

# Student Aspirations: National and International Perspectives

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This paper describes the results of several studies which have articulated the changing goals and aspirations of American Youth during the last two decades. Some cross-cultural comparisons are made and implications for the futures of our youth and society are suggested.

## INTRODUCTION

Webster's (1981) defines aspiration as "a strong desire to achieve something high or great" or "an object of such desire." Some synonyms are yearning, eagerness, inclination.

Aphorisms on aspirations range from the romantic ideal to harsh cynicism.

- Too low they build, who build beneath the stars—Young
- No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings—Blake
- Heaven is not reached in a single bound—Anonymous
- To thy own self be true—the Periclean Greeks
- There are two great disappointments in life, not getting what you want and getting it—Wilde.
- The young have aspirations that never come to pass, the old have reminiscences of what never happened—Saki

Notwithstanding their range, these sayings imply an invention to convert distant dreams into future actualities. They suppose wisdom in dreaming and knowledge in choosing effective means. Who among us is wise enough to know even our own selves let alone to prescribe for others even though parents and educators are expected to do so. At least we can bring some facts to bear.

Aspirations, of course, are important because they guide what students learn in school, how they prepare for adult life, and what they eventually accomplish. Educators can better plan their policies and practices if they understand current youth aspirations. Since they also need to know what affects aspirations and prospects for realizing them, my purpose is to depict youth in the light of national and international surveys.

It is worth remembering both the importance and the tenuousness of our understanding, and the difficulty of prediction (especially if it involves the future). A sage pointed out many a slip between cup and lip. Also worth remembering is the volatility of aspirations and opinions. Youth of the late Sixties seemed the opposite of those characterized by one of our national pollsters George Gallup in January, 1960:

"Essentially quite conservative and cautious . . . old before their time; almost middle-aged in their teens. In general, typical American youths show few symptoms of frustration, and are most unlikely to rebel or involve themselves in crusades of any kind. They like themselves the way they are, and they like things as they are. The U.S. has bred a generation of nice little boys and girls who are just what we have asked them to be" (quoted in Bezilla, 1988, p. 3).

## YOUTH OPINIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

According to recent national polls (Bezilla, 1988), 85 percent of American teenagers report satisfaction with the way things are going in their own personal lives (p. 13).<sup>2</sup> About 40 percent, nonetheless, would like to talk more with parents about family finances, drugs, drinking, and school.

Only about a quarter, however, would like to talk more about sex and religion (p. 15). Their most frequent arguments with their parents are about keeping their rooms clean, their clothes and appearance, and school; the least frequent arguments are about politics and drugs (p. 17). About half get along very well with their parents and only five percent get along poorly (p. 19). Forty percent think their parents are sufficiently strict, a third think they are too strict, and a fifth think they're insufficiently strict (p. 21).

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, the survey findings were obtained during the last few years.

### *Peer Pressures*

Some 40 to 50 percent feel peer pressures to have boy or girl friends, have dates, party, break rules, and drink; and 20 to 30 percent felt pressures to smoke, use marijuana, and have sexual relations (p. 23). Doubling in the last decade from about quarter to half was the increasingly prevalent view that the most important problem of their generation is drug abuse. About ten percent or less were similarly concerned with alcohol, teen-age pregnancy, and peer pressures; five percent or less were so concerned with AIDS, getting along with parents, problems in growing up, unemployment, teen suicide, school problems, financing college, fear or war, economic problems, and career uncertainties (p. 25).

### *Grading Schools and Self*

In percentages, teenagers would give the following grades to their high schools: A, 16 percent; B, 47; C, 25; D, 7; and Fail, 4 percent (p. 45). Teachers would be given the following grades: A, 24 percent; B, 44; C, 22; D, 6; and Fail, 3 percent (p. 47). Half (and even more of those with above-average academic standing) think high school graduation requirements should be more strict; a third believe they should be less strict (p. 49). About 40 percent want more homework; about half, less (p. 51). The following percentages participated in extracurricular activities: interscholastic sports, 32; band, 17; choir, 15; science or math club, 14; dramatics, 11; newspaper, 8; cheerleading, 7; and debating, 3 (p. 59).

