

# What Do Parents Think?

A Poll of New Orleans  
Public School Parents



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# Summary of Findings

## **The quality of public education and teachers are top concerns among families.**

Collectively, parents and guardians viewed education as their top concern of the issues facing New Orleans as a whole, followed closely by crime and criminal justice.

Respondents also cited the quality of teachers as one of their biggest concern about public education.

## **While some parents and guardians hold strongly negative or positive views about the school system, the largest percentage seem to have neutral feelings about the system and its governance.**

Nearly half of respondents reported that they felt that public education in the city is staying the same, compared to around a quarter each who said it was getting better or worse.

The largest percentage of parents and guardians rated the quality of education offered by the city's public schools with a C letter grade, followed by those who rated it with a D.

Opinions towards the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), public charter schools, and OneApp were more neutral than positive or negative.

A majority of parents and guardians stated they did not have concerns about OneApp. Of those who did, the inability to access top choice schools was listed as the main concern.

There were no statistically significant differences between demographic subgroups with regards to attitudes towards the OPSB, public charter schools, or OneApp. Predictors tested included gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, and education level.

## **Parents lack understanding about some key processes, definitions, and complexities of public education in New Orleans.**

A majority of respondents stated they were not very informed or not at all informed about the way school letter grades are calculated. Additionally, a majority said they did not know the letter grade of the school their child(ren) attend(s).

Two-thirds of parents and guardians said they had not heard anything about the OPSB's recent closures of schools and those who had slightly underestimated the number of schools closed in the past year.

Almost one-half of respondents did not know if their child(ren) attend(s) selective admissions schools, suggesting a lack of clarity around the terminology and/or practice.



## **Families are more likely to gain information about public schools through informal channels.**

Word of mouth was by far the most common way parents and guardians received information about OneApp (40%), with social media being the second most common (11%).

A majority of respondents did not visit any school they applied to via OneApp prior to enrollment, suggesting they gathered information about schools through other channels.

## **Mode of transportation to school and time spent in transit differ along racial and socioeconomic lines.**

More parents and guardians reported driving their children to and from school each day than those who reported that their children take the school bus.

Those who drive their children to school estimated that they spend approximately 43 minutes getting their children to and from school, while those whose students take the bus estimated that the journeys take approximately 58 minutes daily.

White respondents and those from higher-income households were more likely to drive their children to school than Black respondents or those from lower-income households.

## **Parents and guardians ranked school performance scores, school letter grades, and standardized test scores as lower in importance compared to other factors that mattered to them in schools.**

When asked to rank what mattered most to them about the school their child(ren) attend(s), school performance scores and standardized test scores were ranked the least important considerations.

Only 38% of respondents said they knew the letter grade of the school their child(ren) attend(s), suggesting that letter grade and/or performance score is not considered an important and/or relevant feature for many families.

## **Many parents and guardians are in agreement on key aspects of the city's public education system. According to responses, the majority:**

Want a unified school calendar for all of the city's public schools;

Believe school performance scores should be based on more than standardized test scores;

Have concerns about corruption at both charter schools and the OPSB;

Believe that OneApp will only be fully effective once the city has more high-performing schools.

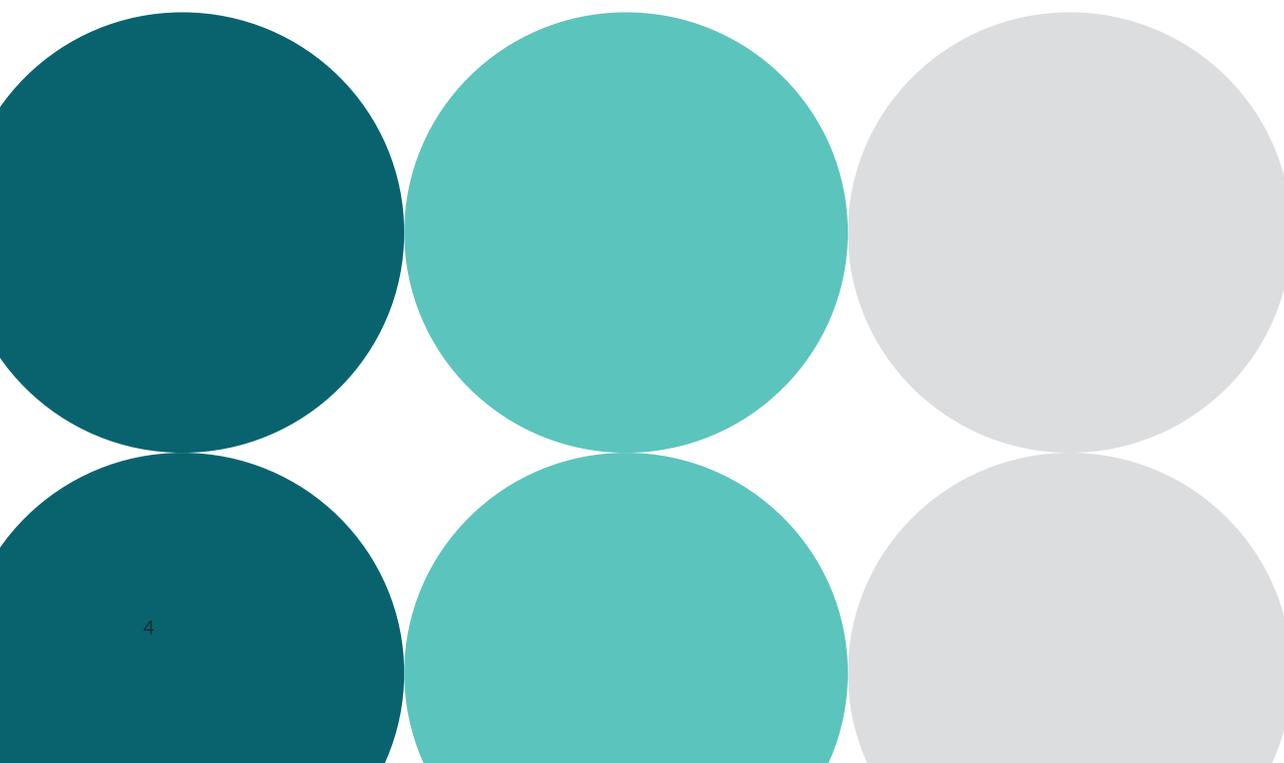
# Introduction

**The Cowen Institute has conducted annual polls on perceptions about public education in New Orleans since 2007. Given the unique, ever-evolving nature of public education in the city, we administer these polls as a way to assess the views of parents and, in the past, the general public, on important issues ranging from governance and the prevalence of charter schools to the performance of the OPSB and the impact of specific education policies.**

These polls consist of questions that we ask consistently each year in order to identify trends in opinions over time, along with questions that are relevant to the particular context of the education landscape at the time the poll was conducted. With governance of 78 of the city's 86 schools under the OPSB (also now referred to as NOLA Public Schools) and New Orleans being the first city in the country with a public education system composed entirely of charter schools, we believe public opinion polls are more vital than ever.

