

PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NEW ORLEANS

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INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 2007, the Cowen Institute has conducted annual polls to assess public perceptions about the significant changes that have occurred in K-12 public education in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans public education, and its continued evolution, remains unlike anywhere else in the country.

New Orleans' system is highly decentralized: More than 90% of students in the city attend charter schools, a far higher percentage than in any other major U.S. city. Schools here have far greater autonomy over hiring and staffing decisions, curriculum, and instruction practices than most schools run elsewhere by districts or school boards. Additionally, the city also has an open enrollment application system, allowing, with only a few exceptions, students to apply to any school in the city, regardless of where they live. Following the implementation of these changes in the years following Hurricane Katrina, the city's schools experienced dramatic improvement across a range of metrics. Most notably, New Orleans schools had a collective failing grade from the Louisiana Department of Education prior to 2005 and now have a C grade.

Assessing how the public views this education environment has always been central to the work of the Cowen Institute and our desire to understand the impact of policies on individual families. As in the past, the goal of this year's poll was to gain a deeper understanding of individual and family experiences, as well as the public as a whole, with the local K-12 education system. Next year marks a seminal transition for schools in the city, as all charter schools currently under the oversight of the state's Recovery School District (RSD) will come under the authority of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). This process of unification will mean that for the first time since Hurricane Katrina, the vast majority of city schools will be under local oversight. Public opinions about the unification process are thus especially pertinent.

This year, we've expanded our focus to include post-secondary success and opinions about what it takes for students to thrive in their higher education and career opportunities. Thus, we asked about the perceived value of a college degree and how to improve funding for higher education across the state, which remains a salient issue given Louisiana's ongoing budget crisis.

One important note to keep in mind is that this year's poll, like our poll in 2017, includes a deliberate overrepresentation of parents. This increased representation allows us to better understand the opinions of those who are directly interacting with and participating in the public and private education systems in the city. Overall, the poll includes responses from a total of 700 New Orleans residents, whose demographics closely mirror those of the city as a whole. Of those, 450 are parents: 313 of public school students, 110 of private school students, and 27 with students in both public and private schools.

Methodology

This is the ninth public opinion poll on education in New Orleans published by the Cowen Institute. The survey was conducted by phone in March and April 2018, by Market Research Insight with Dr. Verne Kennedy as director. All questions were created by the Cowen Institute and Market Research Insight staff.

MRI is a nationally recognized polling firm. A sample of 700 voters was randomly drawn from the latest list of registered voters in New Orleans by city council district to ensure geographical representation. The questionnaire was programmed into a CATI system and multiple attempts, at least two, were made to reach each individual. Surveys were conducted from a call center with trained and experienced staff. At least two monitor stations constantly observed and listened to responses to ensure quality. Results were compared with census and voter registration demographics to be certain the collected sample represented important characteristics of the New Orleans population. Since New Orleans has higher cell phone use than similar cities because many residents switched to cell phones after Hurricane Katrina, 63% of surveys were conducted on cell phones. The sample provides a 4% margin of error at the .95 level of confidence, which accounts for the fact that council districts and other populations having error factors based on the cell size of each group. Both public and private school parents were proportionately represented based on the overall makeup of the New Orleans population.

Overall, 63% of respondents were Black, 30% were White, 2% were Hispanic, and 5% other.

KEY FINDINGS

School Quality and Education Policies

- **Support for charter schools remains consistently high:** Nearly two-thirds of respondents believe charter schools have improved public education in New Orleans, which echoes results from previous polls.
- **More respondents believe schools are improving in 2018 than in 2017:** 39% of those polled stated schools are getting better, compared to 33% last year. However, those who believe schools are staying the same also increased to 41% from 36% last year.
- **A majority continue to back open enrollment:** Support for the city's open enrollment policies remained at similarly high levels to 2017.
- **Most respondents gave public schools a B or C grade:** 43% of respondents gave the entire education system a C grade and 22% gave it a B; these responses are nearly identical to those in last year's poll.
- **Vouchers were popular:** Nearly two-thirds of respondents supported vouchers that allow public school students to use public funds to attend private schools.

Unification

- **The public is more familiar with unification:** Familiarity with the unification process increased by nearly 10% from 2017 to 2018.
- **Opinion about the success of the unification process improved slightly:** 64% of respondents gave the process a B or C grade this year, compared to 61% last year.

