

Travels Without Charley

by John F. Jennings

In his year of traveling the nation, Mr. Jennings identified four causes of the public's skeptical attitude toward public education. He discusses those causes here and the actions we must take to deal with each of them.

JOHN Steinbeck decided in midlife that he needed to reacquaint himself with his country, so he got into a camper with his dog, Charley, and spent many months traveling throughout the United States. Steinbeck said that as a writer he needed to hear the accents of people in various parts of the country in order to help him write better.

Last year I shared Steinbeck's sentiment. I had spent many years dealing with schooling and the issues in education, but I felt a need to hear people talk about education in all parts of the country in order to understand better how our schools are faring.

In December 1994 I completed one part of my life — better than a quarter-century working with the Congress on education issues — and began a new phase by establishing the Center on National Education Policy, a small education "think tank" in Washington, D.C. I had some idea of what I would do through this new institute, but I did not know exactly which problems to address. So, following Steinbeck's example, last year I accepted just about any and all invitations and traveled throughout the country — but without a Charley.

During 1995 I visited about one-half of the states and logged some 80,000 miles. During these visits I talked about education with thousands of parents, teachers, students, principals, state legislators, governors' aides, and other citizens. I came back impressed with the thoughtfulness of people's views. Whether in Portland, Oregon, or Savannah, Georgia, I observed that people will listen to the news and hear the debate about issues, but generally they do not rush to judgment. Most people take a very commonsensical approach to education issues. They are willing to listen to a variety of opinions and to try to weigh all the evidence.

But I also came to some troubling conclusions after this year of traveling. People do not always have the basic information they need to form sound opinions about education. Facts that I knew as a matter of course from my experiences in the debates in Washington came as news to many people. And the negativism I heard everywhere surprised me. Traditionally, Americans are known as an optimistic, can-do people. But we seem to have lost some of that spunk and to be wondering if things are out of control and beyond repair.

Wherever I went, I heard constant criticism of the public schools from government and business leaders and from the major news media. Governors, state legislators, business leaders, and the press continually harped on the faults of public education. In many states, efforts are under way to encourage parents to abandon public schools. As a result of these attacks, I saw teachers and administrators turning inward, becoming discouraged, and not engaging in the debate with the public about what the schools should do and how they should go about doing it.

So I was not surprised when, late in the year, I read *Assignment Incomplete*, a report from the Public Agenda Foundation, an organization that uses polling and focus groups to identify the public's attitudes on issues of national concern. Since that report touches on what I heard and saw regarding public perceptions of the schools, I will repeat the main findings. I do not necessarily agree with all these conclusions, but the general tenor is consistent with what I observed during 1995.

American support for public education is fragile and porous. Although many people voice initial approval of their own local public schools, this support disintegrates at the slightest probing. People think private schools do better than public schools in the areas that are most important to them - safety, order, standards, and smaller classes. Moreover, if they could afford to, the majority of public school parents would send their children to private schools.

Despite their disappointment with public schools, however, most Americans are not ready to dismantle the public system — at least not yet. People would like the public system to work - to provide the environment and standards that are conducive to teaching and learning. But people also are clearly frustrated and

confused about how to make this happen. Understanding of such alternatives as vouchers and privatization is fragmentary, and people are divided over whether more money will improve the schools. Thus, in the battle over the future of public education, the public is essentially "up for grabs." Neither the advocates of public education nor the proponents of private alternatives should confidently count the American public on their side.

These conclusions are startling when one considers how central the institution of public education has been to the development of the United States and how important it continues to be in American life. Nearly every neighborhood in every part of the country has a public school, and in everyday life the existence of public schools has simply been assumed. But Public Agenda's polling results showing deep skepticism about public education are supported by other recent surveys of opinion, although the findings may not be stated so dramatically. For instance, in surveying women, the pollster Celinda Lake has found strong support for education as a way to make a better life, but she has also found the prevailing view that education in America is in bad shape. "Despite a long tradition of support for public education, Americans seem to be halfway out of the schoolhouse door," concludes David Mathews, president of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, in his recent book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* Using more than 10 years of research, Mathews found that most people view schools as serving the private purpose of achieving economic well-being, but they have lost sight of any purpose for society in general that might be served by the public schools.