This year, though, for the first time, we exclusively polled parents and guardians of New Orleans public school students. In the past, our polling methodology oversampled parents but also included members of the general public who did not have direct ties to the New Orleans public school system. For 2019, however, we wanted to focus solely on public school parents to gain insight into how those most directly involved with, and served by, public education in our city feel about the trajectory of our schools, what they view as the most important issues, the extent of their understanding of crucial policies and processes (like OneApp), and what, if anything, they would like to see improved. Additionally, because New Orleans schools' open enrollment policy means that students can attend school anywhere in the city regardless of where they live, we asked parents about transportation and the amount of time their children spend getting to and from school each day. We focused on these specific issues as they have received a large amount of publicity in recent years and we felt it was important to try and gain a deeper understanding of public school parents' attitudes and opinions.

This report includes the overall responses of the parents we polled, as well as their answers broken out by race, gender, and socioeconomic status. As with all of our previous polls, you can download the data from our website.



# Methodology

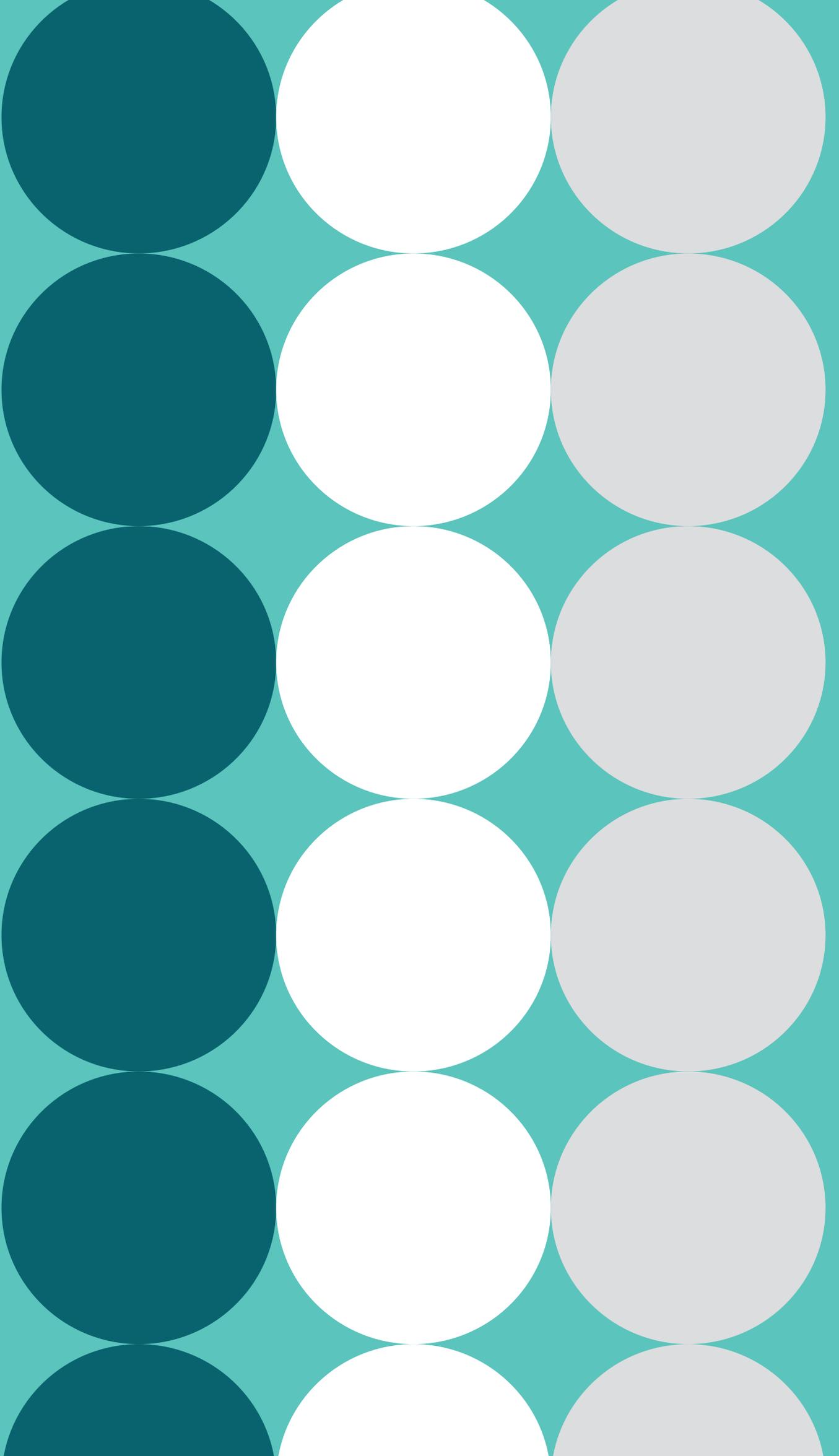
This is the tenth public opinion poll on education in New Orleans published by the Cowen Institute. The survey items were developed following consultations with community organizations, education organizations, researchers, and families. The poll was administered via landline and cell phone to a sample of registered voters from Orleans Parish from July 25 to August 6, 2019 by LJR Custom Strategies, a strategic research and consulting firm led by Principal Jennifer Johnson. The poll surveyed 500 parents and guardians of current New Orleans public school students.

Findings are subject to a sampling error of plus or minus 4.3%. Subgroup analyses are subject to error of up to plus or minus 10%. The sample was representative of the location of residence of the population of New Orleans, with between 18-22% of respondents from each of the city's five council districts. Additionally, the sample was closely aligned with the overall demographics of the city's population by race, income, and educational attainment level: 59% identified as Black, 34% as White, 1% as Asian, 2% as Hispanic/Latinx, and 3% other. 40% of respondents had a four-year college degree or higher, and the majority of those who provided their household income reported a household income of \$75,000 or less per year.

# Limitations

While the poll's demographics are representative of the city as a whole, they are not representative of the city's public school student population. There is an over-representation of Black students in New Orleans public schools (89%) compared with the city's general population (60%). **So while the demographics of survey respondents are in-line with the city's population, they do not accurately reflect the families served by public schools.** When presenting findings along racial lines, we only include White and Black respondents due to the small number of respondents in other racial and ethnic subgroups (Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Other). However, all respondents are included when we present findings along other lines. This is, undoubtedly, another limitation of the current study, as it does not allow us to provide the valuable and needed insight on key subgroups of our public school population. Also, with regards to the racial categories listed above, we recognize that this list is limiting and fails to capture the racial and ethnic diversity of our city and its residents. However, we decided to include these response categories as they are the standard measures used by the LDOE in their data on public school students and, as such, would allow for ease of comparison.

Finally, based on the responses of those surveyed, there is an over-representation of parents and guardians whose children attended selective admissions schools (19% of our sample compared with 9% of the total public school population). We did not intentionally target this population. Rather, this over-representation is most likely related to the nature of the poll sample and administration (registered voters via phone survey).