Post-secondary Success

- **There is strong support for increasing taxes to support higher education funding:** Only 19% of respondents did not support a tax increase of any kind to increase education funding.
- **Marijuana legalization and the taxation of it, as well as increased cigarette taxes, received the most support for tax increases geared towards higher education funding.**
- **If TOPS must be cut, there was near majority support for reducing all awards equally:** If the state's Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), Louisiana's largest scholarship program has to be cut, 49% supported an equal reduction to all awards compared to 27% who would want low-income students prioritized.
- **Financial limitations were thought to be the most common reason students cannot or do not attend college.**
- **There is continued overwhelming support for schools to provide Career and Technical Education (CTE) to students, but a majority of parents said their children have not participated in CTE courses:** 91% of respondents believe all students should receive some CTE while in K-12, but 55% of parents said their student had not taken CTE yet while in school.

SCHOOL QUALITY & EDUCATION POLICIES

Overall, the education policies that have been adopted in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina continue to be viewed positively by the public. The belief that charter schools have improved public education in the city remains high: **61% felt that charter schools have improved education here, compared to 17% who disagreed.** In 2017, the results were similar at 63% who agreed and 15% who disagreed. As in previous polls, this support was consistent across racial demographics.

One notable aspect of this year's poll was the finding that support for charter schools was much higher among parents than the public at large: **70% of public school parents believed charter schools had improved education, compared to only 50% of those without children.**

Open enrollment also continued to be viewed favorably, with 55% of respondents viewing the policy positively, compared to 16% who viewed it negatively. This echoed the results from 2017, when 54% had a positive view and 13% a negative one. Results for this question have remained consistent across racial demographics in both 2017 and 2018. This year's poll did find that public school parents viewed the policy more favorably than private school parents, with 63% and 51% supporting the policy respectively.

As for overall school quality, public perception has also remained consistent over the past two years: **65% of respondents gave schools a B or C grade in 2018, just as they did in 2017.** The number of respondents giving all schools a D or F grade also remained constant at 23%. Notably, public school parents were far more likely to give schools a C grade overall, compared to private school parents, at 48% to 24% respectively. In fact, a greater percentage of private school parents gave schools a B than public school parents, at 35% to 31%.

An assessment that the progress of public schools is stagnant was echoed in a question about whether school quality was improving, staying the same, or getting worse. **While the percentage of respondents saying schools are getting better rose six points from 33% in 2017 to 39% in 2018, 41% believe school quality is staying the same.** This was up from 36% last year. The number of respondents who believe schools are getting worse dropped slightly to 15% this year, from 17% in 2017. Public school parents had a higher opinion of

school improvement, with 49% saying schools were getting better, compared to 30% of private school parents.

Given the importance placed on school letter grades with regards to overall performance evaluation and schools' charter renewal contracts, we also asked whether parents were aware of the letter grade of their students' school.¹ The vast majority, 64%, stated they knew the letter grade of their child's school, compared to 36% who did not. **Additionally, a majority of parents care about the letter grade of their child's school: 57% said the letter grade influenced their school selection decision compared to 34% who said it did not.**

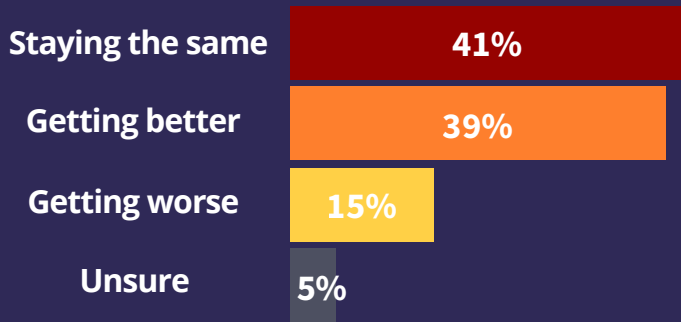
We also asked an open-ended question to respondents about how they would define a failing school and the two most common responses were: **32% defined a failing school as one with low-test scores, while 16% said it was one with low graduation rates.**

New Orleans also has one of the highest rates of enrollment in private schools of anywhere in the U.S., with nearly 25% of students attending private K-12 institutions.² **Given the popularity of private schools in the city, it is not surprising that a near majority of respondents, 48%, believe private schools offer a better education than public schools, compared to 22% who believe public schools do.** However, it is notable that the gap between these two narrowed significantly from 2017 to 2018: Last year, 58% of respondents favored private schools, compared to 12% for public schools. Predictably, private school parents view private education far more favorably than public education, with 75% believing the quality is higher in private schools compared to 31% of public school parents.

