



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

Just How Smug Are the Affluent about Their Local Schools?

Is the high opinion affluent Americans have of their local schools unwarranted? Jay Greene and Josh McGee suggest just that in their pathbreaking report comparing the performance of students in 13,636 school districts in the United States with students in other industrialized countries.

Students in many of this country's most affluent school districts—Beverly Hills, California; Fairfax County, Virginia; and Montgomery County, Maryland, for example—are performing at only a mediocre level when judged against students in countries throughout the industrial world.

In their presentation of these startling results, Greene and McGee argue that the affluent have an inaccurate sense of the quality of their schools, in part because state testing systems encourage comparisons between students attending suburban schools and those in urban centers rather than comparing students with their peers in other advanced industrial nations. They worry that, as a result, the school reform effort lacks energetic support from a segment of the population that is politically active and thought to be particularly powerful.

Some of the results from the 2011 *Education Next* poll (see “The Public Weighs In on School Reform,” *features*, Fall 2011) lend empirical support to this line of thinking. My colleagues and I found that 54 percent of college-educated Americans whose incomes fall within the highest income decile in their state give their local schools an A or a B on the five-point scale teachers use to grade students. Only 15 percent of the affluent give one of these two grades to the nation's schools as a whole.

Of course, the affluent are not the only ones to grade local schools less harshly than the nation's schools. Among the general

public, 46 percent give local schools an A or a B, even though just 22 percent give the nation's schools equally high grades. And teachers prove themselves to be the most generous graders of all: 64 percent of them give their local schools an A or a B, and 37 percent give the nation's schools an equally high grade.

Yet the disparity between the national and local evaluations is greater among the affluent than among the public as a whole. Does that mean the affluent oppose school reforms? The *Education Next* survey doesn't provide much evidence for that inference. If anything, a larger portion of affluent Americans than of the public as a whole favors reform. For example, 64 percent of the affluent favor the formation of charter schools, compared to 53 percent of the general public. Similarly, 52 percent of the affluent lend their support to merit pay—basing teacher salaries in part on student test performance—compared to 47 percent of the public. Two-thirds of the affluent oppose teacher tenure, but just 49 percent of the general public does. And 80 percent of the affluent would have students pass a statewide test if they are to be given a high school diploma, a view held by 72 percent of the public.

It is the teachers whose opinions most clearly deviate from those of the public as a whole. Thirty-seven percent of teachers oppose the formation of charter schools, compared to just 19 percent of the affluent. When it comes to merit pay, 72 percent of teachers are opposed, but only 36 percent of the affluent are. When it comes to tenure, 53 percent of the teachers support the idea, compared to 20 percent of the affluent.

Still, satisfaction with local schools does dampen enthusiasm for school reform, among the affluent and the public alike. If the Greene and McGee findings disturb this complacency, the study could have an impact on school districts around the country.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
