



# Perceptions of Public Education

## in New Orleans

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# INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, New Orleans has garnered national attention for its resiliency. This resiliency is evident in the way the city and its residents have rebounded since 2005, managing to preserve local traditions, while also transforming into a 21st century city with a diversifying economy. Perhaps nowhere is this attempt to balance past and present more evident than in the city's public education system, which compared to other systems across the country, is uniquely decentralized.

Following the state's takeover of the lowest performing schools after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has developed the most decentralized public education system in the U.S., with almost all city students attending autonomous charter schools. Change has been the most notable hallmark of New Orleans' public education in the past decade, and this past year carried on that trend. In 2016, state lawmakers voted to have all charter schools under the state's Recovery School District (RSD) come under the authority of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) by 2018. This unification process is the most significant change to school structure and governance since 2005.

Assessing the public's knowledge of this process, as well as their perceptions about the education system in general, is immensely important for a system predicated on choice. Since 2009, the Cowen Institute has conducted an annual poll to assess public perception of the education system in New Orleans. Last year's poll focused heavily on the debate over alterations to school governance taking place in the Louisiana Legislature. This year's poll examines the responses of parents and the public-at-large to those changes, as well as attitudes towards other vital education issues, such as the future of the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) and the best path for public schools in the city. Additionally, the poll also questioned private school parents about their opinions of public education and whether they would ever consider enrolling their children in a public school in the city. The poll is based on responses from 700 New Orleans residents, including 250 parents of public school and 150 parents of private school students. Please see the final page of the report for the complete polling methodology.

One important note is that this year's poll included a pool that was 57 percent parents compared to 37 percent in 2016, which could influence some difference in results when comparing across years. In this report, comparisons of results from 2017 to 2016 and other previous years are intended to give context, but not meant to indicate trends.

# KEY FINDINGS

Overall, respondents to this year's poll perceived public education to be one of the foremost issues facing New Orleans, ahead of crime and infrastructure concerns. A plurality pinpointed the improvement of academic offerings at schools as the most important issue within education, followed by teacher quality and more student socioeconomic and racial diversity. Here are some other key findings from this year's polling:

## Governance & Unification

- Of those respondents who were aware of the unification plan to have RSD charters come under OPSB oversight, a plurality believed that the process deserved a C grade so far.
- Nearly twice as many respondents favored the decision to have RSD schools return to the OPSB as did those who opposed it. Respondents showed moderate levels of confidence in the OPSB's readiness to take on RSD schools by 2018, with those who were somewhat confident in the OPSB slightly outranking those who were not confident.

## Post-Secondary Success

- A majority of parents said they had not received help navigating the financial aid process from their child(ren)'s public high school, including discussing student loan options.
- A plurality of respondents said that if funding for the TOPS program continues to be cut, all students should receive smaller awards, while one-third said awards should be prioritized for students from low-income families.

## School Quality

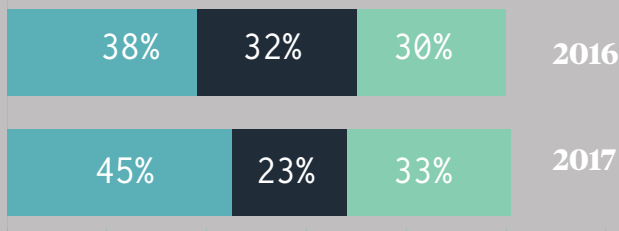
- An overwhelming majority of those polled believe that student growth, or how much progress a student makes in a single year, rather than his or her absolute performance, should be a significant part of how schools are assessed.
- A majority of parents said that academic performance and academic offerings were the main reason they chose the school their child(ren) currently attend.
- Respondents expressed continued approval of the changes that have occurred within the city's public education system, with majorities supporting open enrollment policies and sharing the opinion that charters schools have improved the city's education.

## Private vs Public

- Parents of private school students showed skepticism of the quality of city public schools. The vast majority said they had never applied to have their child(ren) enrolled in a public school and that they were less likely to enroll in public school than prior to Hurricane Katrina.
- Overall, respondents stated that they believed the quality of education provided at private schools exceeded that of public schools by a nearly 5:1 margin.

