

# COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY *for* QUALITY SCHOOLS

Results of the 2008 National Poll  
and the Civic Index  
for Quality Public Education



# Measuring Public Attitudes and Public Involvement in Education Across 10 Categories

*Public Education Network (PEN) has focused a significant portion of its agenda on the need to engage the American public in public education. By 'public engagement' we mean citizen action on behalf of public education to fulfill three roles: demanding and setting expectations of excellence in public education; electing officials that will ensure all children receive a quality public education; and ensuring that there are sufficient and stable financial resources for public schools. Public education cannot exist as a valued public institution, and quality public education will not be provided to all children, without the vigilant, knowledgeable, and active support of the American people.*

*Today, with the launch of the Civic Index for Quality Public Education, we go beyond what members of the 'public' must do, to describe what various sectors of a 'community' must do to support public education. These sectors, or 'categories' of community support, as we describe them in this document, must hold themselves and each other accountable for each playing their part. And ultimately the public will be the arbiter of whether they have succeeded.*

**For many years, policymakers and the public have been holding students and schools accountable for improvement, but there was no way to determine whether the public and its elected officials were doing their part.**

Quality public schools depend on supportive communities and strong civic leadership. In the words of researchers Anne T. Henderson and Karen Mapp, "When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more."

For many years, policymakers and the public have been holding students and schools accountable for improvement, but there was no way to determine whether the public and its elected officials and community organizations were doing their part to strengthen public schools. To address this shortcoming, Public Education Network (PEN), with funding from the MetLife Foundation, developed a first-of-its-kind Civic Index for Quality Public Education as a comprehensive online tool to help the public understand what assets their community must have to support high performing public schools.

The Civic Index consists of 10 categories of community support determined by the public and experts to be critical factors outside the school to support and sustain quality public schools. The categories include everything from the role elected officials play in leading change to the depth and quality of media coverage and parental and business involvement in schools.

The research-based index was developed over the past several years in consultation with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland and researchers, social scientists, and national experts from more than 30 organizations and universities. The online Civic Index toolkit includes numerous resources, strategies, and best practices for communities to assess how well

they are supporting their schools, and to improve that support in each category. It can be accessed at [www.civicindex4education.org](http://www.civicindex4education.org).

This document summarizes the findings of the 2008 Civic Index public opinion poll, a key element of the toolkit. (The survey instrument used in this year's launch was first tested nationally in 2006 and used across communities in West Virginia as a self-assessment.) Comparisons between 2006 and 2008 results are reported in this summary. The 2008 poll is based on a national phone survey of 1,200 adults nationwide, including an oversample of Latino/a and African-American adults. It was conducted by Lake Research Partners in May 2008. The poll was designed to discern the scope and depth of community responsibility for quality public education and determine the importance of education in the public's mind, their attitudes toward school improvement locally and nationally, and the use and availability of information about quality schooling in their communities.

The poll provides insight into national trends and is being used as a benchmark by communities nationwide to ascertain how well they are doing across the 10 categories of community support compared with national data. Each city or county will release a local report card and work with their public to 'improve their score' in 'low-scoring' categories using the numerous resources, strategies, and best practices for each category provided in the online Civic Index toolkit.

San Francisco and Paterson, N.J. have already conducted the Civic Index in 2008. Bridgeport, Conn.; Cincinnati, Ohio; Hamblen County, Tenn.; Mobile, Ala.; Oakland, Calif.; and Washington, D.C. will do so in the next several months.

## Education Still a Major Concern in the Face of Rising Prices, Economic Woes

With gas prices soaring and the economy lagging, the public still sees education as a significant priority. Even when other issues are seizing the day, Americans care about education, ranking it third, slightly above health care. Top concerns included gas prices (22 percent) and jobs and the economy (19 percent), followed by education (12 percent), health care (11 percent), crime and drugs (8 percent), taxes (8 percent), the budget deficit (4 percent), homeland security (4 percent), the environment (3 percent), and traffic and roads (3 percent).