IF THERE is such skepticism about public education and such conditional support for continuing the enterprise, how did we come to such a pass? And are these negative conclusions warranted?

Based on my year of traveling, listening, and observing, I have identified four principal causes of this skeptical attitude toward the schools. Others may identify different causes, and their reasoning may have as much validity as mine. My conclusions are not based on a scientific survey, but, as Steinbeck said in his book of travels, small truths that are observed can reveal the foundations of a larger truth.

First, everywhere I went I found the major news media to be extremely negative about public schools. This negativism is very significant because at least three out of four American households do not have children of school age, according to demographer Harold Hodgkinson. The families without children in the schools receive most of their impressions of the schools from the news media, and so the picture that is painted there is extremely important in shaping the country's general opinion of education.

An example may help to illustrate this point. When I was in Kansas in November 1995, a violent incident in one school had recently made headlines throughout the state. According to the teachers and administrators I talked to, that meant that many people thought there was widespread violence at many different schools. The media made no attempt to put the incident in perspective as a single event involving a limited number of children in one school; instead, the media contributed to the creation of a general impression of danger in the schools. With the overwhelming majority of people lacking direct contact with the schools, there was no counterweight to that impression. Consequently, the schoolpeople had become very frustrated because, while they believed that the picture of the schools being painted in the media was not accurate, they had no way of correcting it.

Maybe there was a good explanation for the treatment that this event received in the news media in Kansas, but I mention it here because similar events were handled in like fashion wherever I went. The bad news was immediately broadcast, and good news about the schools rarely made it into print or onto television.

From my work in Washington, I know that there is much good news about the effects of school reform, but I saw no evidence that these positive trends are widely known. The good news that is not known is that the public schools are better today than they have been in years past and that the school reforms of the last decade are starting to pay off. Consider some examples.

In 1982 only 13% of high school graduates had completed a core curriculum of four years of English and three years each of science, social studies, and mathematics; by 1992, 47% of graduating seniors had taken this more difficult coursework.

In 1982 the high school dropout rate was 13.9%; by 1993 that rate had fallen to 11.0%, even though high schoolers were taking more demanding courses.

In 1982 the high school dropout rate for blacks was 18.4%; by 1993 that had fallen to 13.6%, an even more dramatic drop than the drop for all students. And again, this occurred at a time when black children were taking more demanding coursework than before.

Everyone knows that American students do not stack up well in science and mathematics when compared with students in other countries in international assessments. But hardly anyone knows that American students ranked among the best in the world in comparisons of reading achievement (even given all the problems with making comparisons between nations).

And Americans have finished more years of schooling than have the citizens of many other industrialized countries, including Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

In other words, we are not going to hell in a hand basket. Americans show a dedication to education and have attained high levels of schooling. American high schoolers are taking more difficult courses than they were taking a decade ago, and, even with these greater demands, more high schoolers are staying in school. And the progress for black Americans is especially noteworthy. It was not that long ago — the late 1960s — when more than one-fourth of black students dropped out of high school; today the black dropout rate has dramatically declined and is approaching the average for all students.

I mention these facts because they are not widely known; instead, many Americans believe that the public schools are doing an awful job and that our children are not being educated. This impression generally comes from the major media, which ignore the good news and focus on the bad. Where are the headlines telling us that students are taking more demanding coursework and that schools are achieving lower dropout rates? Where are the television reports on the advancements made by blacks?

What the media do highlight each year are SAT scores, and these results stick in people's minds as a demonstration of the failure of the public schools. Every year, when it releases the results, the College Board cautions the media that the test-takers are not a representative group, because students choose whether or not to take the test. The College Board further cautions against misusing the state-by-state data because the proportion of high school seniors who sit for the exam in each state varies so widely. Moreover, the SAT was never designed to serve as an indicator of national trends in achievement or in the quality of schools. Yet every year the media ignore these cautions and spread the results on the front pages of newspapers and on the evening news shows.

SAT scores did decline from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, but they have been gradually rising since then. In fact, last year the average scores increased by five points on the verbal section and three points on the math section. The media, which trumpeted the declines of years past and laid the blame squarely (if mistakenly) on the schools, wrote stories last year designed to show that the increases had to be the result of something other than better schooling. While aggregate scores on the SAT should not be used at all when discussing the quality of schooling, the media reveal their bias in the lack of consistency of their coverage of increases and declines.