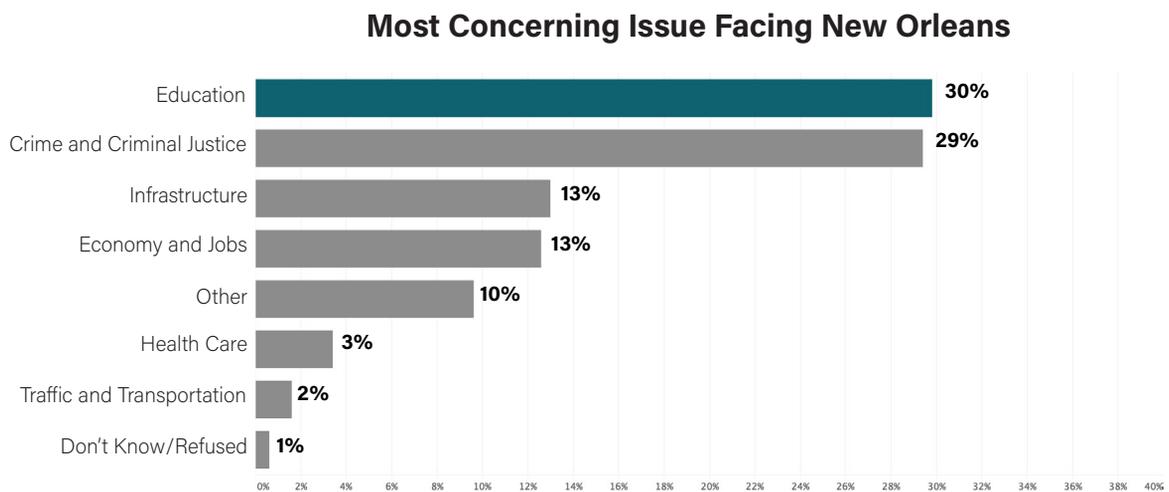


# Findings

## 1.

### The quality of public education and teachers are top concerns among families.

When asked about their top concerns for the city of New Orleans, 30% of parents and guardians named education, followed closely by crime and criminal justice at 29%. Education, and crime and criminal justice were the top concerns for respondents regardless of race, though White men were more concerned about infrastructure than any other group by a wide margin (27% of White men cited infrastructure as their top concern). Both Black and White women cited crime and criminal justice just slightly ahead of education as their top concern.



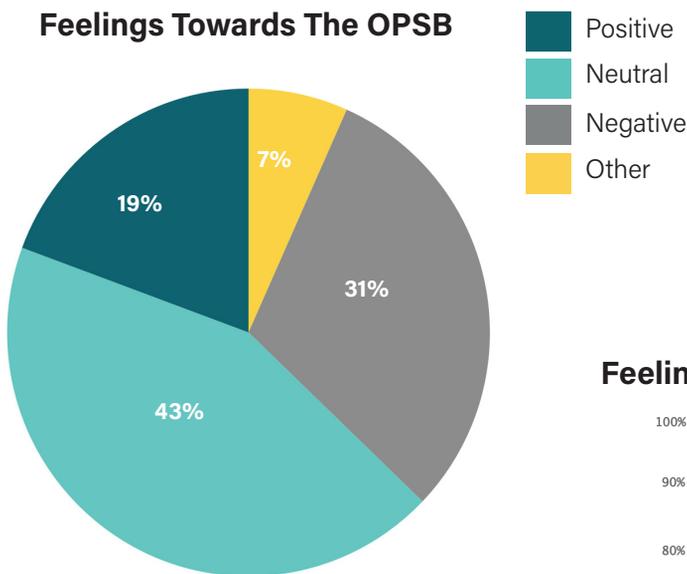
When parents were asked to name what they would change about public schools in New Orleans, a combined 17% of respondents cited teacher or school quality. How parents defined quality, however, remained open to interpretation. This response outpaced any other ideas. Parents offered a variety of suggestions to this question, including making schools more equitable, improving the classroom setting, going back to neighborhood schools, improving logistics, offering students more help, and leadership, though no other response received more than 6%.

# 2.

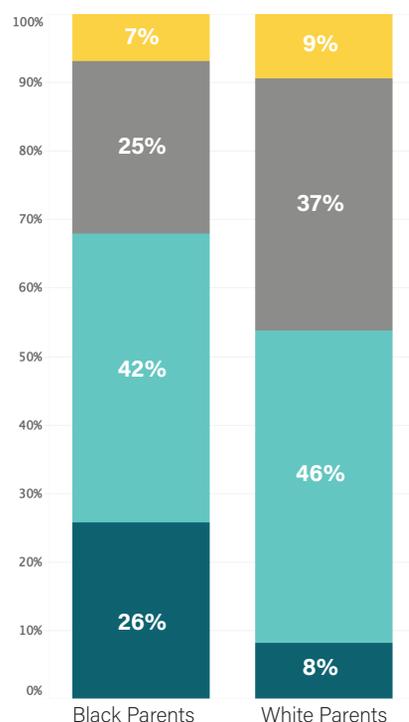
While some parents and guardians hold strong negative or positive views about the school system, the largest percentage report neutral feelings towards the system and key aspects of its governance.

## Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB)

Attitudes towards the OPSB were mixed, with the largest number of parents and guardians, 43%, feeling neutral towards the governing body. Only 19% of respondents reported positive feelings towards OPSB while 31% viewed them negatively. White respondents reported higher rates of negative feelings than Black respondents.



### Feelings Towards The OPSB By Race



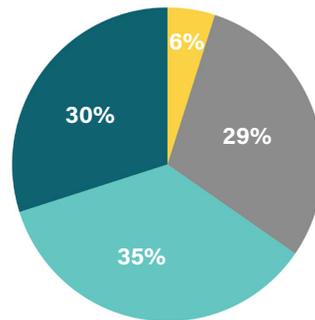
# Public Charter Schools

One of the most unique aspects of public education in New Orleans is that all schools in the city are public charters, the only city in the country with this type of governance model. Given the prevalence of charters, we've consistently asked the general public and parents about their perceptions of charter schools in our polls.

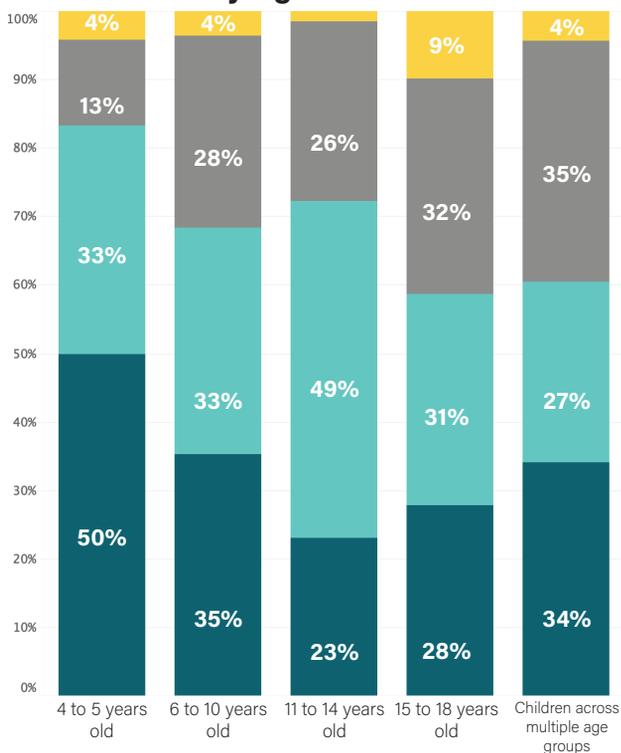
This year, feelings towards public charter schools were mixed. A total of 35% of parents and guardians felt neutral about public charter schools, compared to 30% who felt positively and 29% who felt negatively. Positive feelings were highest among respondents with younger children and generally declined with children's age from 50% positive for those with children aged 4-5 to 28% positive for those with children aged 15-18. Interestingly, respondents from low-income households reported more positive feelings about charter schools, with 36% saying they felt positive, while those from middle-income households had the highest rate of negative feelings at 44%. Respondents from high-income households reported more neutral feelings. Overall, attitudes were consistent across race. A near majority of 49% of respondents agreed with the statement that public charter schools have improved public education in New Orleans, compared to 37% who disagreed. There were no statistically significant differences along the lines of race, gender, or household income.



