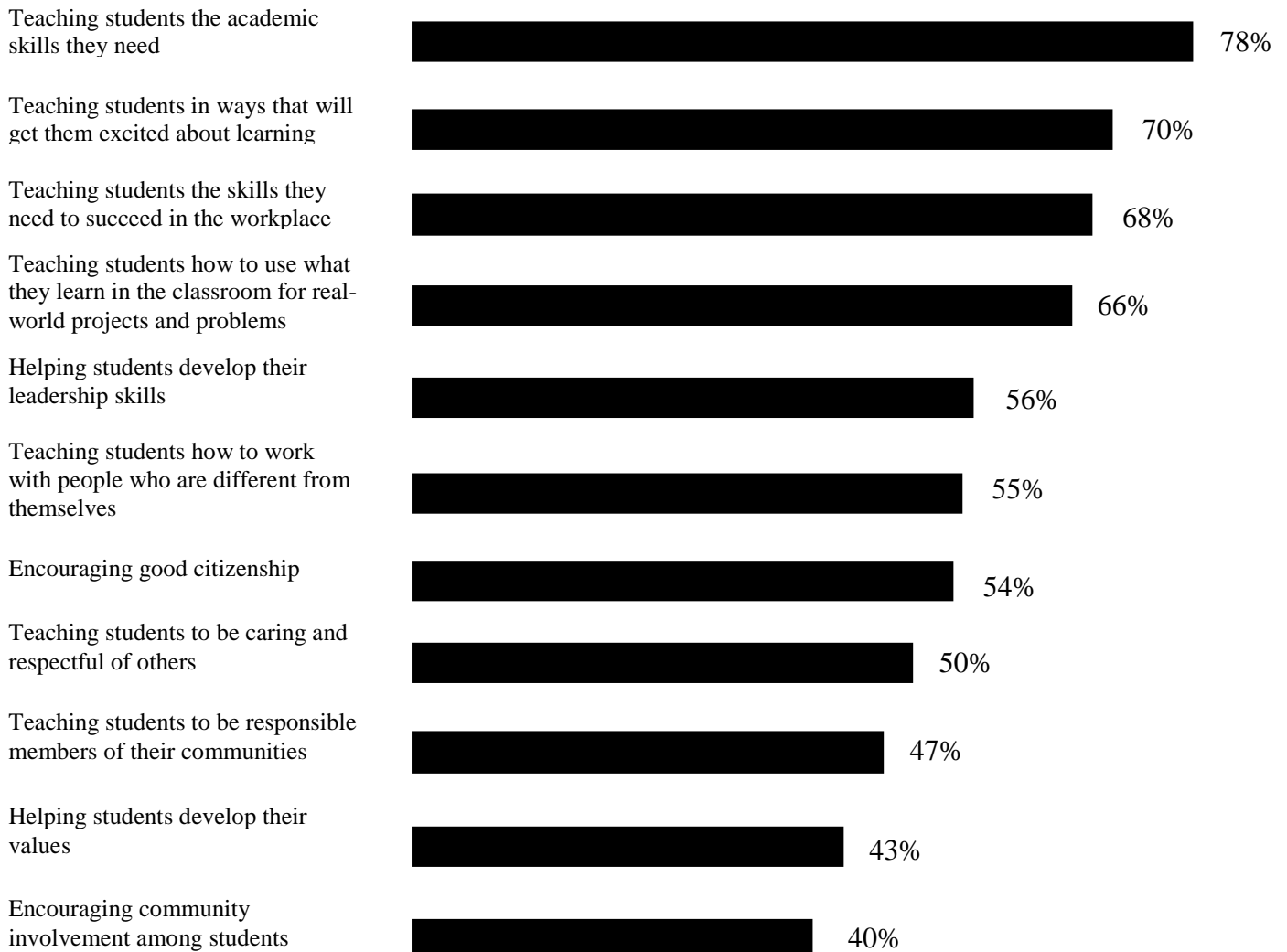
Half or more of Americans also believe that schools have a responsibility to teach or encourage:

- leadership skills (56%);
- working with others who are different (55%);
- citizenship (54%); and
- care and respect for others (50%).