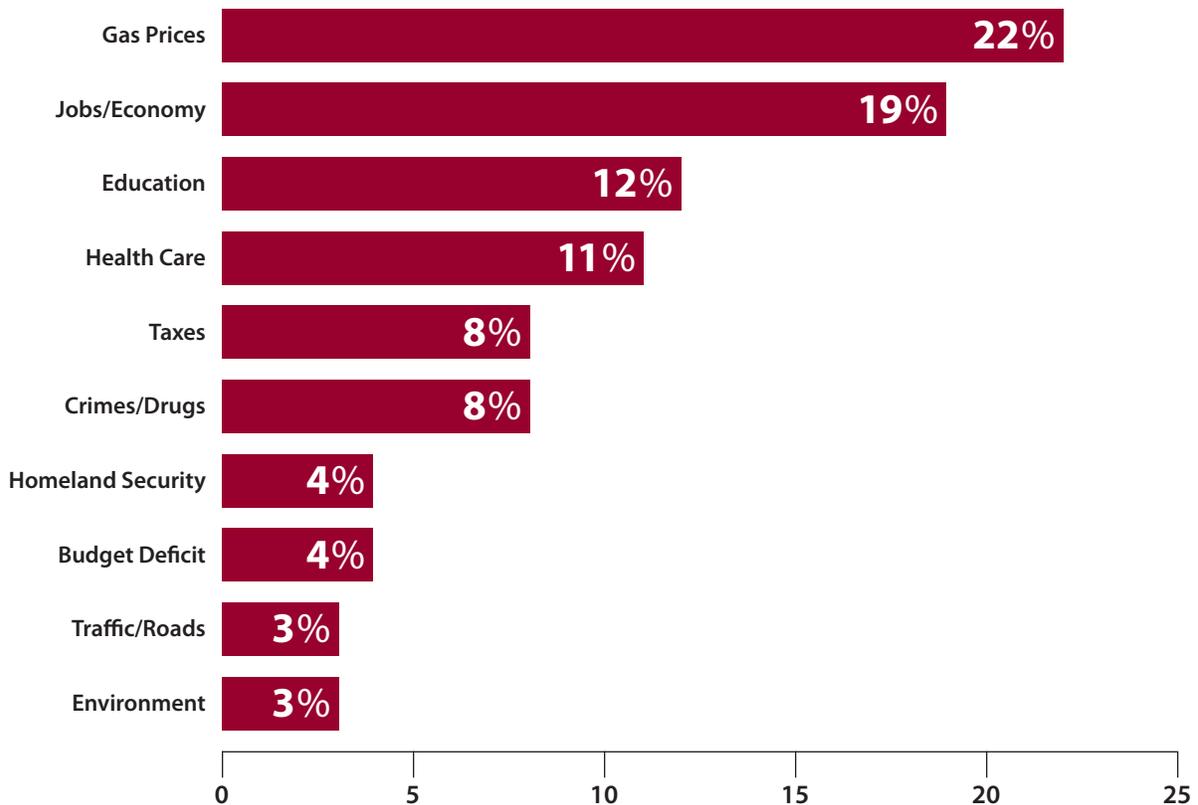
This marks a change from two years ago, when education was seen as the most important issue local leaders need to address. It dropped 4 points, from 16 percent in

2006 to 12 percent this year.

While its importance has declined somewhat since 2006, education remains a crucial topic on which the public will base their votes for president. The 2008 poll asked, “Thinking about the presidential election, of all the issues that come up in the election, how important are the candidates’ positions on education in helping you decide which candidate to vote for?” In a second poll that PEN conducted in 2006, a majority of voters (56 percent) said that a candidate’s position on education was “one of the most important” or “very important” in helping them decide. Today, close to half (48 percent) say a candidate’s position on education is “one of the most important” issues or “very important.”