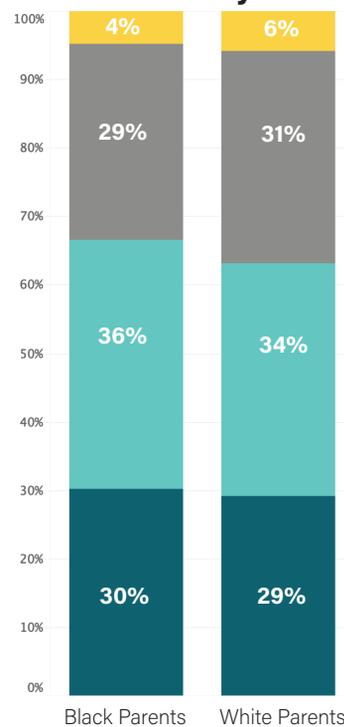
**Overall Feelings Towards Public Charter Schools**



**Feelings Towards Public Charter Schools By Age Of Child**



**Feelings Towards Public Charter Schools By Race**

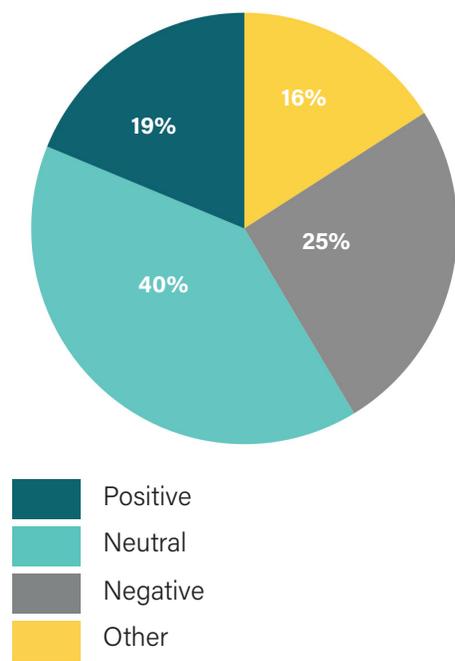


# OneApp

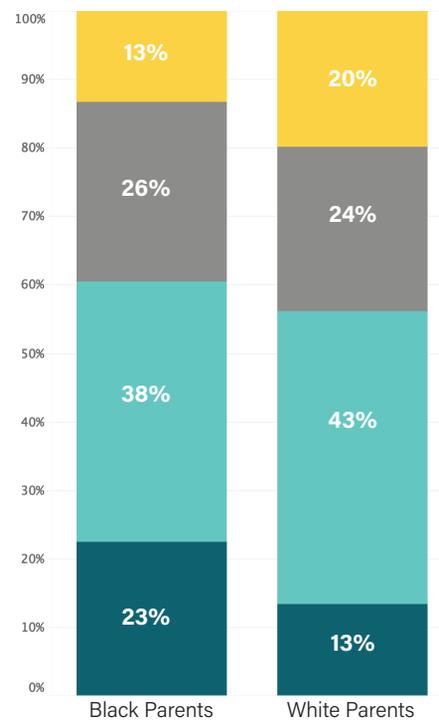
With regards to OneApp, the city's centralized school enrollment website, the percentage of respondents who felt neutral (40%) was greater than those who felt positively (19%) or negatively (25%). Differences became apparent when looking more closely at those who had children in two or more schools. Those who did were more likely to hold negative opinions about OneApp (36%) compared with those who had children in only one school (24% of whom had negative attitudes). Black respondents were more likely to feel positively about OneApp than White respondents (23% to 13%, respectively), while Black women reported the highest positive feelings towards OneApp (24%) and White women had the highest negative feelings (32%).

Just over a third of parents and guardians, 34%, said they had concerns about OneApp, compared to 66% who reported no concerns. Those with children in two or more schools were the most likely to voice concerns regarding OneApp. Of the concerns mentioned by respondents, the most common issue was that their child(ren) didn't get into their most desired school.

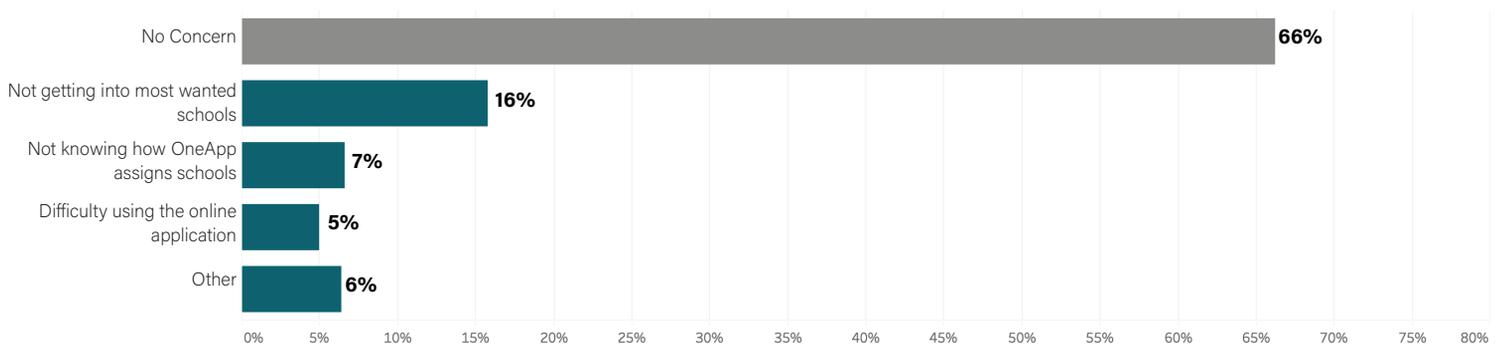
**Feelings Towards OneApp**



**Feelings Towards OneApp by Race**



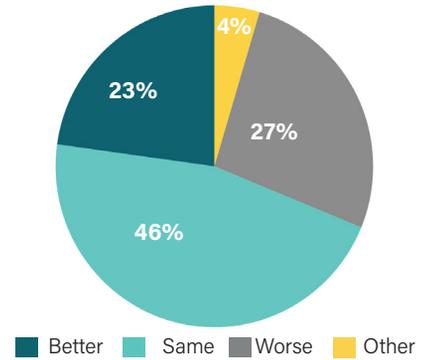
**Concerns About OneApp**



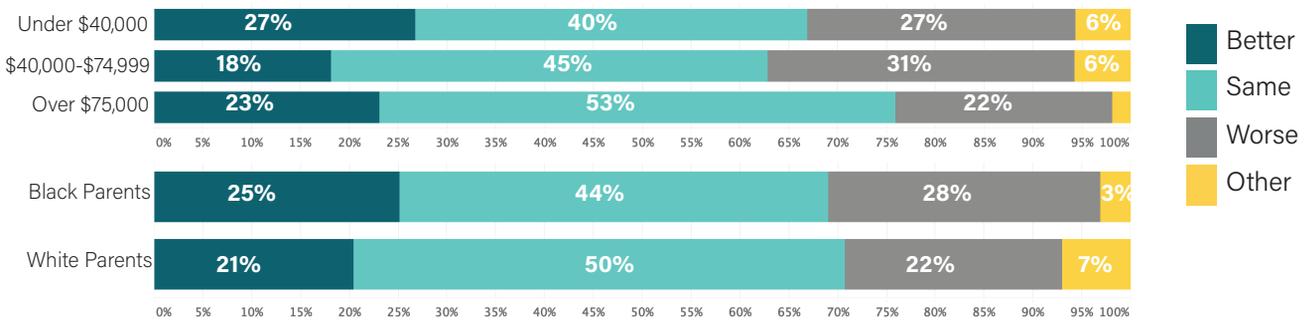
# The Quality and Direction of Public Education