Responsibilities of Public Schools

% saying each is a “definite responsibility” for public schools in the US

Base: All respondents



Q.5 – How much responsibility do you think the public schools in the United States (including kindergarten through 12th grade) have to do each of the following?

People of Different Ages See Schools' Responsibilities Differently

Younger adults are particularly focused on students acquiring the academic skills and real-world experiences that lay the foundation for success later in life. For example, about three-fourths (76%) of adults age 18 to 34 believe it is a definite responsibility of schools to teach students the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. In comparison, only 61% of adults age 55 or older believe this is a definite responsibility.

Older adults are more likely to consider “encouraging good citizenship” and “teaching students to be caring and respectful” to be definite responsibilities of public schools.

Responsibilities of Public Schools – By Age

% saying each is a “definite responsibility” for public schools

Base: All respondents

Considered more of a responsibility by younger adults

	<u>Age</u>		
	18-34	35-54	55+
Teaching students the academic skills they need	82%	79%	71%
Teaching students the skills they need to succeed in the workplace	76	66	61
Teaching students how to use what they learn in the classroom for real-world projects and problems	70	67	59

Considered more of a responsibility by older adults

	<u>Age</u>		
	18-34	35-54	55+
Encouraging good citizenship	50%	53%	60%
Teaching students to be caring and respectful of others	48	47	56

Q.5 – How much responsibility do you think the public schools in the United States (including kindergarten through 12th grade) have to do each of the following?

Does the Public Think Schools Are Responsible for Encouraging Citizenship and What Is the Public's Vision of Good Citizenship?

The majority of Americans say public schools have a definite responsibility to encourage good citizenship (54%).

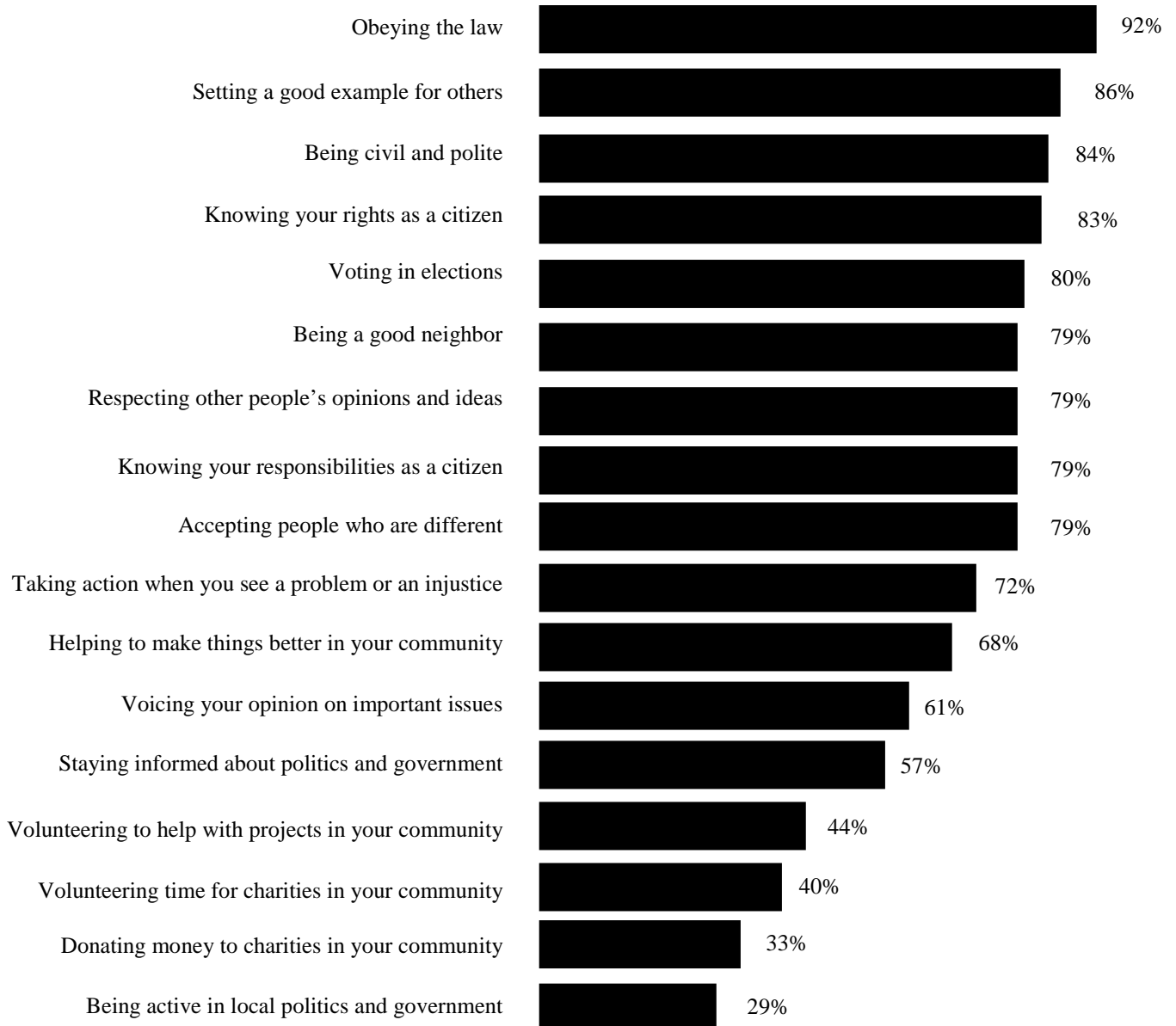
So, how does the public define good citizenship and community involvement? For many Americans citizenship has at least two aspects. One aspect focuses on the legal rights and responsibilities of citizenship: obeying the law, knowing your rights, and voting. The other aspect focuses on American values: setting a good example for others, being civil, being a good neighbor, respecting other people's opinions, accepting people who are different, and taking action when you see a problem or an injustice.