When asked why they feature so many negative stories on education, the news media respond that they are merely reporting the news and that there are no reports showing progress in education, while there are numerous reports showing failures. This is not quite true, because the U.S. Department of Education, Money magazine, the RAND Corporation, Phi Delta Kappa, and others have issued various reports showing positive data and have published articles documenting improvements in schooling. Yet these articles and reports have clearly not received the same extensive media coverage as have the reports of bad news. The news media's response, though, is accurate in one respect: many school reformers believe that a dark picture of the schools must be painted in order to force action to improve the schools. These reformers — for the best of reasons — are feeding bleak facts and reports to the media. In other words, well-meaning individuals who want to change the schools are overstating their case — or at least ignoring the progress that has been made — because they believe that otherwise no change will occur.

Consider, for example, the use of the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). High standards for what students ought to know in history, geography, mathematics, science, and reading have been adopted by the National Assessment Governing Board, and these standards are being used in the national assessments. The results show that American students have not demonstrated mastery of these subjects, based on these high standards, and this is the news that is carried throughout the country by the media when the NAEP reports are issued.

But this lack of mastery of high standards does not mean that the students of today know less than did the students of some years ago. For example, between 1982 and 1994 the performance of 17-year-olds on the NAEP mathematics and science assessments improved enough to equal an additional year of learning, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, which is the federal data-collecting agency. Scores on seven of the nine trends in the NAEP in reading, mathematics, and science are at all-time highs, according to researcher Gerald Bracey.

When the reports are written on the results of the NAEP tests, the question becomes a matter of emphasis. Should student achievement be compared with what some experts say students ought to master, or should student achievement be compared with the achievement of students in the past? Today's students should know more than they do, because we live in an increasingly competitive and increasingly complex world. But today's students do know more than students did a decade ago, because the schools are doing a better job today than they did then. Unfortunately, only the first news is the subject of headlines.

I am not mentioning all of this in order to say that the schools ought not to be changed or that students should not be held to higher standards. There are many reforms that must be implemented, including encouraging students to know much more and holding them accountable if they do not. But the good news is being drowned out, and the bad news is being overemphasized, with the disastrous effect that citizens are starting to lose faith in public education.

ANOTHER deleterious effect of the extreme negativism of the news media is that teachers and other educators are losing heart and are starting to turn inward. They are less and less inclined to explain what they are trying to do. Based on what I learned in my travels, I would identify this disengagement of educators as the second cause of the public's skepticism about the schools. But this second cause is directly related to the first — the unbalanced reporting in the news media.

Let me give an example of this state of affairs from the meetings I attended last year. In August I was in a western state for several days of meetings with school superintendents and state legislators. One day, the chair of the education committee of the state senate lectured the superintendents about how they had to implement total quality management in their schools, and he drew on his experiences in business to make his case. The senator told the superintendents that their job was to produce a better product and that this product was higher test scores. If that product was not delivered, the implication was that producers other than the public schools would be found to fill the role.

The next day the state legislators were not in attendance, and the superintendents and I met among ourselves. I asked them whether they agreed with the senator, and they said that they did not, because parents were not telling them the same thing as he was. Many said that parents wanted their children to be "well- rounded," which meant to be active in sports and to have many friends, as well as to do decently in school. Some said that parents were more concerned about whether the school's football or basketball team was doing well than about what the test scores of the school were. None said that parents were demanding that the schools had to help their children get the highest test scores or to learn the most they could.

I then asked the superintendents why they said nothing when they were lectured the day before by the state senator on how their job was to produce higher test scores. Why didn't they tell him that this purpose was not what the parents were telling them they wanted from the schools? The superintendents answered that they could not satisfy all the critics of the schools even if they tried. They said that they typically faced one set of critics in one room, whom they would try to answer (without success), and another set of critics in another room, whom they could not satisfy either. As a consequence, they had given up trying to respond at all, which I identify as turning inward.

I saw that inwardness on display during the three days I was with them. They would gripe to one another about how awful things were with finances and lack of support, and then they would shrug off suggestions that they deal with the newspapers or other media in order to gain support. I observed this turning inward by educators in many of my travels last year.

So that is how my second reason for the faltering of public confidence in the public schools ties in with my first. The bad news has been emphasized so much that those who are trying to do better in the schools are becoming discouraged, they are not receiving any support or encouragement from those outside the schools, and they are giving up on explaining to the public what they are trying to do.