**Americans say that education is a crucial topic on which they will base their votes for president.**

### Most Important Issue



**More than 6 in 10 Americans (63 percent) believe elected officials are not held accountable for their efforts to improve public education.**

Furthermore, at a time when Americans are worried about rising prices at the gas pump and job losses, 60 percent of Americans say they have not heard enough and still want to hear more from candidates for office about education. Sixty-three percent believe elected officials are not held accountable on this issue, while 3 in 10 (29 percent) believe they are held accountable.

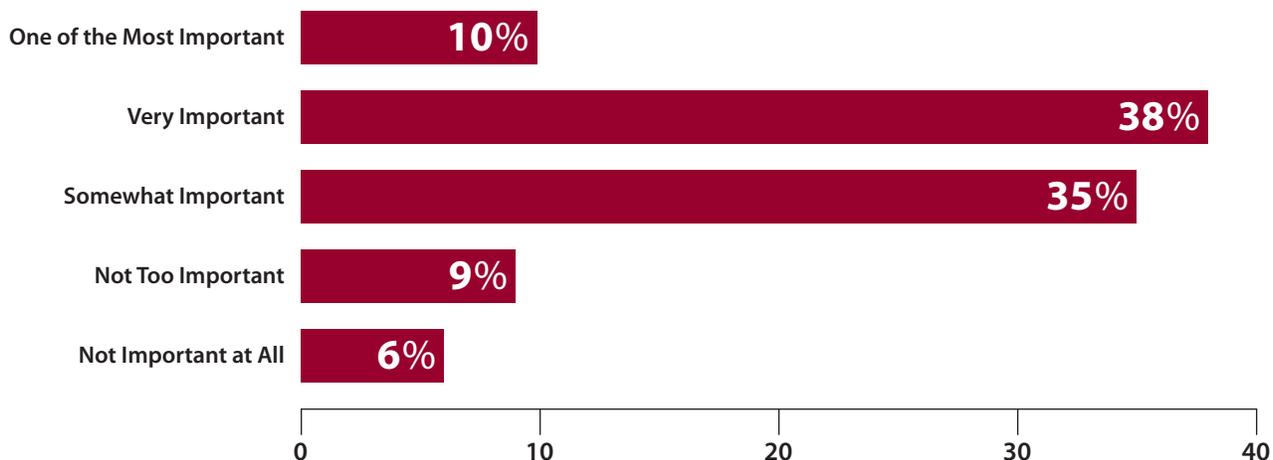
Meanwhile, more than one-third of voters (36 percent) say they are hearing less about education as an election issue this year than in years past, compared with 16 percent of the public who are hearing more about education today than they have in the past.

Most Americans say they are getting too little information about where candidates

stand on education – from virtually every source. Print media, family and friends, candidates themselves, and community organizations declined by a whopping 17, 16, and 13 points, respectively, as sources of information about candidates over the past two years. Only the Internet was seen as an increasing source of information – up 5 points since PEN’s 2006 poll.

The PEN poll also reveals that the public is divided about the effectiveness of the federal No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) after six years of implementation. About 3 in 10 (31 percent) Americans say the law has helped in the performance of local public schools; about 3 in 10 (31 percent) say it has hurt; and a large minority (38 percent) say that it has made

**How Important Is a Presidential Candidate’s Position on Education to Your Vote?**



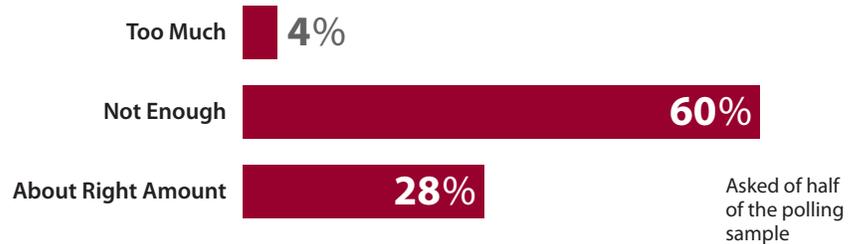
no difference or that they just do not know. African-Americans and Latinos are by far the most positive about the law. By about a 2-1 margin, they believe the law has helped rather than hurt.