Large majorities of Americans agree that all of these activities and attitudes are very important aspects of good citizenship. Fewer people, but still relatively large minorities, also say volunteering help and time for community projects is also an important aspect of citizenship.

Aspects of Good Citizenship and Community Involvement

% saying each is a “very important” aspects

Base: All respondents



Q.3 – We would like to know what you think are important aspects of good citizenship and community involvement. Please tell me whether you think each of the following is very important, not too important, or not at all an important aspect of good citizenship and community involvement.

Schools Are Not Fulfilling Many of Their Responsibilities

Many Americans believe the school system is not meeting its responsibility to effectively prepare students for life outside of school and after graduation. The majority of the public says schools are doing a poor or only a fair job of meeting their responsibilities in these key areas:

- teaching students how to use what they learn in the classroom for real-world projects (57%);
- teaching students to be caring and respectful of others (57%);
- helping students develop leadership skills (55%); and
- teaching students in ways that get them excited about learning (53%).

In What Ways Are Schools Not Meeting Their Responsibilities?

% saying each is a definite responsibility along with performance rating

Base: All respondents

	Responsibility	Performance Rating	
	<i>% saying a definite responsibility of public schools</i>	<i>% saying public schools do an "excellent" or "good" job</i>	<i>% saying public schools do an "fair" or "poor" job</i>
Teaching students in ways that will get them excited about learning	70	41	53
Teaching students the skills they need to succeed in the workplace	68	43	53
Teaching students how to use what they learn in the classroom for real-world projects and problems	66	38	57
Helping students develop their leadership skills	56	40	55
Teaching students how to work with people who are different from themselves	55	42	52
Teaching students to be caring and respectful or others	50	40	57
Teaching students to be responsible members of their communities	47	38	58
Helping students develop their values	43	37	58
Encouraging community involvement among students	40	41	54

Q.4 – In general, how good of a job do you think the public schools in the United States (including kindergarten through 12th grade) are doing with each of the following?

Q.5 – How much responsibility do you think the public schools in the United States (including kindergarten through 12th grade) have to do each of the following?