In grading their capacities, about half give themselves A's in physical fitness, reading, and spelling; the same grade was given by about a third in writing, mathematics, and history, and about a quarter in science, music, and art (p. 61).

### *Post-Secondary Plans*

With respect to post-secondary plans, half intend to go to college; a quarter, to work and to attend college part-time. About ten percent intend to work full-time; and another tenth plan to join the armed services (p. 69).

Some 85 percent think a college education is very important; and only four percent think it is "not too important" (p. 71). Of those going to college, three-fourths strongly agree that good writing and communication skills are necessary for almost any job; half similarly agree that top jobs in business often go to people with a well-rounded education; about a third believe that students should choose a major and specialize as soon as possible; and about a quarter believe that college success requires knowledge of computers, and that practical studies such as business, nursing, or engineering are best to study (p. 77). Slightly more than half the teens (and more males) believe that U.S. women have equal job opportunities. Sixty percent believe women have equally good chances for executive promotion (p. 79).

In 1977, the most likely occupations for female teenagers in their own views were (in order of likelihood)—secretary, teaching, nursing, medical technician, and model; today—medicine, business, and law. For males in 1977—skilled worker, engineering, lawyer, teacher, and athlete; today—computers and electronics, business, skilled worker, medicine, engineering, law, and military (p. 81).

In thinking about important events in their lives, teens in 1985 expected on average to be married at age 25, own their own homes at 26, have their first children at 27, attain the height of their careers at 31, retire at 64, and die at age 84. In thinking about adult marriage, 72 percent think divorce is too easy, and 23 percent think it is too hard. More than two-thirds think that divorced people didn't try hard enough to save their marriages.

### *National Service and Causes*

A quarter of the teens (19 percent of boys and 30 percent of girls) are involved in charity or social service activities such as helping the poor, sick, or elderly (p. 85). What causes do they serve and which do they aspire to serve (p. 87)? The following are the percentages of each:

Cause	Serve	Aspire
Conserving natural resources	11	56
Racial harmony	9	54
Environment	9	50
World peace	7	68
Women's rights	7	49
Improved government	6	63

Should such large discrepancies be counted as hypocrisy or idealism? Would adults do or report as well?

Somewhat more than half favor one year of mandatory service for the nation either in military or non-military work, here or abroad, such as in hospitals or with elderly people. For themselves, more than half the males would prefer military service, and three-quarters of the females would prefer non-military service (p. 91).

Teen satisfaction with "the way things are going in the U.S. at this time" rose from 42 percent in 1979 to 59 percent in 1988. Somewhat more boys than girls and substantially more Republican than Democrat teens (68 v. 49 percent) are satisfied (p. 99). In the fall of 1988, 52 percent preferred George Bush for president; 42 percent, Michael Dukakis (p. 105). They had earlier preferred Ronald Reagan to Jimmy Carter.

From 1982 to 1988, the percentage of teens that identified themselves as Democrats declined from 45 to 36 percent. During the same period, the percentage of Republicans rose from 33 to 44 (pp. 107, 109).

About half, however, say they are more liberal in their political views than their parents; and about a quarter say they are more conservative (p. 113). Concerning the most important problem facing the country, their views changed from 1982 to 1988: those expressing economic concerns dropped from 57 to 28 percent; those expressing international and defense concerns rose from 23 to 33

percent; and those expressing social concerns rose from 5 to 23 percent (p. 116).

In 1985, more than half thought nuclear war likely and 65 percent believed that the U.S. had a poor chance to survive as a nation. Half thought unilateral disarmament is a good idea (p. 119). More than half said in 1988 that the prospect of nuclear war influences the way they think about or plan the future (p. 121).

*Character and Personal Beliefs*

When asked about personal qualities, the following percentages of teens named the following as "very important" (p. 133):

Responsibility	89
Honesty	89
Self-respect	87
Hard work	70
Independence	65
Patience	61
Obedience	60
Religious faith	44

More than 95 percent believe in God or a universal spirit; three-quarters believe God observes their actions; and about 7 in 10 believe in angels and life after death. Even so, only half have confidence in organized religion, approve of prayer in school (a third oppose it), and attend religious services in a given week (p. 135). More than three-quarters think the Ten Commandments are still valid and can name one; a third could name four (p. 141).

