Across the Years

Perceptions of Public Education in New Orleans 2015-2018

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Introduction
Since its founding in 2007, the Cowen Institute has dedicated its work toward improving public education in New Orleans. As part of that focus, for most of the past decade, the Cowen Institute has released annual public perception polls on K-12 education in the city. The annual polls contribute to our mission by helping to assess the impact of education policies on families.

Each year, our polls examine the quality, performance, and policies of New Orleans schools and the perceptions of families, students, and educators. The polls also address timely issues relating to public and private education in our city.

Methodology
In each of the past four years, our methodological approach has been consistent but not identical. In the interest of transparency, it is important to point out what changes have occurred.

For every poll, we contracted with Market Research Insight (MRI), directed by Dr. Verne Kennedy, a nationally respected external research and polling agency, to conduct the actual polling. This ensured the results would be produced by a neutral third-party with experience in polling. All questions were created by our staff in partnership with MRI. MRI conducted the polls within a small window of time, over the phone.

For each poll, a sample of voters was randomly selected 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 at least two attempts 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 ascertain that the sample was representative of the New Orleans population in terms of race and income level. Over time, the number of residents reached by cell phone has increased. The polls each have a 4% margin of error at the .95 level of confidence.

Key Differences
Despite the consistent sampling strategy, the number of total voters, and public and private school parents polled, has varied. The chart below illustrates the differences in the sampled population for each of the four years of polling included in this brief.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
<th>Number of Public School Parents Polled</th>
<th>Percentage of Black Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of White Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents of Other Races</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chart above illustrates the differences in the sampled population for each of the four years of polling included in this brief.

- Notably, we increased the number of total respondents from 600 in 2015-2016 to 700 in 2017-2018.
- Additionally, the number of public school parent respondents has also increased in each of the four polls. We have intentionally oversampled parents of public school students to gauge the opinions of those who interact most with the public education system in the city.
- The majority of questions we have asked also varied from year to year depending on the focus of the legislature or state of public schools and governance in New Orleans at the time. Please note that this report only includes questions asked in at least two of the last four years. To see the results for other issues, please reference the original poll reports.

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Key Findings:

Over the past four years, we have seen persistently high support for the most notable policies of New Orleans K-12 education, namely the prevalence of charter schools and open enrollment. However, most respondents still perceive schools as being average, giving them a C grade overall, and more people believe school quality is staying the same than improving.

» School Quality:
   » Over the past four years, most respondents have given schools a C letter grade, mirroring the actual state assessment of New Orleans’ schools as a whole.
   » For the past three years, the percentage of respondents stating the overall quality of schools is staying the same has steadily increased, while the percentage of people who believe schools are getting worse has decreased.

» Charter Schools:
   » There has been a consistently high level of support for the idea that charter schools are improving education in the city. In each of the past four years, around 60% of respondents have offered support of charter schools, while around 20% of respondents have stated the belief that charter schools are not improving the city’s public education.
   » Overall, White respondents have viewed the impact of charter schools more favorably than Black respondents.

» Open Enrollment:
   » In each of the past four years, a majority of respondents have expressed support for New Orleans’ unique open enrollment policy that allows students to attend almost any school in the city, regardless of where they live.

» Unification of Schools:
   » Over the past two years, the perceptions of those polled about the unification of all New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) schools under the authority of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) improved.

» Career and Technical Education:
   » Career and Technical Education (CTE) is overwhelmingly popular: In both 2017 and 2018, at least 90% of respondents expressed support for ensuring schools provide CTE to students.

» TOPS:
   » If Louisiana’s main higher education scholarship program, the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), must be cut due to the state’s budget crisis, when asked in each of the past two years, most respondents have stated they prefer to cut all scholarship amounts equally – regardless of a student’s income level or academic performance.

What letter grade would you give to schools in New Orleans?