Part Two: Public Attitudes Toward Service-Learning

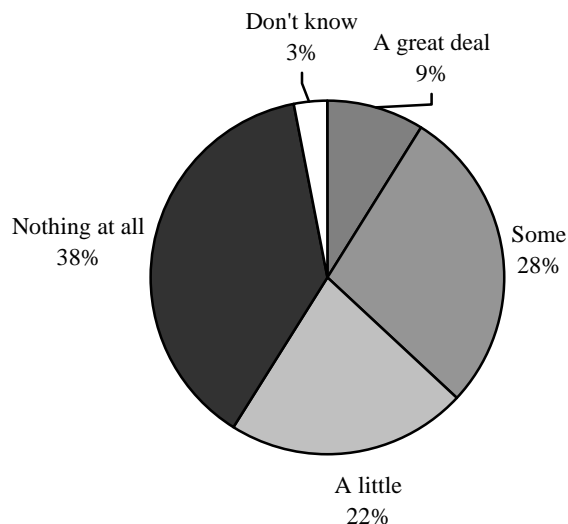
Knowledge of Service-Learning Is Low

Relatively few Americans are familiar with the term service-learning. When asked about the term, a majority of Americans report that they have heard or read “just a little” (22%), nothing at all (38%), or don’t know anything about it (3%). Only one-third of the public say that they know either a great deal or some about service-learning (37%).

Recognition of the Term Service-Learning

% who are familiar with the term service-learning

Base: All respondents



Q.7 – How much have you heard or read about public school having students in kindergarten through 12th grade get involved in “service-learning” as part of their education? Would you say you have heard or read a great deal, some, a little, or nothing at all about “service-learning?”

Americans are more knowledgeable about the kinds of activities service-learning students pursue than the actual term “service-learning.” Slightly more than half of the public say they know a great deal or some about “public schools having students in kindergarten through 12th grade get involved in community projects or activities as part of their education” (52%).

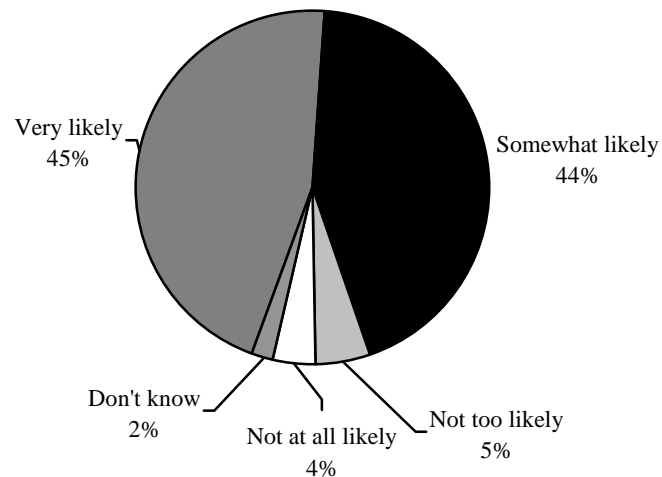
Americans Overwhelming Endorse Service-Learning

When given a simple definition of service-learning, the overwhelming majority of Americans say that they would support such a program in their local schools (90%). Forty-six percent of them indicate that they would be very likely to support service-learning in their local public schools.

Gauging Support for Service-Learning

% likely to support service-learning in the local school

Base: All respondents



Q.8 – In service-learning, students, as part of their education, strengthen their academic skills by using what they are learning in school for community projects. With this in mind, how likely would you be to support service-learning in your local public schools? Would you be likely to support it, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not at all likely to support it?

Who Is Most Supportive of Service-Learning?

Parents and people who volunteer in their communities are significantly more likely to support service-learning in their local schools.

- Parents with children under 18 years old are significantly more likely than the rest of the population to say they are very likely to support service-learning in their local public schools (52% vs. 42% respectively).
- People who have volunteered in their community in the last 12 months are more likely than those who have not volunteered to say they are very likely to support service-learning (54% vs. 36% respectively).