*Role Models*

When asked their first and second choices of the greatest person in history, the following percentages named (p. 154):

Abraham Lincoln	32
George Washington	22
John F. Kennedy	13
Martin Luther King, Jr.	11
Jesus Christ	6
Thomas Jefferson	3
Franklin D. Roosevelt	3
Elvis Presley	2

They named the following as America's greatest presidents (combining top three choices and noting where adults differed by more than ten percentage points (p. 154):

Lincoln	53
Washington	46 (25 for adults)
Kennedy	41 (56 for adults)
Reagan	25
Roosevelt, F.D.	21 (41 for adults)
Carter	12
Jefferson	8
Nixon	7

Youth may name Washington from recent study and adults may directly remember Roosevelt and Kennedy.

From 1985 through 1988, President Reagan and Reverend Jesse Jackson ranked first and second as men teens most admired. Also, mentioned frequently were Mikhail Gorbachev (in 1988), George Bush (in 1987), Don Johnson, and Pope John Paul II. Also mentioned in 1988 were Michael Jordan, Gary Hart, Oliver North, Arnold Schwarzenegger, John Elway and Sylvester Stallone (p. 158).

Except for Geraldine Ferraro in 1985, Nancy Reagan was the most admired woman from 1985 through 1988. Margaret Thatcher, and Madonna were also very frequently mentioned. Frequently mentioned in 1988 were Corazon Aquino, Vanna White, Janet Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Coretta King, Christie Brinkley, and Whitney Houston (p. 160).

The types of leaders teens most admired were as follows: (p. 155):

Government	80
Civil and social rights	28
Religious issues	18
Scientists & explorers	16
Entertainers	4

Many of these choices appear influenced by experiences with the mass media, friends, and parents. They mentioned, for example, the following as their favorite ways to spend an evening (p. 205):

Visiting friends	28
Watching TV	22
Movies	12
Being with family	6
Reading	5
Dating	4
Sports	3
Games	2

From 1980 through 1988, dating and sports declined in popularity while visiting friends and watching TV and movies increased.

**ENVIRONMENTS AND ACTUALITIES**

Given their aspirations, opinions, and activities, how have things been turning out for youth, and what shapes their opportunities (*Youth Indicators, 1988*)? First consider the aspirations of high school seniors four years later in 1986 as indicated by the percentages that held the following life-cycle values "very important" (p. 123):

Having a happy family life	87	(females higher)
Being successful in work	81	(males higher)
Having steady work	80	(males higher)
Having strong friendships	76	
Having leisure time	69	
Providing children opportunities	68	

Having children	49 (females higher)
Having lots of money	23 (males higher)
Living close to relatives	16 (females higher)
Correcting inequalities	11
Moving from area	8
Being a community leader	7 (males higher)

What opportunities and activities affect the possibilities of attaining these aspirations, and how well are youth attaining them? Let us also consider available recent trends.

### *Family Conditions*

Families changed substantially from 1950 to 1985. For example, the number of divorces per 1,000 married women rose from 10 to 22 (p. 10). Several indicators of family difficulties approximately tripled in the period. The percentage of children (under 18) whose families underwent a divorce during the year rose from .6 to 1.7 percent (p. 10). The percentage of children in single-parent families rose from 7.1 to 21.0 percent; the most recent percentages were 52 for blacks, 26 for Hispanics, and 16 for whites (p. 20).

For the period 1950 through 1986, however, median family income doubled from \$15,117 to 29,458 (in 1986 dollars, p. 26). At the end of the period, income was \$17,604 for blacks, \$19,995 for Hispanics, and \$30,809 for whites.