Obviously, this situation is not good for public education. If no one answers the critics when they are unfair, then the criticisms gain credibility. However, the situation is not irreversible. Whenever I mentioned to teachers and principals some of the good news about increased academic course-taking or lower dropout rates, they would immediately perk up and say that, based on their own experience, they knew that their schools were better than before, but no one in a leadership position was telling them that.

It is a tricky business to try to bring about major change and still keep up the spirits of those who are being asked to make those changes. Based on all that I saw this last year, we have gone too far in emphasizing the need for change without acknowledging the progress that has already been made. I know that I will be criticized by reformers for saying this because they will allege that such statements will lead to an easing up on the pressure and so will make it take longer to achieve reform. But, from what I have seen, the far greater danger at this point is that our country will lose the institution of public schooling because the intense and persistent criticism of the schools plays into the hands of those who do not necessarily share the philosophical assumptions underlying public schooling.

THIS LEADS to what I identify as the third cause of public skepticism about the schools. The political Far Right is hammering the public schools, and the pounding is further shaking popular support for public education.

Far Right groups are making all sorts of accusations about the schools and so inflaming the debate. The most visible example around the country of these irresponsible assertions by the Far Right concerns the Goals 2000 program, which seeks to raise education standards. The American Policy Center, for instance, called this program, which is based on work begun by President Bush and completed by President Clinton, "a diabolical assault on local schools." One can reasonably disagree with Goals 2000, as many liberals and conservatives do, without making it the work of the devil.

On 30 August 1995 the Wall Street Journal quoted some other assertions that have been made about the Goals 2000 program.

"The government plans to take over the responsibility for raising infants, toddlers, and preschoolers," according to the same American Policy Center. The program "would let federal workers judge parents' performance in the home and take their children away," according to a New Hampshire group. The program "would allow the federal government to remove children from homes where guns can be found and loaded within 10 minutes," according to a New Hampshire-based gun owners' group.

Such statements are summarily dismissed by many as the ravings of a small minority, but in quite a few school districts I have seen the effects of the repetition of such assertions about public schools and their programs. School boards and even state governments are being cowed, and teachers feel that they are being left to go it alone, without anyone explaining the reasons for legitimate programs.

All this has led to an inevitable conclusion: the Far Right has begun to label public schools as "government schools," implying that there is a cabal involving the ruling elite to control the minds of children. In November 1995 the Separation of School and State Alliance announced its aim of removing any government influence from schooling and urging a complete reversion to private schools, "just as they were in the early days of the colonies." It's time "to end 150 years of socialist, welfarist schools," said the proclamation of the Alliance, according to the Washington Times.

Again, many people may dismiss this announcement as insignificant — but, from my experiences of the past year, I believe it is dangerous to let these statements stand. There are elected representatives at both the state and national levels who are espousing the same beliefs as these, and their assertions are not being challenged or debated, with the effect that policy is being made that reflects these beliefs.

For instance, last fall I received a phone call from a Republican staff member of the education committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, who asked me whether it was true that the public schools were created by a small minority to control the majority. When I asked how he came by such an absurd notion, he said that a number of the newly elected conservatives on the committee had made these assertions in the committee caucus, and he needed to know if there was any material available explaining the reasons for the creation of the public schools. Let this be a lesson to all those interested in public education: do not presume that everyone knows that the country developed public education over the course of a century and a half as a means of ensuring a democratic form of government and a more cohesive society.

THE THREE reasons for the shakiness of public support for the public schools that I have outlined here are coming together and having a cumulative impact. The major news media are painting a dark picture of public education, teachers and administrators are turning inward and not engaging the public, and the Far Right is making wild statements about the schools that, left un rebutted, are fueling popular apprehension. Then there is a fourth reason that I observed this past year, which further adds to the confusion and weakens support for public schools: we say that we want higher academic achievement from our children, but we are not willing to change our conduct — or theirs — to realize that end. When no change takes place, our leaders assert that the schools have failed.

Business executives, governors, legislators, and presidents say that American youngsters must know more if they are to get good jobs and help the country compete in a world economy. Citizens agree that standards ought to be higher in the schools. For instance, the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll released in August 1995 showed that 87% of Americans favor higher standards for promotion from grade to grade and that 84% favor higher standards for graduation from high school.