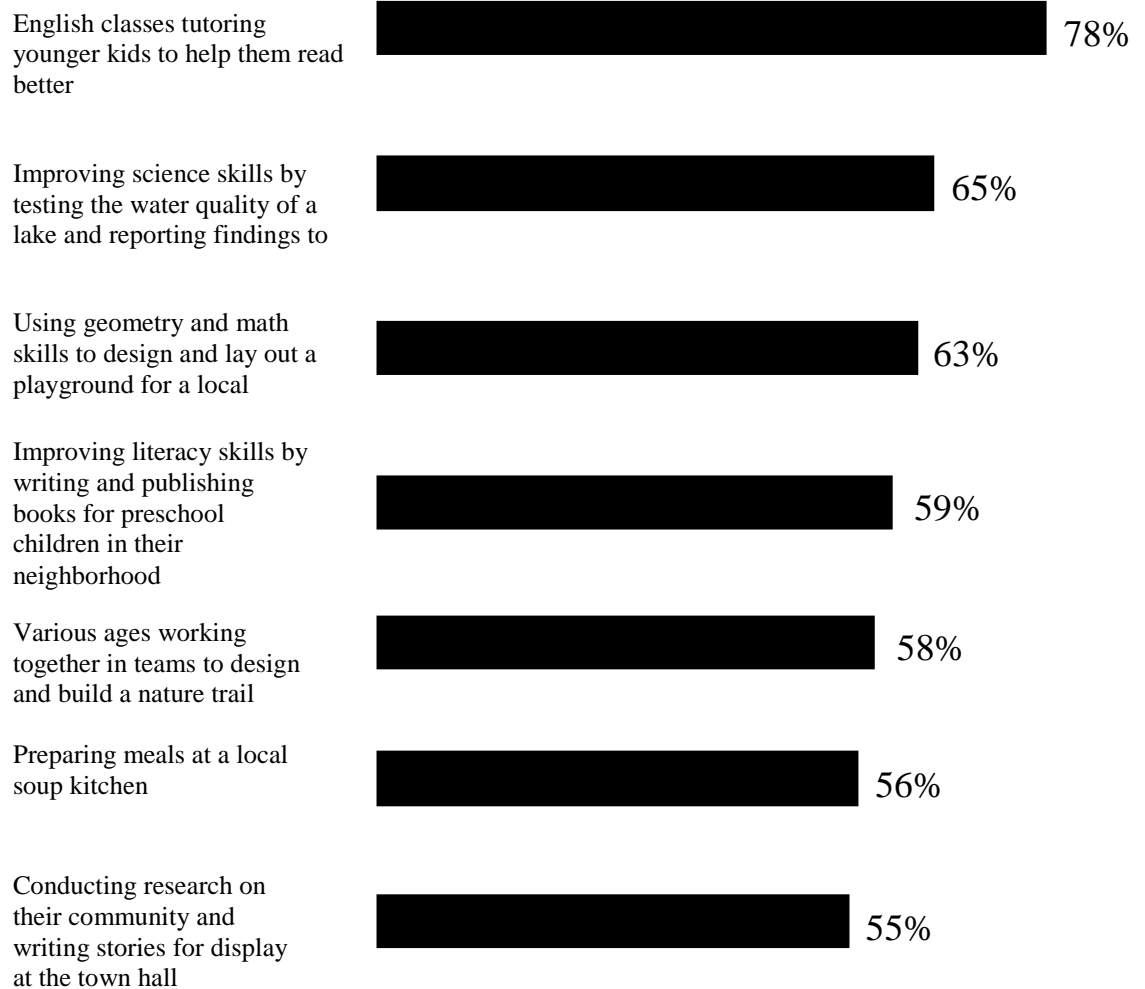
What Types of Service-Learning Activities Do Americans Support?

Americans are most supportive of service-learning projects that use academic skills in practical projects that help other children or communities.

Support for Service-Learning Activities

% saying "very likely" to support service-learning in local public schools

Base: All respondents



Q.9 – How likely would you be to support service-learning in your local public schools if each of the following was an example of a service-learning project? Would you be very likely to support it, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not at all likely to support it?