### *Youth Health*

From 1950 through 1985, the death rates per 100,000 for 5- to 14-year-olds halved from 60 to 28 (p. 100). Death rates declined less impressively for older and young adults through age 34. Youth death rates for females remained considerably lower. For youth aged 15 to 19, the leading causes of death (in order) were: motor vehicle accidents (declining), other accidents (declining), suicide (rising), homicides (rising), cancer (declining), and heart disease (sharply declining, p. 102).

From 1950 to 1985 the rates of serious diseases affecting youth changed remarkably: Polio was conquered; measles and syphilis declined sharply. Gonorrhea, however, rose substantially from a high rate in the 1950s; and AIDS incidence about doubled (from a small base rate) from 1985 to 1986 (p. 94).

The percent of the national high school class drinking alcohol within the past month varied from 65 to 72 percent and showed little time trend from 1975 to 1986. By the same criterion, marijuana use showed 23 to 34 percent rates during the period peaking about 1980. Although heroin use remained less than .5 percent, cocaine use rose from about 2 to 6 percent (from 1975 to the 1986 classes). LSD use declined from above to below 2 percent; and PCP use remained around 1.5 percent (p. 98).

### *Youth Crime*

The annual average number of crimes committed against youth aged 16 through 19 was 68 per thousand: 54 were assaulted, 11 were robbed, and 2 were raped. Rates of assault and robbery were generally higher for males than females and for blacks than whites (p. 112).

From 1950 to 1985, arrest rates per 1,000 under-18-year-olds multiplied 30 times from 4 to 119 (p. 114). In 1985, the most frequent causes for arrest for 14- to 17-year-olds were (in order): burglary, alcohol and weapons violations, assaults (other than aggravated), vehicle thefts, disorderly conduct, and drug abuse (p. 116).

### *Labor Force Participation*

Some 38 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds enrolled in school were employed in 1985 (p. 76). About 55 percent of all 16- to 19-year-olds in 1986 were employed or seeking employment; 85.8 percent of the men and 72.4 percent of the women, aged 20 to 24, were similarly employed or seeking employment.

From 1950 to 1986, the percent of 16- to 19-year-olds seeking employment rose from about 11 to 18 percent. Only about seven percent of those aged 25 to 34, however, were seeking employment (p. 74).

### *Quantity and Quality of Schooling*

For the period 1940 through 1986, the percent of 25- to 29-year-olds with less than four years of high school declined from 61.9 to 13.9 percent. Those with four or more years of college rose from 5.9 to 22.4 percent (p. 52).

The average per-pupil costs (in 1985-86 dollars) of public schooling rose 2.7 times from \$1,571 in 1955-56 to \$4,206 in 1986-87. During the same period, pupil/teacher ratios declined from 30 to 19 in elementary and 21 to 16 in secondary schools (p. 56).

### *Educational Achievement*

From the 1974-75 to the 1983-84 school year, reading proficiency rose slightly for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, although whites continued to excel, and blacks lagged behind Hispanics (p. 58). Mathematics achievement rose similarly from 1977-78 to 1981-82 for the various groups and ages (p. 59).

Despite these gains, only about 39 percent of 17-year-olds for the later period were able to "find, understand, summarize, and explain relatively complicated literary and informational material." About 5 percent were able to "understand the links between ideas . . . when not explicitly stated and to make appropriate generalizations . . . when texts lack clear introductions and explanations" (p. 58).

Practical literacy among young adults, aged 21 to 25, was lower than many would prefer: 56 percent had the ability required to locate information in a news article or

almanac; 57 percent had the ability level to follow directions to travel from one location to another using a map; and 56 percent the requisite ability for entering deposits and checks, and balancing a checkbook (p. 66).

### INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

In the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1776) argued that national welfare depends on ability. In *A Nation at Risk*, moreover, the National Commission for Excellence in Education (1983) warned that educational mediocrity jeopardizes U.S. prospects for national welfare but cited no correlations of education and economic data.

In view of public concerns, the connection was recently investigated (Walberg, 1989). The scores of fourteen-year-olds on standardized international tests of science achievement collected in 1970–71, indeed, predicted economic growth a decade later. Among the eight nations that participated in the International Studies of Educational Achievement in Science, Japan had by far the highest score, 31, and also the highest growth rate, 4.4. Italy, Britain, Sweden, and the U.S. had scores below 23 and correspondingly low economic growth below 2.5 percent.