For the past four years, we’ve asked respondents to assign all public schools in New Orleans a letter grade:
   » The most common letter grade response has been a C, followed by B.
   » In all years but 2015, these responses have been consistent when broken down by the race of respondents. However, in 2015 there was a large gap between White and Black respondents, with 50% of White voters rating New Orleans public schools as a C, compared to 40% of Black voters. That year, more Black respondents gave the system a B than White respondents, at 19% to 13%, respectively.

Do you believe schools are getting better, worse, or staying the same?

For the past three years, we’ve assessed whether New Orleanians think K-12 public education in the city is getting better, worse, or staying the same:
   » 2016 was the only year in which a plurality of respondents stated schools were getting better. In 2017 and 2018, the most common response was that schools were staying the same. The least common response in all three years was that schools were getting worse.
   » Over time, the number of respondents who think schools are staying the same has increased while the number of respondents who think schools are getting worse has decreased.
Do you believe charter schools have improved public education in New Orleans?

In each of the past four years, we’ve asked respondents whether they believe charter schools have improved education in the city:

- Positive perceptions about charter schools have remained consistent across those four years, with around 60% of respondents believing that charter schools have improved public education.
- A majority of both White and Black respondents have consistently stated that the impact of charter schools has been positive. However, a higher rate of White respondents have agreed with this view each year.

Do you believe open enrollment has had a positive impact, negative impact, or no impact on public education in New Orleans?

We’ve also asked respondents whether they support the open enrollment policies in New Orleans that allow students to attend, with a few exceptions, any public school in the city, regardless of where they live:

- In all four years, a majority of respondents have stated they believe open enrollment has had a positive impact on education in New Orleans.
- In all but 2016, those who believe the policy has had no impact exceeded those who believe it had a negative impact.

What letter grade would you give the unification process of schools under the oversight of the Orleans Parish School Board?

Due to legislation passed in 2016, all New Orleans charter schools that were under the oversight of the state’s Recovery School District (RSD) were required to come under the OPSB by the start of the 2018-19 school year. For the past two years, we asked respondents to give the unification process a letter grade:

- Perceptions about the unification process improved slightly from 2017 to 2018. In 2018, 64% of voters gave the process a B or C letter grade, compared to 61% in 2017. Those giving the process an A also increased.
- The percentage of voters giving the process a D did, however, increase from 10% in 2017 to 15% in 2018.

Should public schools provide students with Career and Technical Education (CTE)?

Under the state’s Jumpstart initiative, all high schools in the state must provide students access to career credential pathways. Since the implementation of this new diploma track, we’ve asked New Orleans’ voters whether they support teaching CTE in schools:

- Respondents have expressed incredibly high levels of support for teaching CTE in 2015 and 2018, the only two years we asked about it, with at least 90% in favor.
If TOPS has to be cut due to the state’s budget crisis, what’s the best way to allocate the available funding for the program?

In recent years, the cost of Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) has faced increased scrutiny from state legislators tasked with balancing a budget during a fiscal crisis. As restrictions on eligibility were removed, the number of recipients from high-income families has steadily grown, and the cost of the overall program has expanded dramatically.

We have worked as a founding member of the Louisiana College Access Coalition, a group geared towards reallocating TOPS funding by prioritizing the original target audience of the program: high-performing students from low-income backgrounds. Given our investment in the issue, for the past two years, we’ve asked about how TOPS funding should be reallocated if the program is cut:

- In both 2017 and 2018, the top response (47% in 2017 and 49% in 2018) was that awards should be cut equally for all students, regardless of their income status or performance level.
- The next most common response from both years was to allocate the money to students from low-income households with support from 34% of voters in 2017 and 27% in 2018.
- Notably, in 2018, we also asked respondents whether they’d support a tax increase to help fund post-secondary education in the state. 81% of respondents supported some form of a tax increase, with 25% of voters preferring to legalize and tax marijuana, followed by 24% of respondents who would choose to increase cigarette taxes.