Potential Benefits of Service-Learning That Are Most Appealing to the Public

Americans are very attracted to the potential benefits that service-learning offers. They are especially likely to support service-learning after hearing that service-learning experiences can:

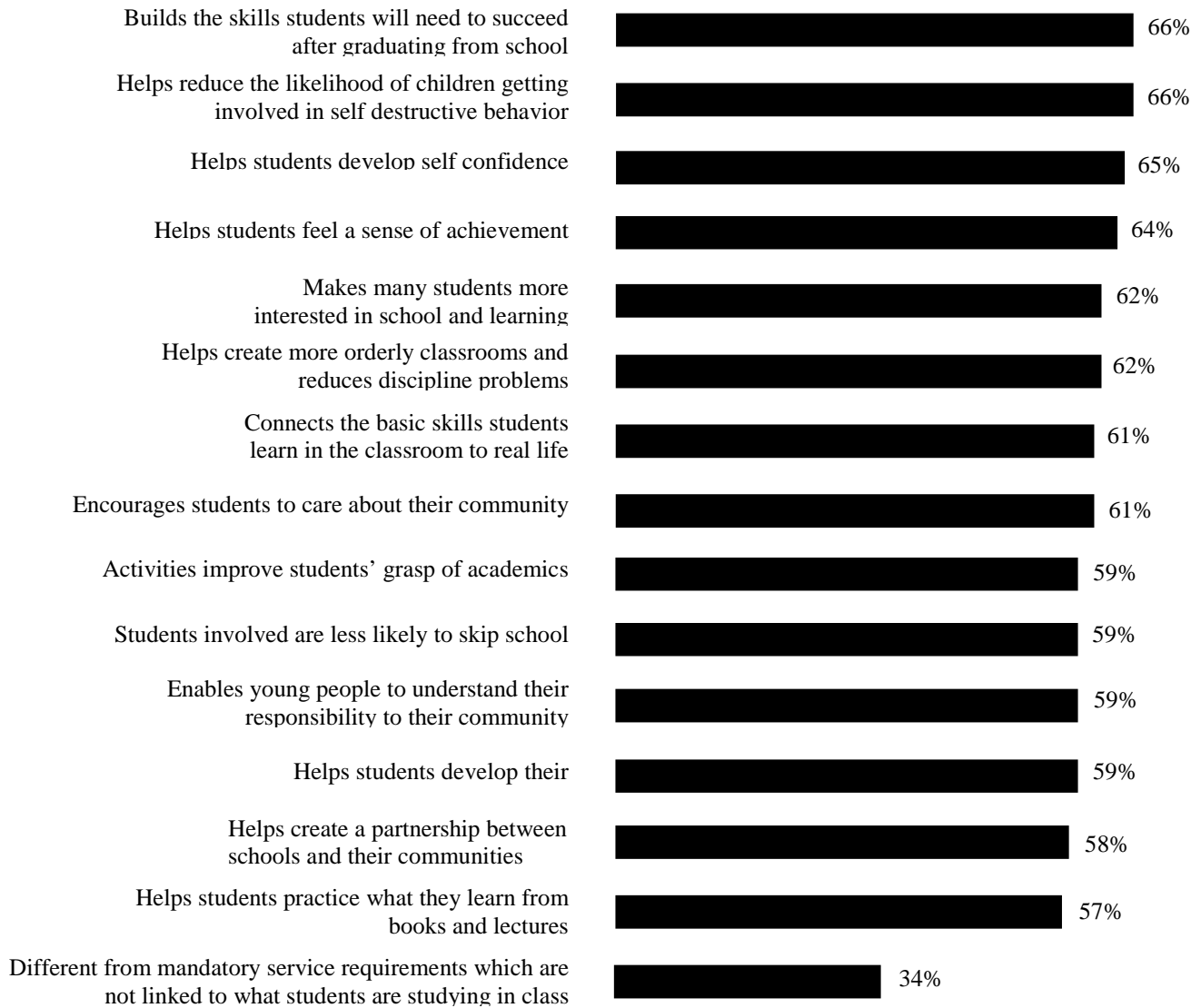
- build the skills students will need to succeed after graduating from school;
- reduce self-destructive behavior; and
- help students increase their self-confidence and sense of achievement.