Regarding the overall quality of public education in the city, a plurality of respondents, 46%, stated they believed it is staying about the same. Comparatively, 23% believed it is getting better and 27% believed it is getting worse. However, responses varied by demographics. Parents and guardians from middle-income households were more likely to believe education was getting worse, those from low-income households were more likely to state that it was improving, and the majority of respondents from high-income households felt things were staying the same. Half of White respondents felt education was staying the same, while Black respondents were slightly more likely to state both that education was getting better or worse, though there was relatively little variability.

**Direction Of Public Education In New Orleans**

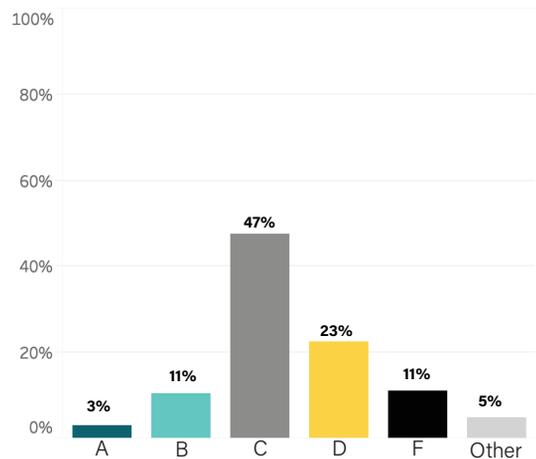


**Direction Of Public Education In New Orleans By Income And Race**

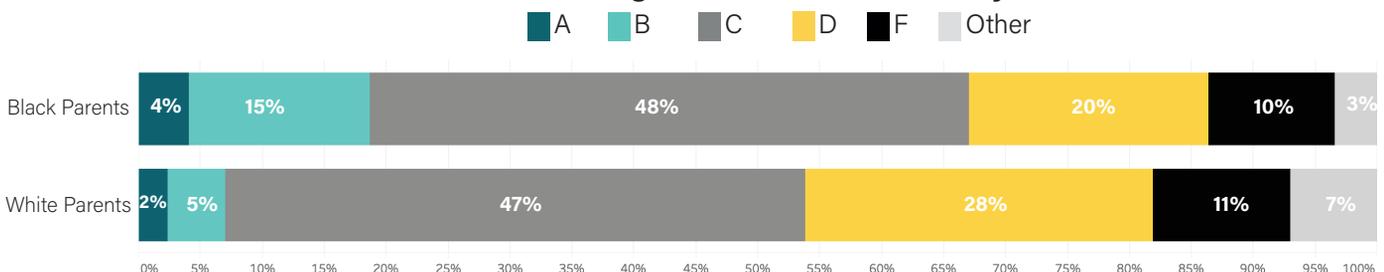


When asked to give a letter grade to the overall quality of education in New Orleans, the data again offered a middling assessment, with more respondents having a negative assessment of schools than a positive one. A plurality, 47%, gave schools a C grade, compared to just 14% who gave an A or B, and 34% who gave a D or F. Notably, no more than 6% of any demographic subgroups gave the school system an A grade. Responses were relatively consistent across all demographic subgroups to this question, though respondents with children aged 4-5 assigned an A or B grade at the lowest rate. Additionally, Black respondents were more likely to give an A or B grade compared to White respondents (19% to 7%), while White respondents gave D and F grades at higher rates than Black respondents (39% to 30%).

**Parents Ratings Of Public Education**



**Parents Ratings Of Public Education by Race**



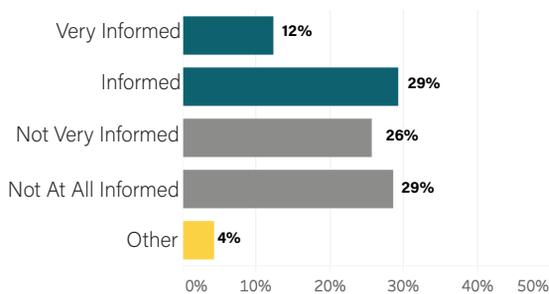
# 3.

## Parents lack understanding about some key processes, definitions, and complexities of public education in New Orleans.

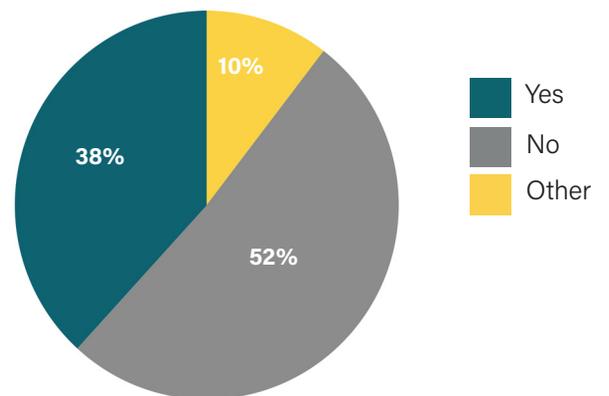
### School Performance Scores

A majority of parents and guardians said they were either not informed (29%) or not very informed (26%) about how school scores were calculated. Women were more likely to report knowing how scores were calculated than men, as were respondents from higher-income households. Also of note, 52% of respondents said they did not know the letter grade of the school their child(ren) attend(s), compared to just 38% who said they did. This was consistent across demographic subgroups. Even among those who say they are very or somewhat familiar with how a school's grade is calculated, only 59% know the grade assigned to their child's school. A majority of respondents from high-income households reported knowing their child's school's letter grade, while 70% of those from low-income households did not.

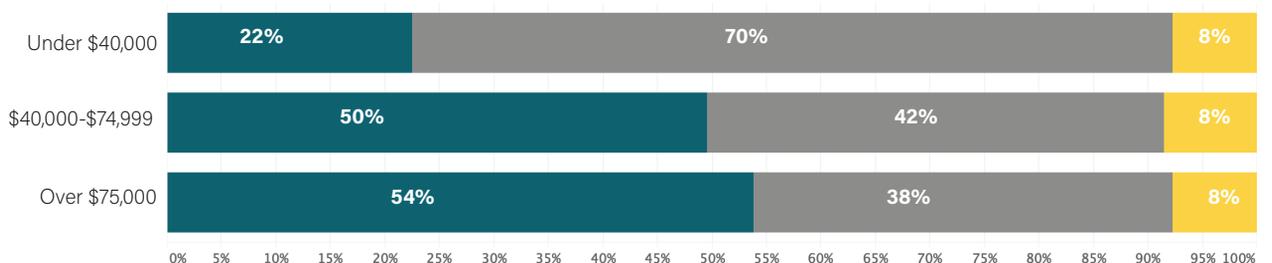
**How Informed Are Parents About How School Letter Grades Are Calculated?**



**Do Parents Know The Letter Grade Of Their Child(ren)'s School(s)?**



**Do Parents Know The Letter Grade Of Their Child(ren)'s School(s) By Income**



## School Closures

Notably, the data suggest that many respondents were not entirely aware of OPSB's role in school closures. For instance, 30% stated they had heard something recently about the OPSB closing schools, while 67% said they had not heard anything on the topic.

