

Michigan Residents Grade Their Schools: Results from the 2003 State of the State Survey

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The State Board of Education and the Michigan Department of Education are about to publish letter grades for each of the state's 4,015 public elementary, middle and high schools. These grades are part of Education YES!, Michigan's new school accreditation system. The familiar ABCD/F grades of their youth will provide parents and the public with a summary measure of a number of school quality indicators, including test scores, attendance rates and parent involvement levels, in an easy to grasp format. The grades handed out by the state will be based on an extensive set of data – far more data than has ever been available to the general public.

Of course, most people already have a sense of how they would grade both their local schools and the state school system as a whole. In fact, the State of the State Survey (SOSS) conducted by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR) has for a number of years regularly asked respondents to grade both their local

schools and the state school system overall. Results from the most recent SOSS show a sharp downturn in public confidence in the quality of public schools both locally and statewide.

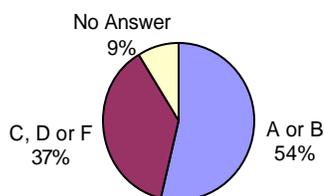
The May 2003 survey asked people to grade schools using the same ABCD/F scale used by Education YES! The SOSS results below include approximately 10 percent of respondents who answered Don't Know or who did not answer a given question.

A Less Than Stellar Report Card

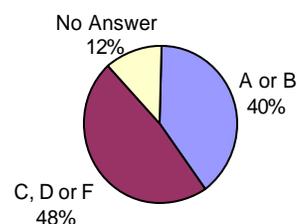
Overall, respondents gave their local schools higher grades than they gave schools across the state (Figure 1). Fifty-four percent gave their local schools grades of A or B, while only 40 percent gave those grades to the state's schools as a whole.

Figure 1.

Grades for Local Schools - 2003



Grades for State Schools - 2003



This pattern of higher grades for local schools held true in every geographic area in the state. The lowest grades came from respondents in Detroit, where fewer than one in four gave A or B grades to their local schools, and only one in five gave positive grades to the state system overall (Table 1).

Favorable grades (A or B) for local schools also dipped below 50 percent in the West Central region that includes Grand Rapids. State schools fared even worse in West Central Michigan, receiving favorable grades from only 27 percent of respondents there.

Table 1.

Region	Grades of A or B for Local Schools	Grades of A or B for State Schools
Upper Peninsula	67%	47%
N. Lower Peninsula	57%	40%
West Central	48%	27%
East Central	66%	56%
Southwest	66%	38%
Southeast	55%	46%
Detroit	23%	20%

People who live in small cities, suburbs or rural areas also rated local schools significantly higher than the state system as a whole (Table 2). Urban respondents, in contrast, actually rated the state system more favorably – barely – than their local schools, 28 percent versus 27 percent. In the most

dramatic finding of the analysis, less than one in six African-Americans give their local schools a favorable grade, compared to three of five white respondents. Grades from those with children under 18 years of age were comparable to grades from those without school-age children.

Table 2.

Community Type	Grades of A or B for Local Schools	Grades of A or B for State Schools
Rural	56%	40%
Small City, Town or Village	61%	47%
Suburban	55%	37%
Urban	27%	28%
Race		
White	60%	43%
African American	15%	23%
Respondents		
With children < 18 yrs old	55%	42%
W/out children < 18 years old	53%	40%

Those without high school diplomas were least likely to give favorable grades to schools, either locally (36 percent) or statewide (20 percent). High school graduates and those with technical or junior college degrees were most likely to grade schools favorably (Table

3). Good opinion of local schools was steady across age groups, but good grades for the state system fell as ages increased, from one in two (49 percent) among young adults to one in three (34 percent) among senior citizens.

Table 3.

Education Level	Grades of A or B for Local Schools	Grades of A or B for State Schools
No Diploma	36%	20%
High School Graduate	58%	52%
Technical/Jr. College	84%	57%
College Graduate	54%	30%
Age Group		
18-29	56%	49%
30-49	53%	43%
50-64	53%	34%
65+	55%	34%
Income Level		
Less than \$40,000	56%	40%
\$40-70,000	46%	37%
\$70,000+	67%	51%

The lowest grades were awarded by middle-income people: only 46 percent gave their local schools an A or B, and only 37 percent gave state schools an A or B. Those earning \$70,000 or above were most likely to give positive grades to both categories of schools.

independent voters gave either group of schools favorable grades. Republicans were the most likely to give high marks to local schools (64 percent A or B grades) and, simultaneously, the most likely to give low marks to state schools (34 percent A or B grades).

People varied in their opinions by political affiliation (Table 4). Fewer than half of

Table 4.

Political Affiliation	Grades of A or B for Local Schools	Grades of A or B for State Schools
Republican	64%	34%
Democrat	52%	46%
Independent	49%	44%

What a Difference a Year – or Two – Makes

How do these 2003 grades for local schools compare with those awarded by SOSS respondents in 2001? Dramatically, it turns out. As can be seen in Table 5, 65 percent of survey respondents gave A or B grades to their local schools in 2001 – 11 points higher than in 2003. Favorable grades for local schools dropped 24 percent in the West Central region, 12 percent in the Southwest and 16 percent in

Detroit. They dropped 22 percent in the suburbs and 17 percent in urban areas, 18 percent among Republicans and 19 percent among African Americans. Favorable opinions fell by as much as 26 points among college educated respondents, 18 percent among senior citizens and 17 percent among middle-income earners. Public views of schools statewide followed a similar pattern.

