

# ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION

By [Jason Amos](#)

[Vol. 6 No. 8](#)

[Apr 18, 2006](#)

Rating

*"We have supported many schools and school districts in their efforts to redesign and create new high schools that ensure all young people graduate prepared for college and success," said Tom Vander Ark*

On April 11 and 12, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* focused its estimated 49 million U.S. viewers' attention on "American Schools in Crisis," a 2-day report on the poor state of America's high schools. During the first show, Bill and Melinda Gates unveiled STAND UP, a national campaign to make the public more aware of the dropout crisis in American high schools and to provide them with the tools to make a difference. The campaign's goal is to ensure that students receive the support they need to graduate from high school ready for college, work, and citizenship.

"We have supported many schools and school districts in their efforts to redesign and create new high schools that ensure all young people graduate prepared for college and success," said **Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, one of 50-plus foundations, community-based schools, education organizations, and others that have joined the campaign. "But it will take more than these efforts to get the job done. STAND UP seeks to provide all Americans—parents, teachers, community leaders, and others—with information they need to take action so our high schools prepare all young people and our country for a strong future."

According to an article in *Education Daily*, more than 2 million visitors visited the STAND UP website after its launch. "We've had people hitting our site at a rate of 20,000 per second," said **Mike Franzini, president and media director of the nonprofit media-consultant firm Public Interest**, which conceived the campaign. "So we know that we're tapping into something big."

**Students Trade Places on Oprah**

On one segment of the first show, Oprah showed the reactions of students from two very different kinds of high schools when they switched places for a day. Students from Harper High School, which is located in a low-income community in Chicago and graduates just 40% of its students, and students from Neuqua Valley High School, a \$65 million facility that graduates 99% of its students, couldn't believe what they saw about how the others were being educated.

At Neuqua Valley, students enjoy an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a gym and fitness center, a huge computer lab, and an award-winning music department. In contrast, students at Harper High must pass through metal detectors when they enter their school building, which does not have enough instruments for a music class-students must rely on improvised instrumentation, like banging on desktops-and the school's swimming pool has not contained water in a decade. "It's so mind-blowing to think that there's such a difference and we're both in the same state, an hour away from each other," one Neuqua Valley student said.

To no one's surprise, the academic performance between students at Harper High School and Neuqua Valley was as different as night and day. At Neuqua Valley, 78% of students met the Illinois reading standards, 76% met the science standards, and 77% met the math standards. At Harper High, only 16% met the reading standards, 1.5% met the science standards, and just 0.5% met the math standards.

After sitting in on a math class at Neuqua Valley, a Harper student questioned whether her education at Harper would prepare her for life after high school. "I was looking at the math problems that they're doing [at Neuqua Valley], and I'm like, 'What language is that?'" she said. "As soon as I get to college, I'm going to be lost."

As part of her shows, Oprah laid out the problem and offered substantive hope for fixing schools. However, she said that the American public needs to take a more active role in demanding better schools and asked individuals-as they think about who they will vote for later this year-to consider what elected officials are doing and saying about this matter. She directed individuals who were concerned about the crisis in America's high schools to make their voice heard.

"I believe, just as I know all of you watching believe, that every American child deserves the best school," she said. "If you've watched this show today, and you realize that your child is one of the children who is not getting the best that this nation has to offer, or if

you are concerned about what's happening to other kids in this country, go to [StandUp.org](http://StandUp.org).”

## **Oprah/TIME Survey Finds Americans Dissatisfied with Public Schools**

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* also teamed up with *TIME* magazine to conduct a poll on Americans' attitudes on the educational system and on high school dropouts. According to the poll's results, 55% of Americans are dissatisfied with the public schools in this country, with 61% saying that they think public schools are in a “crisis.” When asked how serious they thought the dropout problem is, 89% of Americans said it was “extremely serious” or “somewhat serious.”

When asked how they would solve the dropout problem, most Americans seemed to favor stronger enforcement measures to keep kids in school. For example, 83% said that making truancy enforcement stronger would be “very effective” or “somewhat effective” at reducing the number of children who skip school without an excuse. When asked at what age a student should be allowed to drop out, 38% said age 18, whereas 26% said that students should never be allowed to drop out. In addition, the poll found that 87% of respondents thought that increasing “parental involvement by offering training to parents on how to keep their children in school” would be “very effective” or “somewhat effective” in fixing the dropout problem.

Respondents thought that states could justifiably deny certain privileges to dropouts. Sixty-five percent said a state should be allowed to deny a student a driver's license if he or she dropped out of school and is under age 18, and 33% said a state should be allowed to deny individuals a work permit. The poll also found that Americans would put their money where their mouth is when it comes to improving schools-59% of those surveyed said they would be willing to pay higher taxes to improve the public school system.

In addition to the national poll, the April 17 issue of *TIME* also features a cover story on the “Dropout Nation.” It profiles Shelbyville, Indiana, a middle-class town that is located about 30 miles from Indianapolis. Of the 315 Shelbyville students who started ninth grade 4 years ago, only 215 are expected to graduate. As **Shelbyville schools' Superintendent David Adams** said, “I think [when] the average person thinks dropout, they think urban, they think minority. But that's just not the case.” In addition to its profile on Shelbyville High, the *TIME* article also provides an in-depth look at the nationwide dropout crisis and the repercussions that accompany it.

As Oprah said on both shows, when Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, says he's terrified about the state of American education, it makes her "really, really scared." "I've often said that I believe that education is freedom," she said. "And if it is freedom, indeed, then we are literally imprisoning America's future. We all have to demand more from our local, our state, our national leaders ... and more from ourselves as citizens, because this is a crisis. And this crisis is going to affect every single one of us."

More information on Oprah Winfrey's "**American Schools in Crisis**" report, including features from the show, the STAND UP campaign, and complete results from the poll, is available