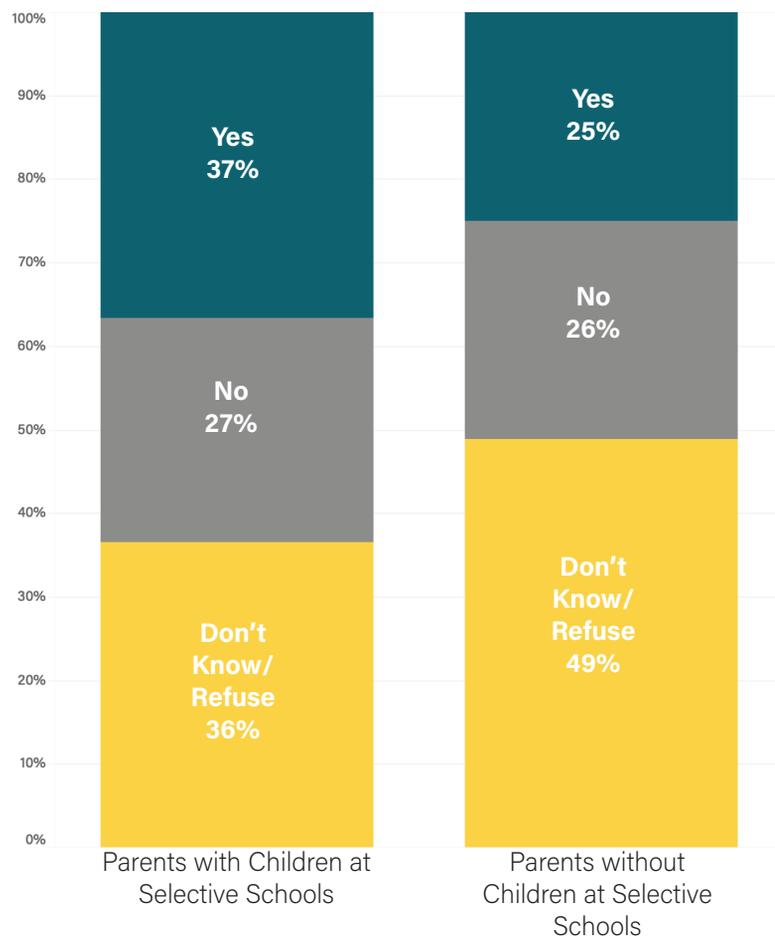
## Understanding Selective Admissions

Some of the highest performing schools in New Orleans are selective admissions schools that require students to take a cognitive or language test prior to gaining acceptance and also require parents to comply with a number of admissions criteria. Admission into these schools is competitive and the demand for these seats typically exceeds the number of spots available. When asked, a near majority of 46% of respondents said they did not know if their child was in a selective admissions school or not, compared to 27% who said they had at least one child in such a school and 26% who said they did not.

We also asked parents where their child(ren) attended schools. Interestingly, the lack of knowledge regarding the selective admissions status of their child's school was equally distributed among parents at both selective and non-selective admissions schools. We found that 25% of parents who said their child(ren) did attend a selective admissions schools were incorrect once they named the school. Similarly, 27% of respondents said their children didn't attend a selective admissions school when, in fact, they named a selective admissions school as the school their children attend.

### Does Your Child Attend A Selective Admissions School?

These graphs show that many parents are confused as to whether or not their children attend a selective admissions school. This is true for parents at selective admissions schools and among those whose children don't attend selective admissions schools.



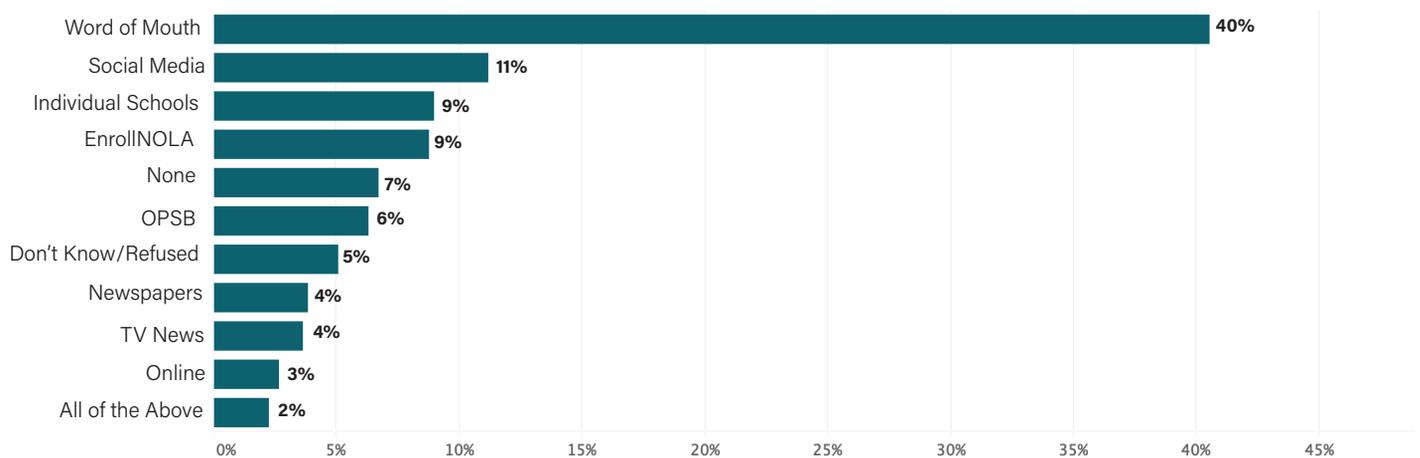
# 4.

## Families are more likely to gain information about school enrollment through informal channels.

### OneApp Knowledge

In general, parents and guardians were most likely to source information about OneApp from informal channels. A plurality of 40% of respondents said that “word of mouth” was their main source of information about OneApp, followed by social media at 11%. The percentage of parents and guardians who received information on OneApp from formal channels such as the EnrollNola website (9%), an individual school (9%), or OPSB (6%) was notably lower.