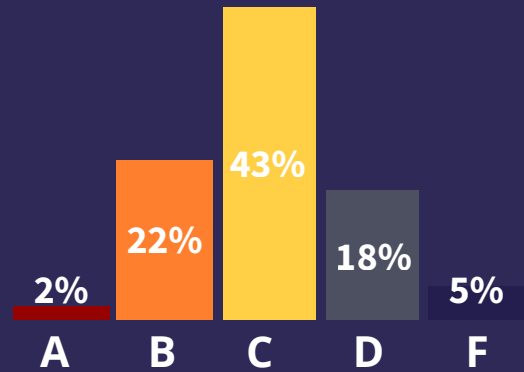
Finally, since the administration of Governor Bobby Jindal, Louisiana has had a voucher program, the Louisiana Scholarship Program, that uses public funding to allow a limited number of low-income families to send their children, tuition-free, to some private schools. Though research studies have continually shown the education provided by private schools that participate in the voucher program to be at best equal to that offered by public schools, and in some cases worse, **two-thirds of respondents said they favored the use of vouchers. Support for vouchers was similar for both public and private school parents.**³

At a Glance: K-12 Education

Are public schools in New Orleans getting better, getting worse, or staying the same?



Overall, what letter grade would you give all public schools in New Orleans?



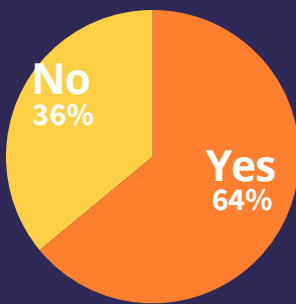
61%

believed charter schools have improved education in New Orleans.

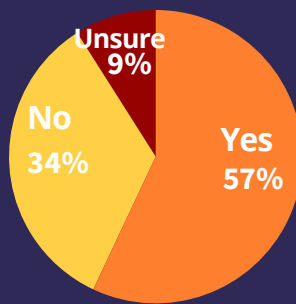
55%

believed open enrollment policies have had a positive impact on education.

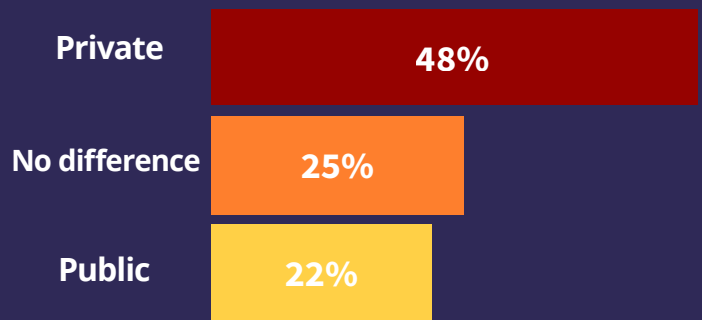
Do you know the letter grade of the school your child attends?*



Did you consider that grade when selecting the school?*



Do you think the quality of education is better in public or private schools?



67%

favored the use of vouchers for attendance at private schools in Louisiana.

32%

defined a failing school as one with low-test scores.

Note: These questions were asked only of parents.

POST-SECONDARY SUCCESS

At the Cowen Institute, we have expanded our focus on students' post-secondary success. Ensuring students have the necessary skills and opportunities to succeed after graduating from high school is central to our mission. This year, we asked a series of questions related to post-secondary success to better understand public opinions on the issue.

Over the past decade, funding for higher education has become a core issue for high school graduates across Louisiana. Facing a massive budget crisis, the legislature has considered cuts to TOPS, the state's main scholarship program for students to attend an in-state post-secondary institution.

Increasing the funds available for higher education is one way to ensure students have more opportunities. **Tax increases are the most direct way to do this and we found that 81% percent of respondents supported some form of tax increase to support higher education funding.** The most popular proposed tax measure was the legalization and taxation of marijuana, supported by 25% of respondents, followed by 24% who instead favored a cigarette tax. There was the least amount of support, 6%, for increased property taxes. These results were consistent across racial demographics and public and private school parents.