# SCHOOL / UNIFICATION

## Do you support unification of all public schools under OPSB?



 **Support Unification**

 **Oppose Unification**

 **Don't Know**

**49%**

**of respondents were unfamiliar with the unification process.**

Previous Cowen Institute polls found the public sharply divided on the best long-term path for school governance in New Orleans. In 2016, a plurality of voters, 38 percent, felt that all RSD charter schools should be required to return to the OPSB by 2018, compared to 32 percent who believed that the current policy, in which RSD schools choose the terms of return, should remain in place.

However, polling this year shows nearly double the support for unification compared to those who oppose it, with 45 percent in favor and 23 percent in opposition. Black respondents were more likely to support unification, with 49 percent supporting the transition, compared to 39 percent of white respondents. Those with confidence in the OPSB's readiness to oversee schools when they do return outweighed those who were not confident, with 45 percent of respondents saying they were very or somewhat confident, compared to 32 percent who said they were not confident. This could indicate an uptake in confidence with the OPSB compared to last year: in 2016, a plurality of respondents, 41 percent, believed that the OPSB could effectively manage all public schools in the city, along with EnrollNOLA, the city's common school enrollment system that is presently run by the RSD. Comparatively, 35 percent believed OPSB could not effectively manage this, and 24 percent were not sure.

Yet, this year's responses indicate that much of the public still lacks familiarity with the unification process initiated by 2016's legislative changes: 49 percent of all respondents said they were not familiar with the unification process, while 49 percent stated they were either very or somewhat familiar with the process. Of those who were familiar, 61 percent said they would give the process a B or a C average so far.

Once unification is complete, the academic quality of schools, teacher training, and the socioeconomic and racial diversity of schools rank as the highest priority issues for educators to focus on in the next ten years.





**50%**

**of parents did not  
consider the school's  
letter grade when choosing a  
school for their child(ren).**

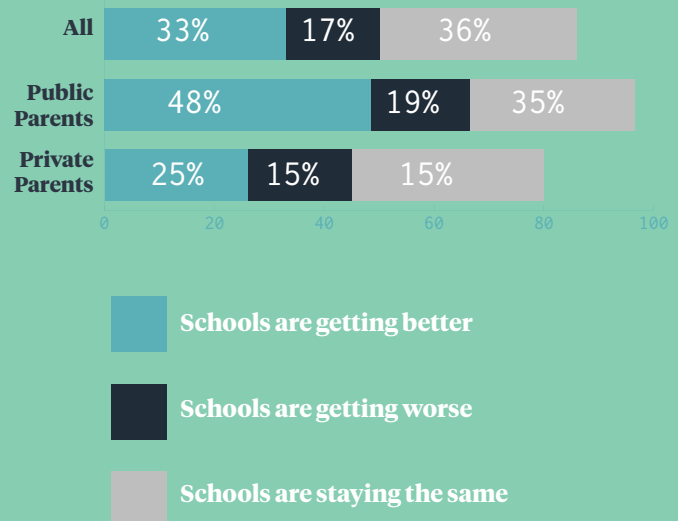
# OVERALL PERCEPTIONS

This year's poll shows that for both parents and the public-at-large, education ranks as a foremost issue for the future of New Orleans. On a scale of one to ten, with ten standing for an issue more important than all others, 84 percent of respondents gave education an eight, nine, or ten. Education thus ranked as important or more important than the crime and infrastructure issues facing the city for most respondents.

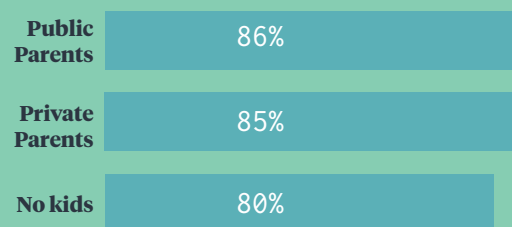
Respondents were mixed, however, in their opinions about the current quality of public education. A preponderance of respondents, 36 percent, stated that schools are staying the same, compared to 33 percent who said they were getting better, and 17 percent who said they were getting worse. This matched closely to the results from 2016. Responses were similar regardless of ethnicity on this question, with 31 percent of white and 34 percent of black respondents indicating that schools had gotten better, and 33 percent and 38 percent of white and black respondents stating they had stayed the same.