**Views on School Improvement Efforts**

Voters say that schools are getting worse, not better, and that improvement efforts, including NCLB, are not working well enough. Many voters express growing dissatisfaction with school improvement and the commitment of local, state, and national leaders to strengthen the quality of public schools. Four in 10 Americans (40 percent) said that the quality of schools nationally has declined compared to 15 percent who said that schools were getting better. Meanwhile, about one-third of all Americans (32 percent) said that the quality of schools in their local community has declined compared with about one-quarter (26 percent) who believe their local schools are getting better. The data reveal that the public is losing, rather than gaining, confidence in local and national efforts to improve our schools. Americans are waiting for change. They have not seen it, and they want to see more.

Parents who are closer to schools have a more positive view than those who are not as involved. Parents with children in school were significantly more likely to say that their local schools have improved (33 percent) than non-parents (23 percent).

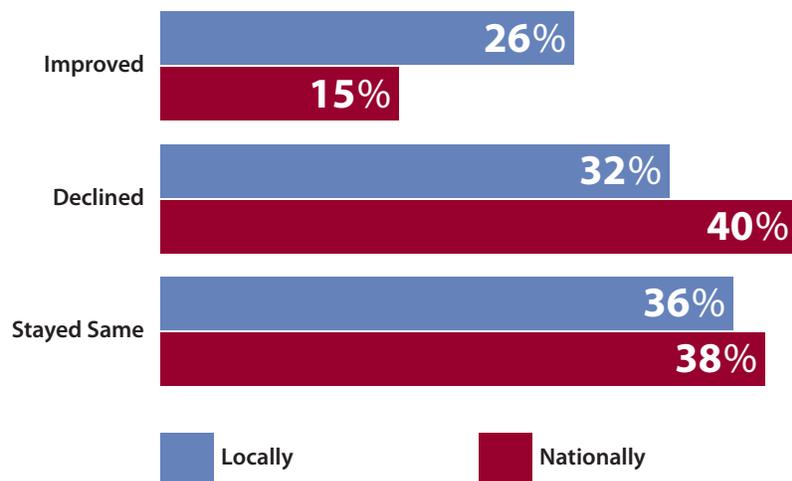
**How Much Have You Heard About Education in This Year's Election?**



**Are Elected Officials Held Accountable for Their Actions on Public Education?**



**Have Schools Improved Locally/Nationally?**



## Half of Americans Are Involved; Public Says Key Stakeholders Need To Do More

The civic index indicates that Americans are doing more to support their schools than they were two years ago. About 6 in 10 (59 percent) said they personally did something to support their local public schools, up from 54 percent when the index was first tested in 2006.

When pressed to say how deep their involvement was, 17 percent said they were “very involved” and 33 percent said they were “somewhat involved.” Nearly 7 in 10 (68 percent) respondents said that people in their community take “a lot” or “some responsibility” for ensuring there are quality public schools, compared with 28 percent who said the community took “a little” or “no responsibility.”

In assessing public involvement across all 10 categories in the Civic Index, the public reserved its lower ratings for

education leadership of local elected officials, business involvement, and media coverage of education, and its highest ratings for commitment to educational opportunity.