**Main Source Of Information About OneApp**



### School Visits Prior To Application

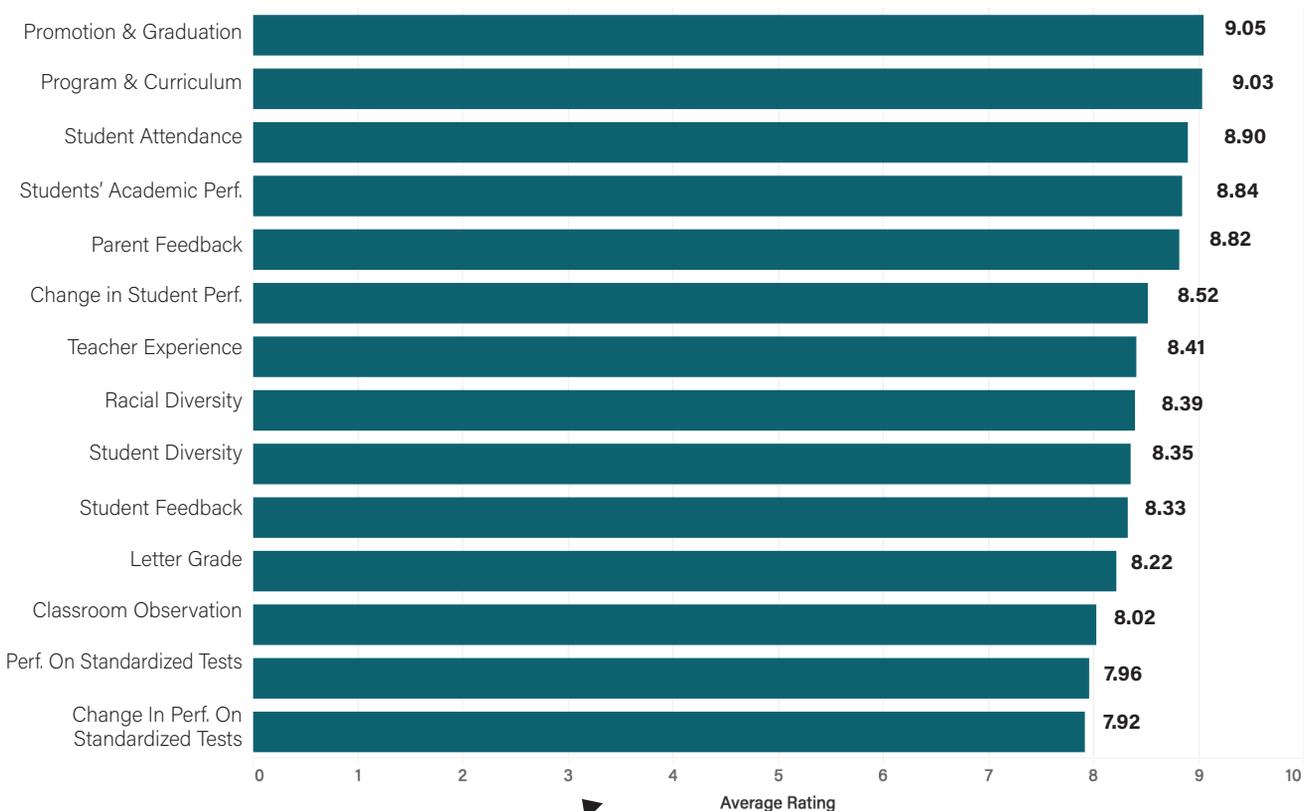
A majority of parents and guardians, 57%, said they did not visit any schools before enrolling their children, compared to 41% who had visited a school. Of those who did go on a school visit, the general experience was positive or neutral. Those with young children (aged 4-5) and those with children at more than two schools were the only subgroups of respondents where a majority had gone on school visits. Parents and guardians who drive their children to school (an indicator that they have reliable transportation) were also more likely than average to have visited a school. The subgroups of respondents who were least likely to have visited a school included parents and guardians of children aged 15-18, those whose children ride the bus, those from lower-income households, and White men.

# 5.

## Parents and guardians ranked school performance scores, school letter grades, and standardized test scores as lower in importance compared to other factors that mattered to them in schools.

The lack of understanding about how letter grades are calculated, as well as not knowing the grade of their child(ren)'s school, reinforced another finding from our polling this year, which is that respondents viewed letter grades as less important than other factors when selecting a school. When asked to rate the importance of 14 different areas when selecting a school on a scale from 1 to 10, where ten meant extremely important, the two highest ranked items were a school's program/curriculum and promotion/graduation rates. This was consistent across almost all demographic subgroups. These were followed by student attendance rates, parent feedback, and overall academic performance. A school's letter grade ranked 11 out of 14 for respondents on our list of factors. Performance on standardized tests was the least important factor for parents and guardians across all subgroups.

**Average Ranking Of Importance For The Following Factors (Scale 1-10)**



Here you can see the two lowest ranked factors are overall performance on standardized tests and change in performance on standardized tests over time.

# 6.

## Mode of transportation to school and time spent in transit differ along racial and socioeconomic lines.

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Another defining feature of public education in New Orleans is the city's open enrollment policy, which allows students to apply to almost any public school in the city, regardless of where they live. The policy is partially designed to allow students and families to find the school that best fits their educational needs and to prevent students' neighborhoods from defining their educational opportunities. However, the policy does lead to transportation challenges for both schools and families, as many students travel long distances on a daily basis. This year, we asked parents and guardians about their experiences in getting their children to and from school everyday. The results showed that the method of school transportation and transit time is divided along racial and socioeconomic lines.

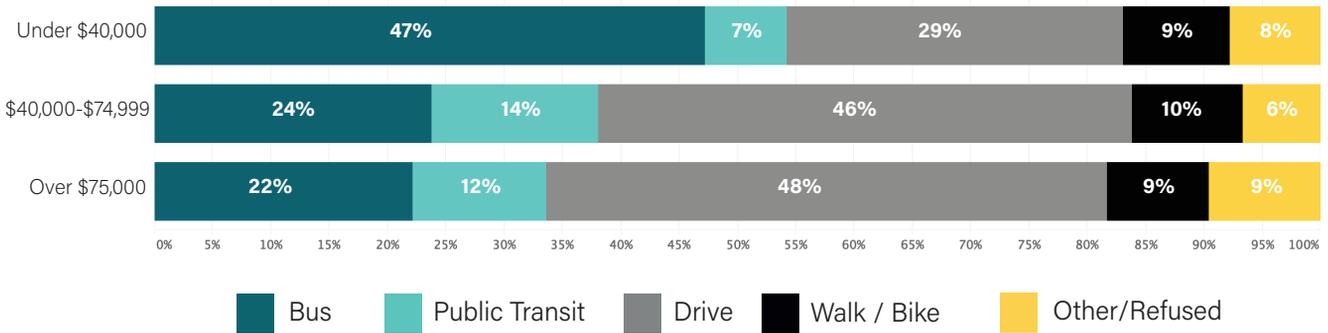
More parents and guardians (39%) said they drive their kids to school each day than those who said their children take a school bus (31%), use public transportation (11% - note that some schools provide students with public transport token to take public transportation), or bike or walk (9%). Unsurprisingly, those with younger children (aged 4-5) were more likely to drive than take the bus, with 60% driving and 15% taking the bus. Older students were more likely to utilize school buses, but in all age groups, parents and guardians were more likely to drive their children than have them take the bus.

With regards to transportation, there were differences along racial lines. Overall, 40% of Black respondents said their children take the school bus, compared to just 16% of White respondents. Meanwhile, 44% of White respondents drive their children to school compared to 35% of Black respondents, with the differences sharpening along gender lines.