If TOPS funding must be cut, a near majority, 49%, supported reducing awards equally among all TOPS recipients, compared to 27% who wanted to prioritize low-income students and 21% who wanted to prioritize the highest performing students to receive scholarships. White respondents were more likely to support prioritization of low-income students than Black respondents, with 33% favoring the option to 26% respectively. Public school parents were more likely to support prioritizing low-income students than private school parents, at a rate of 25% to 17%. Comparatively, 31% of private school parents favored prioritizing students with higher academic performance, compared to 19% of public school parents. Responses to this question were consistent across all income levels. When we asked a question last year about how to make the program more affordable, 47% said students should all receive the same, reduced awards, compared to 34% who said low-income students should be prioritized, and 11% who believed academic requirements should become more rigorous.

Investing in higher education has long-term effects on not just the education of individual students, but also the economy of the state as a whole. A common justification for the expense of the TOPS program has been that it helps to ensure the state's best students stay in Louisiana. **This year, we found that 40% of parents said that if TOPS was cut, they'd be more likely to encourage their student to go out of state, compared to 23% who said it was less likely and 32% who said it made no difference.** Notably, 40% of private school parents stated they were more likely to opt for an out-of-state school, compared to 37% of public school parents.

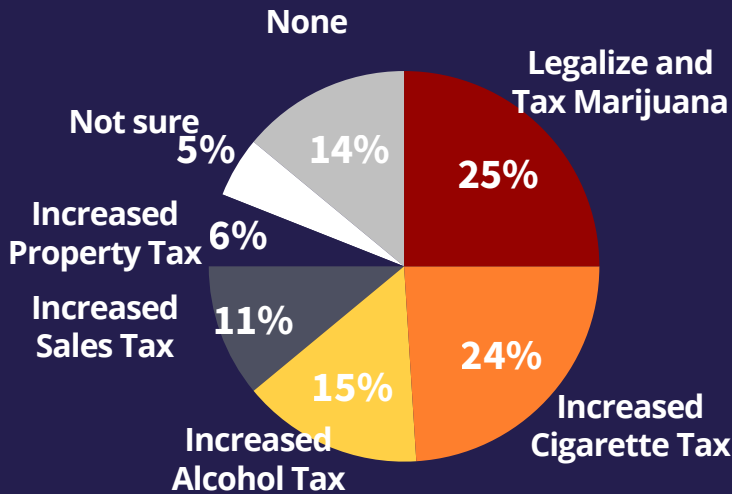
College tuition has continued to increase in Louisiana and nationally over the past decade. Therefore, ensuring students have access to all available federal funding streams and grants to support their higher education is vital for graduates to enroll and persist in college. FAFSA completion is now a graduation requirement for all public school students in the state. Our poll found that of those parents with students in high school, 64% said they had received help on the FAFSA from their high school, compared to 28% who said they had not.

Even with a changing national economy, **67% believed that college prepares young people for success.** As to why students end up not attending college, 42% of all respondents believed financial limitations were the main reason, followed by 20% who said lack of interest, 14% who said low high school academic performance, 13% who said students would rather go to work, and 10% who attributed it to family obligations.

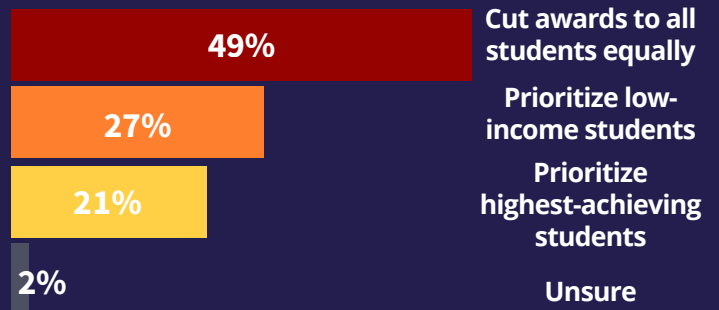
The connection between education and career skills is also a vital component of post-secondary success. **Support for the idea that all students should undertake some CTE coursework while in K-12 education was overwhelming in 2018, just as it was last year, with more than 90% of respondents advocating for the idea.** However, a near majority of respondents, 46%, were not sure what type of career coursework schools should focus on, with the next highest responses being 7% for computer science and 6% on technology. Furthermore, there appears to be a misalignment between the desire for CTE and current options in schools: Of those parents polled, 55% said their student had not participated in CTE, compared to 38% who said they had.

At a Glance: Post-secondary Success

Which, if any, of the following changes would you favor to ensure stable funding to TOPS, Go Grants, or other forms of post-secondary scholarships?



If the state legislature once again decides that cuts need to occur to the TOPS Scholarship Program this year, how should those cuts be prioritized?