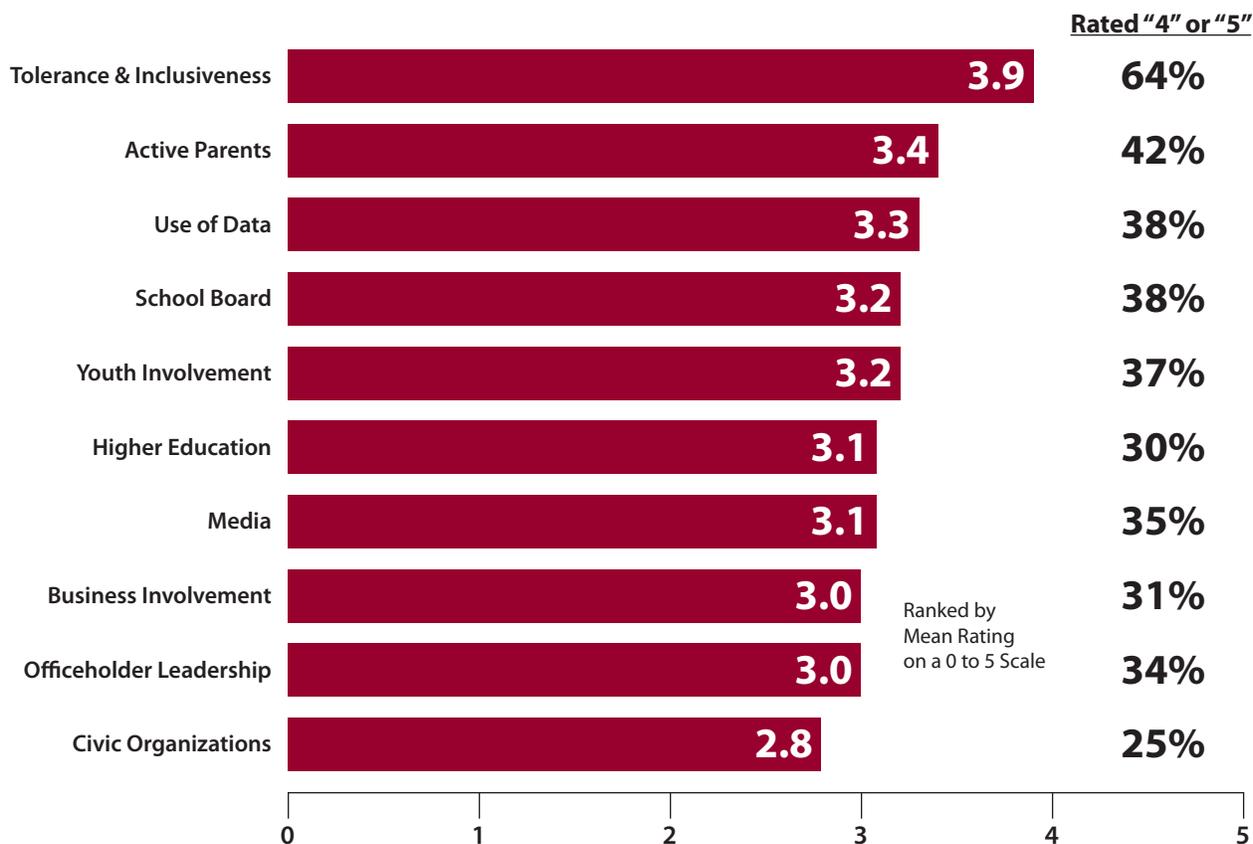
While the rankings remain relatively unchanged from 2006 across the 10 categories (indicating the stability of the index), only half of Americans say they are involved, and key stakeholders need to do more. This year’s poll reveals a 1- to 2-point drop in virtually every category and a 2- to 5-point drop in intensity (highest marks received) in every category. These declines are consistent with the public’s overall concern that public education is less of a priority today than it was a few years ago.

**Tolerance & Inclusiveness:** Public schools received high marks for ensuring equal

educational opportunity for both boys and girls and for different racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups. Eight in 10 Americans gave public schools a rating of 4 or 5 on a five-point scale for providing educational opportunities for boys and girls (80 percent). Meanwhile, 7 in 10 Americans gave high ratings to schools for providing educational opportunities for children of all racial or ethnic backgrounds (70 percent) and for children of all economic backgrounds (67 percent). These ratings were relatively unchanged, except for a small drop in intensity.