A plurality, 42 percent, also gave public schools as a whole a C grade, while 23 percent gave a B, and 15 percent a D. More than twice as many respondents gave schools an F (eight percent) as did an A (three percent). These responses were nearly analogous to those from last year's poll. In 2016, 43 percent gave schools a C, compared to 23 percent who gave a B, and 17 percent who gave a D. A plurality also gave schools a C grade in the Cowen Institute's 2015 poll. There was no difference in response along the lines of race, with both 42 percent of white and black respondents giving schools a C.

## What do you think of public schools in New Orleans?<sup>1</sup>



## Is public education one of the most important issues facing New Orleans?<sup>2</sup>

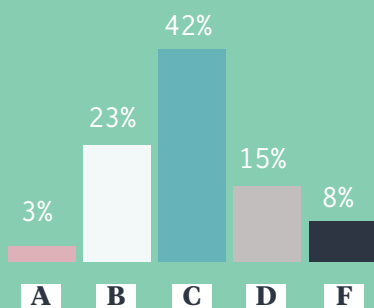


**84%**  
view education  
as one of the most  
important issues  
for the future of  
N.O.

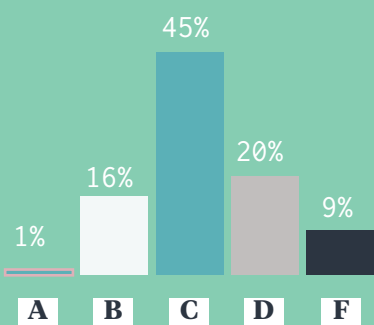
<sup>1</sup> Percentages don't always add up to 100% due to non-response.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents who ranked the issue an 8, 9, or 10 on the scale.

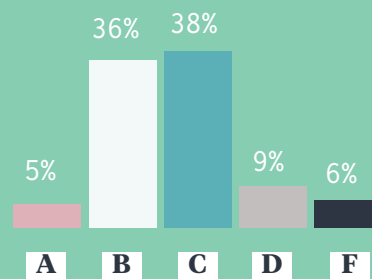
# What letter grade would you give public schools in New Orleans?<sup>3</sup>



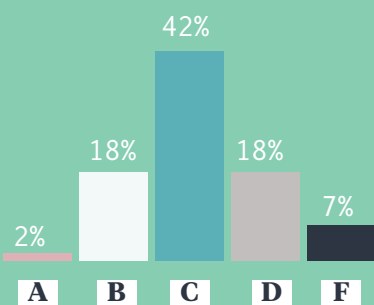
All Respondents



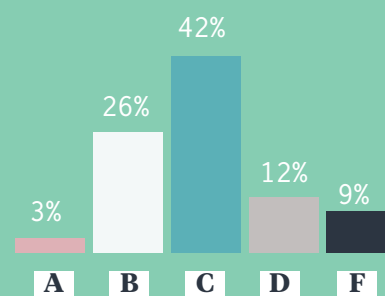
Private Parents



Public Parents



White Parents



Black Parents

# SUPPORT FOR POLICIES



## Enrollment

Those polled expressed support for many of the changes that have occurred to public education in the city over the past decade. A majority, 54 percent, responded that open enrollment policies, which allow children to apply for almost any public school in the city, regardless of where they live, have had a positive impact on public education compared to 13 percent who said it had had a negative impact. Comparatively, in 2016, 62 percent said the policy had had a positive impact and 13 percent a negative impact.

## Charter Schools

New Orleans has the highest rate of charter school enrollment in the nation, with 93 percent of public school students attending charters. As with previous polls, respondents showed overall approval of charters schools, with 64 percent believing that charters have improved New Orleans' public education, compared to 15 percent who disagreed. Black respondents had higher rates of support for charter schools than white respondents; 66 percent of black respondents expressed support compared to 60 percent of whites. Last year, overall, 63 percent of respondents believed that charter schools have improved public education in New Orleans, compared to 23 percent who disagreed.

## Accountability

Currently, both the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and the OPSB are engaged in revising the accountability frameworks they use to assess schools. One major change that will result due to those processes is that school ratings will place a greater weight on how much progress, or growth, students make during a grade year at a school. An overwhelming majority of respondents, 85 percent, favored this approach.