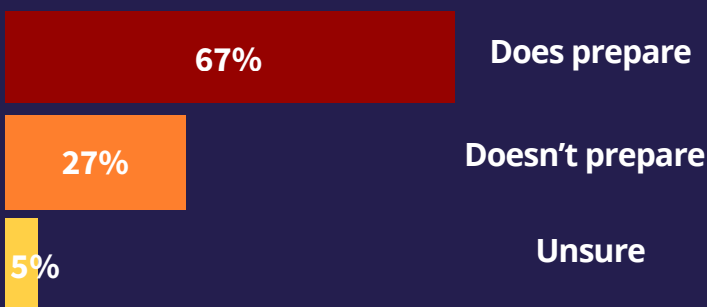
90%

believed all students should receive some career and technical education in school.

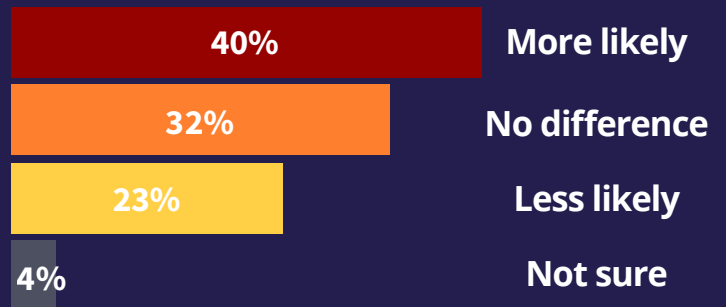
91%

supported inclusion of career and technical education programs in public schools.

Do you think a four-year college education does or does not prepare a person for success in today's economy?



If TOPS is cut and full awards are no longer available to Louisiana students, would you be more or less likely to encourage your student to attend an out-of-state college?



UNIFICATION

As mentioned earlier in the report, on July 1, 2018, all RSD schools will come under the oversight authority of the OPSB. This means that the OPSB will have oversight for the vast majority of schools and students in New Orleans for the first time since 2005.

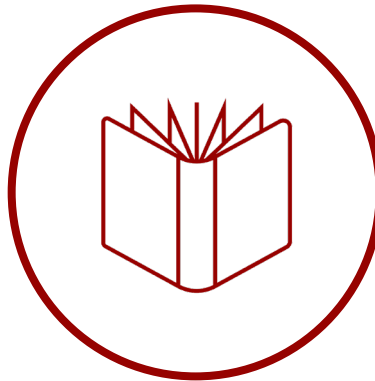
The transition process for RSD schools to unify with the OPSB began in 2016 and has been ongoing. The OPSB's unification process has been guided by a strategic plan and extensive community engagement.⁴

In 2017, the OPSB also conducted a public survey about the unification process. The results of that survey mirrored the responses to our 2017 poll questions about unification.⁵ Only about half of the public, 49%, was aware that the unification process was underway and of those who were, most gave the process a B or C grade thus far.

Our 2018 poll found that far more respondents were familiar with the process: 58% were either very familiar

58%

were either familiar or very familiar with the unification process.



64%

gave the unification process a B or C grade so far.

or somewhat familiar with unification process, while 40% were not familiar. This was consistent across parents of both public and private school students.

The number of respondents who gave a B grade to the process also increased by nearly one-third from 2017 to 2018, going from 22% to 29%, respectively. However, a C grade was still the most common response, at 35% this year, compared to 39% in 2017. The number giving the process a D also increased from 10% in 2017 to 15% in 2018. Interestingly, private school parents were twice as likely to give the process an A than public school parents, at 12% to 6% respectively.

The most common response given when asked what OPSB's top priority should be post-unification was improving school performance, followed by school accountability, and post-graduation success for students.

FOOTNOTES

1. For more information on accountability standards in Louisiana schools, please refer to the LDOE's accountability library: <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/accountability>.
2. Kolko, Jed (August 2014). "Where Private School Enrollment Is Highest and Lowest Across the U.S.," CityLab: <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2014/08/where-private-school-enrollment-is-highest-and-lowest-across-the-us/375993/>.
3. Mills, Jonathan N., Anna J. Egalite, and Patrick J. Wolf (February 2016). "How Has the Louisiana Scholarship Program Affected Students?," Education Research Alliance for New Orleans: <https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/ERA-Policy-Brief-Public-Private-School-Choice-160218.pdf>.
4. Orleans Parish School Board (June 2017). Community Survey: <https://opsb.us/about/nola-schools-unification/citywide-survey-spring-2017/>.
5. Ibid.

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