**Parent Involvement:** The public says that parents are considerably involved in education, stay informed about issues, and are encouraged to participate and contribute ideas on what it takes to improve public schools.

### How Does the Public Rate Their Communities Across 10 Areas of Community Support?



Column identifying the highest ratings of '4' or '5' (based on average of combined responses across all questions in each category) shows level of intensity of responses

About half (48 percent) said that schools encourage parents to participate and take an active role, and 4 in 10 said that parents are highly informed about key issues (39 percent).

**Use of Data:** The public rates the use of data for improving student achievement relatively high among the categories, but there is not much intensity in their views. Nearly half (46 percent) of Americans gave ratings of 4 or 5 to indicate that there is easily available data on test scores and graduation rates of local high schools.

**School Board:** While traditionally few people vote in school board elections, particularly in large cities, the public said that members of their community not only voted in

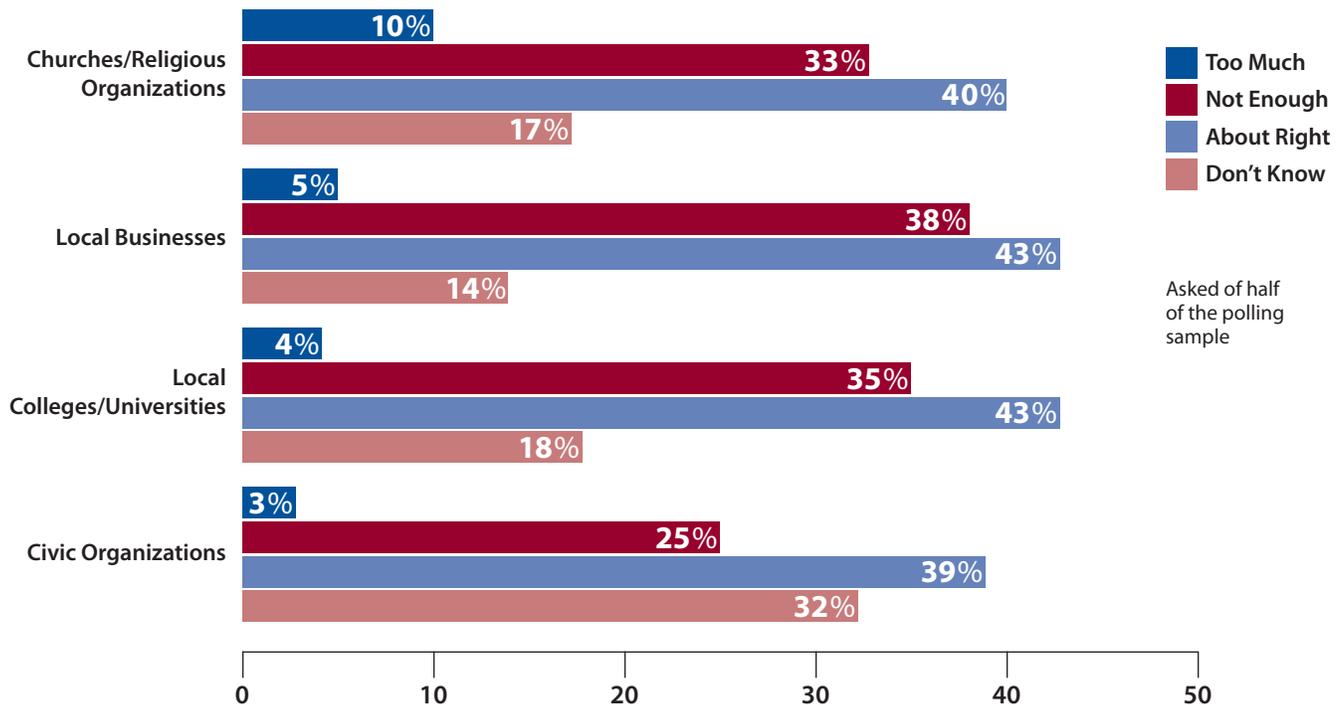
presidential elections but also vote for local education leaders. This is attributable, we believe, to excitement generated by this year's presidential elections.