## Post-Secondary Success

Ensuring that students have the proper financial supports to thrive once they graduate high school has become an increasingly pressing issue for Louisiana. Last year, due to the state's budget crisis, TOPS, Louisiana's largest scholarship program for high achieving students, was cut. As a result, students only received 70 percent of the total award amounts they had initially been promised. The future of TOPS remains in doubt. This year, legislation requesting the restoration of full funding or prioritizing low-income and high achieving students if full-funding was not possible, was considered by legislators but did not advance to a full House vote. This proposal was supported by the Cowen Institute, as well as other members of the Louisiana College Access Coalition, and these groups will continue to push forward this legislation in future years. To ensure the long-term financial availability of the program, 47 percent of respondents supported cutting awards equally for all students, while 34 percent wanted low-income students to be prioritized. Just 11 percent supported raising academic requirements to make it harder for students to qualify for the awards. Notably, white respondents believed that the state should increase academic requirements at more than twice the rate of black respondents, 16 percent to 7 percent, respectively.

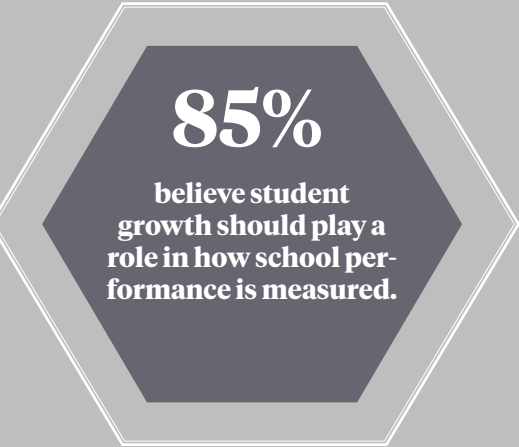
Regardless of whether students qualify for TOPS, completing the federal Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a vital first step in the direction of college affordability for students, especially for those from low-income backgrounds. Yet, of those parents polled who have a student in high school, 68 percent said they had not received support for the FAFSA completion process from their high school, compared to 32 percent who had.



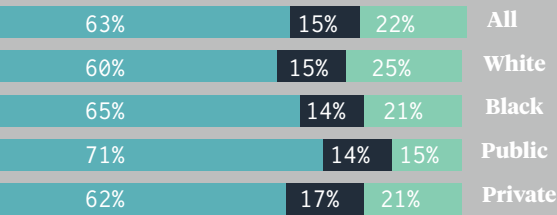
# Do you think open enrollment has had a positive or negative impact on the quality of public education in New Orleans?



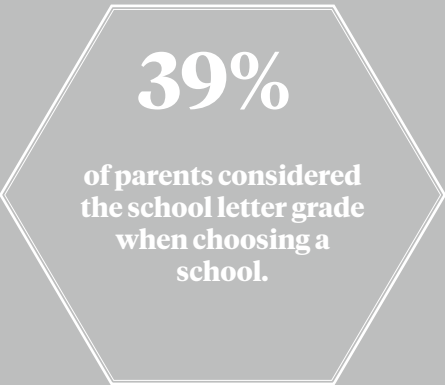
- Positive Impact
- Negative Impact
- No Impact



# Do you think public charter schools have improved public education in New Orleans?



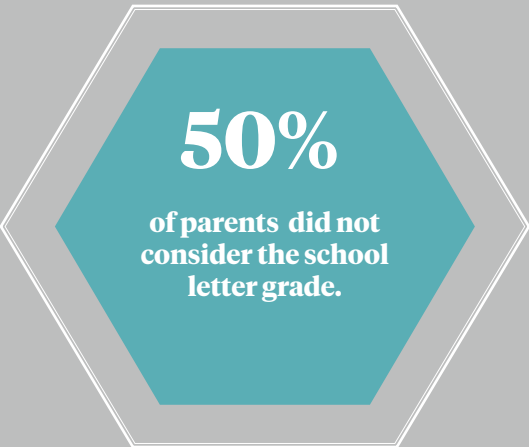
- Agree
- Disagree
- Not sure



# If TOPS cannot be fully funded, how should the available money be dispursed?



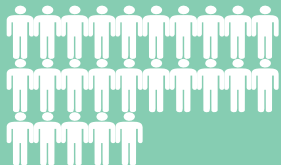
- Academic requirements more difficult
- Based on economic need
- All students receive the same amount