But let me return to the example of the school superintendents in that western state. The state senator told them that their job was to produce higher test scores, and they did not publicly disagree. But they told me that parents really wanted their children to be well-rounded and for the schools to have good sports teams. Parents were not demanding that the schools raise test scores.

The public is ambivalent about children doing well in school. Most parents say that schools should have higher standards, but many parents are also reluctant to have their children work hard to achieve those standards. The Public Agenda report cited above found that Americans consistently and strongly support higher academic standards. However, Americans also believe that "too much learning is suspect." In particular, the report stated, "Sixty-two percent of parents say they would be satisfied with a B average for their child. Only 16% say they want their children to get mostly A's. And almost one parent out of four (23%) would be unconcerned if their child had lots of friends and participated in many social activities, but was only a C-average student."²

We clearly have a problem here. On the one hand, the country's leaders say that the schools must produce higher academic achievement, and the general public seems to agree, but on the other hand the parents want "well-rounded" children who do modestly well in school but who also have friends and participate in social and athletic events. Which is it to be? The schools are caught in the middle — they are condemned by the leaders for not raising academic achievement and by the parents if they do not have a good basketball team.

We have to sort this out. Either the leaders get the parents to agree that academic achievement is truly important, or the leaders have to have more realistic expectations about what the schools can do. And if the leaders prevail and convince the parents of the need for higher achievement — which I hope they do — then certain things must change. Currently, high school students spend only 41% of their time on the basic academic coursework, with the majority of their time being spent on elective courses and on other activities, according to the National Education Commission on Time and Learning.³ If we really want students to do better, schools should be reorganized to emphasize academics. And parents will have to make greater demands on their children to study, with the television being turned off more and with fewer expectations that children will work after school to earn spending money. So this is the fourth cause of public skepticism about the schools that I wish to put forward: effort results in achievement, but we as a nation are not making the effort to get higher achievement. Then we condemn the schools for failing.

From my year of traveling without Charley, I have identified four causes of the public's skeptical attitude toward public education, and we must take action to deal with each. First, the news media must paint a more balanced picture of public education. Second, teachers and other educators must explain what they are doing and engage the public in conversation about it. Third, civility must be returned to our discourse, and the unsubstantiated claims of some Far Right groups must be rebutted even as their legitimate concerns are addressed. And fourth, we must agree as a nation on what we want from the schools, and then we must dedicate ourselves to attaining those objectives.

The public schools are better than they are being given credit for being, but this does not mean that they cannot and must not improve. Important reform efforts are already under way, but these efforts are being jeopardized by increasingly negative public attitudes toward the schools. What we need is a new commitment to work within the public schools to make them better.

The Center on National Education Policy, which I direct, is doing its part by producing two publications — one on the reasons that the U.S. developed public schools and one on the basic facts (both good and not-

so-good) about public education. I believe that we must turn the conversation about public education back to the fundamental questions. Why did we as a people create public schools? Are those reasons still valid? What are the schools doing well? Where are the real problems?

We are very fortunate in that Phi Delta Kappa, as a co-sponsor of our work, has published these materials, and we are working with other groups to ensure a wide distribution. This fall, in conjunction with the National Parents and Teachers Association and our center, Phi Delta Kappa is also sponsoring a series of public forums throughout the country to discuss public education. The purpose of these forums is to have a reasoned discussion, involving various groups in local communities, of why the country has public schools, what the true picture is on the status of public education in each community, and what expectations the community holds for its schools.

We hope that our work in this area encourages others to undertake similar efforts. As a nation, we have been too divided, too uncivil with one another. We must try to find agreement on basic issues, such as education, and then we must all get to work to do better.

John Steinbeck undertook his travels because he wanted to relearn the accents of American speech. He wanted to listen to people talk, and he wanted to hear what they had to say about day-to-day life. I feel privileged that I was able to make my own travels throughout the country, and I have learned again that Americans want to do the right thing. And if they can engage in a civil and open discussion about the real problems, they will.

1. Jean Johnson, with Steve Farkas, Will Friedman, John Immerwahr, and Ali Bers, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1995), p. 11.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3. National Education Commission on Time and Learning, *Prisoners of Time* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994).

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