High test scores, moreover, predict low rates of unemployment: A one-point rise in the national average test score is associated with .7 percent lower unemployment. Japan is again notable in having a low unemployment rate of 2.4 percent while Western nations with low scores—Italy, Britain, Sweden, and the U.S.—had high unemployment rates ranging from 3.1 to 12.5.

The most recent data on science and mathematics achievement offer even more gloomy prospects if Adam Smith was right about human capital causing national welfare. Of eighth-grade students in 20 countries, those in the U.S. ranked 12th in algebra, 16th in geometry, and 18th (above Swaziland and Nigeria) in measurement. Of twelfth graders in 15 countries, those in the U.S. scored 14th in advanced algebra and 12th in elementary functions and calculus.

Among the top 1% of twelfth graders in the 15 countries, U.S. students scored worst in algebra and exceeded in functions and calculus only British Columbia—a province that omits these subjects in high school. These findings are consistent with the National Assessment of Educational Progress conclusion that 1.5 million American 17-year-olds near the end of high school each year are unable to reason mathematically (p. 17).

The U.S. does little better in Science. Although near average at grades 4 and 5, U.S. students exceed only those in the Philippines and Singapore among 17 countries at grades 8 and 9. Among advanced twelfth-grade students in 14 countries, moreover, those in the U.S. ranked last in Biology, 11th in Chemistry, and 9th in Physics.

#### *National Welfare*

As suggested by recent IEA and other studies (summarized by Walberg, 1989), the short school year, the

lack of curriculum rigor, slow repetitive teaching, and little homework and parental involvement seem the major causes of meager U.S. achievement. Even if this were certain, however, reasonable people may disagree on the value implications. Some may see in these trends continuing economic and cultural decline of the West. Others may perceive a re-orientation of society and education for a new era of liberation, leisure, and consumption in contrast to deferral of gratification to attain long-term ends (Freud, 1961) and the prominent work ethic that has characterized the capitalistic Western economies since the Protestant Reformation (Weber, 1958).

High school students apparently disagree that the leisured, permissive millennium has arrived. When asked to name the most important American problem in a recent survey for the National Association of Secondary School Principals (Heard, 1984), more than half mentioned unemployment, and a fifth said inflation—which ranked first and second in frequency among 14 problems mentioned. When asked what they most want out of life, more than a quarter answered career success, a quarter said happiness, and 21 percent mentioned marriage and family—to name the top three.

Japan's indices—nearly three times the growth, one-fourth the unemployment, and one-third the divorce rate of the U.S.—are more consistent with the expressed values of the American youth than are the U.S. indices. Japan provides an example of the possible causal link of school achievement and national vitality. With the highest test scores and nearly the highest growth, and nearly the lowest unemployment of the nations with complete information, Japan may have set the educational and economic standards for the rest of the world.

Unlike Europe, moreover, Japan now graduates a greater fraction of the population from high school than does the U.S. (96 vs. 76 percent, U.S. Department of Education, p. 79). And, notwithstanding often expressed opinions, little evidence shows that Japanese students are uncreative, over-stressed, and suicidal because of high standards and homework (Walberg, 1983; U.S. Department of Education, 1987).

### PROSPECTS

In conclusion, both the importance and the uncertainty of national indices and their causal relations deserve emphasis. The U.S. has lagged in economic growth, which is well predicted by previous science test scores, and which along with mathematics scores lag in further in the most recent comparisons. The indices in which we excel internationally—college enrollments, leisure, television consumption, and divorce (Walberg, 1989)—may not be conducive to future prosperity and, more broadly, our national welfare. Can we not aspire for more?

During the first 18 years of life, families and schools can better foster aspirations, knowledge, diligence, cooperativeness, and other psychological and social traits

that promote the quality of future life. Although the correlations of indices hardly prove this interpretation, they are consistent with it and with what many citizens believe. We may ignore its implications at our children's and our own peril.

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