# PUBLIC / PRIVATE SCHOOLS

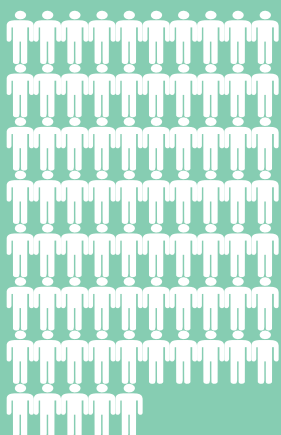
25%

of New Orleans students attend private school.



75%

of New Orleans students attend public school.



28%

of private school families applied for admission at a public school.

New Orleans has one of the highest, if not the highest, rate of private school enrollment in the nation.<sup>4</sup> Public school performance has improved over the past decade, and overall enrollment, though still lower than pre-Katrina numbers, continues to increase.<sup>5</sup> Yet, respondents showed strong beliefs that private options continue to be held in higher regard than local public schools: 58 percent of all respondents stated that private schools provide better education than public schools, compared to 21 percent who viewed the options as equal, and just 12 percent who stated public schools were better. White respondents were far more likely to view private schools as superior, with 68 percent favoring private schools compared to 50 percent of black respondents. Additionally, 59 percent of private school parents stated they were less likely to send their child(ren) to a public school than before Hurricane Katrina and only 28 percent of these families had ever applied for admission to a public school. The poll questions did not differentiate between respondents who had children before and after Katrina, so this data cannot be tracked over time.

A plurality of parents of private school students, 43 percent, said they were not sure what would influence them to enroll their students in a public school, while 31 percent stated they would consider it if the public school could offer a better education. This divide was evident in how parents of private and public school students viewed the progress of public schools: 51 percent of parents with students in public schools believed public schools are better now than prior to Katrina, compared to just 28 percent of parents of current private school students.

When deciding on what school for their students to attend, both public and private school parents prioritized the quality of academic performance at the school. A majority, 53 percent, of all parents, stated that academic performance and offerings were the single most important factor in choosing the school their child(ren) attend. Eleven percent rated school staff as the most important, nine percent school location, and eight percent the discipline policies at the school. A plurality of public school parents, 39 percent, responded that they had considered the letter grade when selecting a school, while 30 percent were unaware of the letter grade of their school, and 20 percent said they did not consider the grade at all. Interestingly, 60 percent of public school parents named academics as the main reason they chose their child(ren)'s school, compared to 49 percent of private school parents. Parents of private school students were far more likely to name safety as their main issue when selecting a school, with 11 percent naming this as their top concern, while only two percent of public school parents named safety as their top issue.

## PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS

v/s

## PRIVATE SCHOOL PARENTS

**51%**

think overall, public schools in New Orleans are getting better.



**28%**

think overall, public schools in New Orleans are getting better.

**53%**

favor a return to OPSB oversight.



**38%**

favor a return to OPSB oversight.

**63%**

think open enrollment had a positive impact on public education.



**49%**

think open enrollment had a positive impact on public education.

**46%**

think the quality of private education is better than public education in the city.



**87%**

think the quality of private education is better than public education in the city.

**34%**

have a college degree or higher.



**59%**

have a college degree or higher.

**72%**

have an annual household income of less than \$100,000.



**60%**

have an annual household income of less than \$100,000.

# METHOD / OLOGY

This is the eighth public opinion poll on education published by the Cowen Institute. All questions were created by Cowen Institute and Market Research Insight staff with input from key stakeholders including legislators, educators, and education advocates.

The survey was conducted by phone in April 2017, by Market Research Insight with Dr. Verne Kennedy as director. 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 programed 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, 54 percent of surveys were conducted on cell phones. The sample provides a four percent 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, 54 percent of respondents were African American or black, 36 percent were white, and nine percent were identified as either Hispanic or other, closely matching the ethnic and racial distribution of the adult residents in the city. Income, gender, age, and residence location were also proportionally distributed across respondents. A total of 400 parents, including 250 with children in public schools, were surveyed.