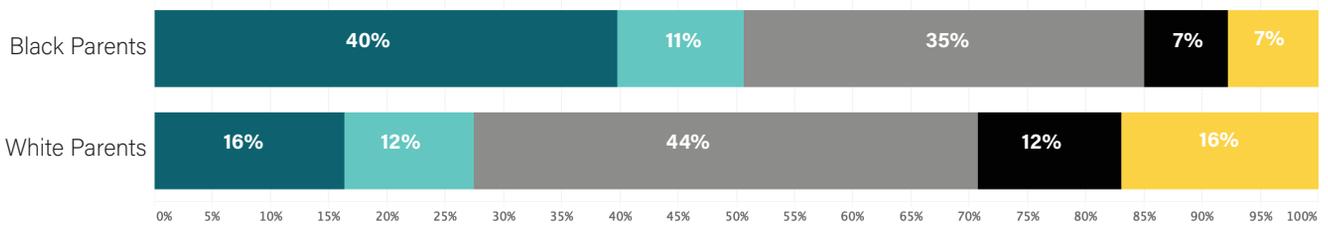
The differences are notable along socioeconomic lines, as well. Of respondents from high-income households, a near majority, 48%, drive their children to school, compared with 46% of those from middle-income households, and 29% of respondents from low-income backgrounds. Conversely, 47% of respondents from low-income households reported that their children take the bus, compared with 22% of those from high-income households.

Transportation to and from school is time-consuming for many families. However, students who take the bus spend more time in transit than those who are driven to school. Parents and guardians reported that their children spend, on average, close to an hour (58 minutes) traveling to and from school on the school bus. However, respondents who drive their children to school reported spending an average of 43 minutes in transit to and from school each day.

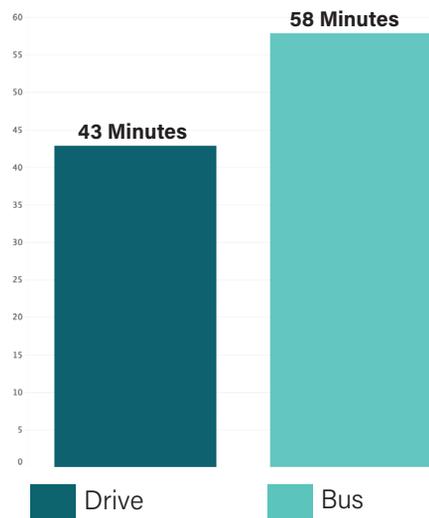
### Mode Of Transportation To School By Household Income



### Mode Of Transportation To School By Race

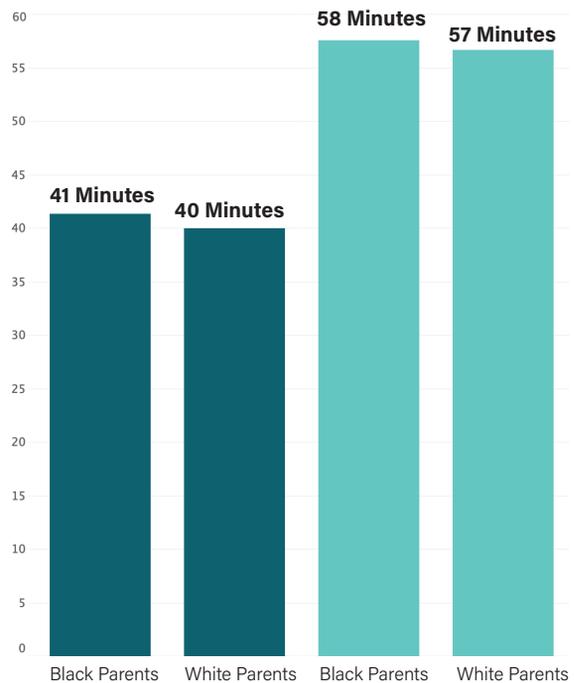


### Average Daily Length Of Time Traveling To And From School By Transportation Type



These graphs show that there is a difference in daily commute time for drivers and bus riders. While there is no difference in commute time along racial lines in a given method (ex: White parents and Black parents spend about the same amount of time driving or riding the bus), Black parents and those from low-income households are much more likely to ride the bus than drive.

### Average Daily Length Of Time Traveling To And From School By Race



# 7.

## Many parents and guardians are in agreement about key features of the city's public education system.

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We asked parents and guardians about whether they agreed with eleven different statements related to public education in New Orleans. In general, there was consensus on several key issues:

- 82% of respondents wanted a unified calendar for all public schools in the city;
- 82% of respondents agreed that school scores should be based on more than student performance;
- 72% of respondents stated they were worried about corruption at charter schools and 65% worried about it at OPSB;
- 61% of respondents believed that OneApp won't work as intended until there are more/enough quality schools in the city;
- 55% of respondents would pay slightly more in taxes to fund public education in the city;
- While parents and guardians would like to see changes at failing schools, there is a slight preference for closing them or finding a new charter group compared with having OPSB run them directly;
- Parents and guardians had more negative outlooks about the city's high schools and prospects for high school graduates, with only 46% believing that the city's high schools are preparing students for college and only 41% believing that high school graduates are succeeding at college.

# Conclusions

1.

The New Orleans public education system is complex and requires a degree of technical knowledge and expertise to navigate in order to maximize personal outcomes. The findings from this year's poll suggest that many parents and guardians either lack access to technical knowledge about the school system or are unaware of the added value of that information. This was reflected in a number of data points, including the lack of understanding of school letter grades, both in how they are calculated and how they are assigned, as well as confusion around school closures and the definition of selective admissions schools. On all of these items, the largest proportion of parents responded "I don't know", indicating a disconnect between the LDOE, the OPSB, schools, and the city's families. This disconnect was particularly evident among parents and guardians from low-income households. It's understandable how families may be confused with regards to whether or not their school is selective admissions when every family has to complete a standardized application to attend any public school in the city. While many aspects of the New Orleans public education model have been in operation for nearly or even more than a decade, these processes are still new to many parents and families who have recently relocated to the city, and those who are enrolling their children in public school for the first time.

2.

While the city's open enrollment policy aims to reduce educational inequity by allowing students to attend any school in the city regardless of neighborhood, the data suggest that ease of access is divided along racial and socioeconomic lines. White respondents and those from higher-income households were more likely to drive their children to school, resulting in notably shorter daily transit times than Black respondents and those from lower-income households.

3.

There are a number of actionable items with broad sweeping consensus among parents and families, like creating a unified citywide calendar for all of the city's public schools and expanding school performance assessments to include a wider array of measurements, such as the quality of instruction, curriculum, and student and teacher experiences, as ascertained through observations and surveys. The latter point, in particular, was reflected in a number of key items, where parents ranked standardized test scores and changes in standardized test scores from year to year as the least important factors when evaluating an individual school. This suggests that parents and families find value in other aspects of their child(ren)'s education and feel that these factors should be considered during school assessments.

# Next Steps

The data show descriptive differences in opinion along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines but none were statistically significant, meaning we can't draw concrete conclusions on differences in attitudes based on this poll data. However, a number of findings raise questions worth exploring in more detail. Further research is needed on:

- How parents and families conceptualize the difference between the OPSB and public charter schools, as a number of key differences in opinion emerged along those lines.
- Also, there is a need for more qualitative research on how parents and families define school and teacher quality, as the term "quality" leaves room for interpretation.
- Finally, we aim to longitudinally explore parents' opinions towards the city's public education system, pulling data from previous polls to examine trends and/or changes over time.