**Youth Development and Involvement:** Americans say that young people are a huge asset, and that they are important in addressing key challenges in education. But communities are not giving young people much of a voice in decisionmaking or the skills they need to take on leadership roles that will be beneficial now and in the future.

**Higher Education:** Just 30 percent of the public gave a '4' or '5' to colleges and universities for assisting local public schools by encouraging their college students to volunteer in public schools.

**Media Coverage:** While the public gets most of its information about education from the media, the public gave low ratings to the local print and broadcast media for not reporting on voting records nor reporting the extent to which elected officials keep their campaign promises. They gave somewhat higher marks to the media for reporting on candidates' education platforms and providing regular in-depth coverage. About one-third of the public (33 percent) said that news reports on local schools emphasized good things happening in public schools compared to 41 percent who said the media is focused on negative aspects of public schools. The data also reveal that those who see positive reports about education have a much rosier picture about schools both locally and nationally, and the reverse is true as well.

## Are Key Community Groups Doing Enough to Improve Public Schools?



## Methodology

**Business Involvement:** Two-thirds of the public (68 percent) say that local businesses are involved in education. But by a nearly 8-1 margin, the public thinks business leaders are doing too little (38 percent) rather than too much (5 percent) to support public schools. The public says that businesses do not offer much support for schools by giving time off and compensation to their employees when they need to attend school events. The public was somewhat more positive about business help in advocating for public schools by offering resources such as internships, financial support, and other assistance that helps student achievement.

**Officeholder Leadership:** Officeholders received some of the lowest ratings of all categories. As noted earlier, the public wants elected officials to make education more of an issue. Only one-quarter (25 percent) of all voters gave ratings of 4 or 5 to elected officials in their communities for consistently communicating with constituents regarding public education issues. Meanwhile, 39 percent of the public gave high ratings to local officials for demonstrating their commitment to public education by voting for or seeking adequate financial support for public schools.

**Community Organizations:** Studies have shown that participation in civic and community groups has been declining for some time. Many Americans would like to see community organizations more involved in improving the quality of public schools and gave their lowest scores to this category in part because they are unsure of what roles civic organizations play or could play in communities. The nation is challenged to strengthen these institutions and reengage the public in real opportunities to strengthen civic and public life.

The poll is based on a national phone survey of 1,200 adults nationwide, including oversamples of 100 Latino/a and 100 African-American adults. The poll was conducted by Lake Research Partners in May 2008. The data were weighted slightly by age, education, race, and party identification in order to ensure that it accurately reflects the demographic configuration of these populations. The margin of error for the base sample is +/- 3.1 percentage points. The margin of error is larger when quoting data for subgroups.

More detailed findings and copies of the report are available on Public Education Network's Web site, [www.publiceducation.org](http://www.publiceducation.org). The Civic Index can be accessed at [www.civicindex4education.org](http://www.civicindex4education.org).

### Acknowledgements

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**MetLife Foundation** supports education, health, civic, and cultural organizations. Education is a major focus of the Foundation, informed by findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. For more information visit [www.metlife.org](http://www.metlife.org).

**Public Education Network (PEN)** is a national association of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals to advance public school reform in low-income communities across our country. PEN believes an active, vocal constituency is the key to ensuring that every child, in every community, benefits from a quality public education. PEN and its members are building public demand and mobilizing resources for quality public education on behalf of 12 million children in 33 states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. PEN has expanded its work internationally to include members in Mexico, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa, and Tanzania. In addition to the Civic Index, PEN also manages Give Kids Good Schools ([www.givekidsgoodschools.org](http://www.givekidsgoodschools.org)), a national campaign to guarantee a quality public education for every child in the nation. It seeks to provide Americans with the information and tools they need to take action in their communities and improve their public schools.

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