Women, more than men, are somewhat more supportive of service-learning because of the potential social or emotional benefits for children. Women are significantly more attracted than men to service-learning as a vehicle for helping students:

- develop self-confidence;
- feel a sense of achievement; and
- develop their values.

Potential Benefits of Service-Learning That Move People the Most

% who say each benefit makes them “much more” supportive of service-learning
 Base: All respondents



Q.10 – Please tell me whether each of the following would make you much more, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less supportive of including service-learning in your local public schools? Or would this not change your opinion?

Will Service-Learning Help Schools Provide the Public's Vision of a Successful Education?

As described earlier in this report, the majority of Americans believe schools are responsible for teaching students academics, teaching them skills that will help them succeed in the workplace, and encouraging citizenship. The public also believes schools are not meeting these responsibilities. But an overwhelming majority of Americans agree that service-learning can help schools meet these responsibilities and will have a positive impact on students.

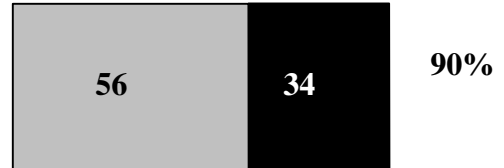
No less than 85% of Americans agree that service-learning will help students build skills to be successful later in life, encourage citizenship and community involvement, and help students improve their grasp of academic basics. Additionally, close to half of all adults strongly agree that service-learning can do these things.

Will Service-Learning Strengthen Education?

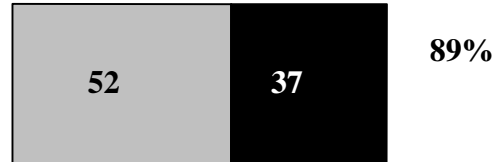
% who agree with statement

Base: All respondents

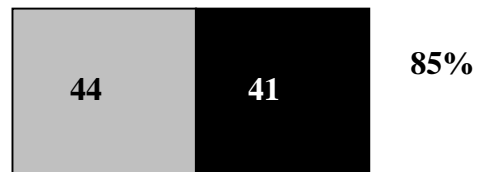
Service-learning will help students build the skills they need to be successful in life



Service-learning will encourage active citizenship and community involvement



Service-learning will improve students' grasp of academic basics



Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Q.11 – Now I'm going to read to you a list of statements that some people have made about schools and service-learning. For each, tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

What Are the Potential Hurdles Service-Learning Faces?

Americans have some concerns about the feasibility and value of service-learning. They are most concerned with the time and money needed to implement service-learning:

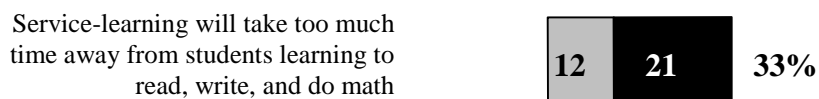
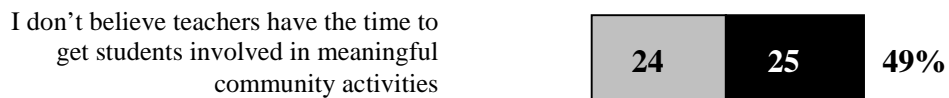
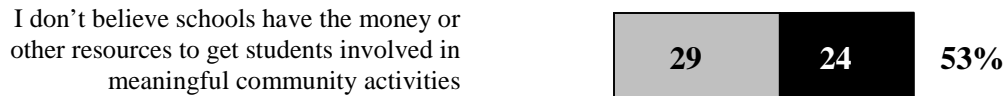
- Fifty-three percent of adults agree with the statement “I don’t believe that schools have the money or other resources to get students involved in meaningful community activities.”
- Forty-nine percent of adults agree with the statement, “I don’t believe teachers have the time to get students involved in meaningful community activities.”

People who do not have school-age children are most concerned about the time and money it might take to implement service-learning.

Reaction to the Potential Pitfalls Service-Learning Faces

% who agree with statement

Base: All respondents



Strongly agree
 Somewhat agree

Q.11 – Now I'm going to read to you a list of statements that some people have made about schools and service-learning. For each, tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.