Table 5.

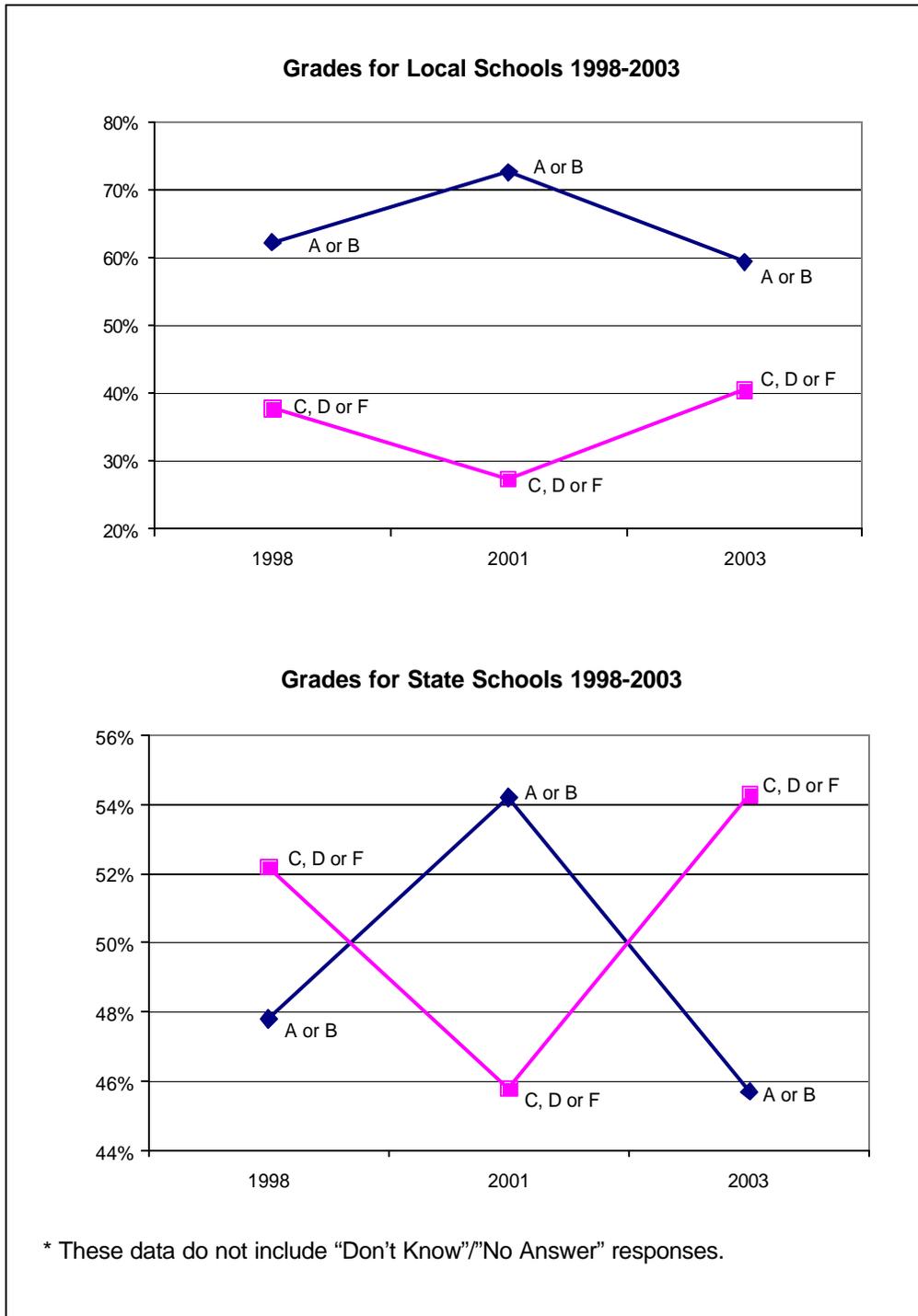
Region	2001 Grades of A or B for Local Schools	2003 Grades of A or B for Local Schools	Two Year Change
State	65%	54%	-11%
Upper Peninsula	53%	67%	+14%
N. Lower Peninsula	60%	57%	-3%
West Central	72%	48%	-24%
East Central	69%	66%	-3%
Southwest	78%	66%	-12%
Southeast	66%	55%	-11%
Detroit	39%	23%	-16%
Community Type			
Rural	58%	56%	-2%
Small City, Town or Village	72%	61%	-11%
Suburban	77%	55%	-22%
Urban	44%	27%	-17%
Race			
African American	34%	15%	-19%
White	70%	60%	-10%
Political Affiliation			
Republican	82%	64%	-18%
Democrat	56%	52%	-4%
Independent	61%	49%	-12%

A Broader Context: 1998 SOSS Results

The widespread decline in favorable grades for schools both locally and statewide revealed by the 2003 SOSS results is dramatic, but it is

only half the story (Figure 2). This is because the 2001 results were significantly higher than those recorded in 1998.

Figure 2.



The grades awarded in 2003 for both local schools and schools statewide are only slightly lower than the grades respondents gave in 1998.

Discussion

Both critics and reformers recognize that the observed swings in grades awarded by the public reveal more about changes in the public's perception of schools than about changes in the schools themselves. In this connection, it is important to recall that the upward swing in favorable perceptions in May 2001 coincided with the tail end of a boom cycle in both the state and K-12 sector budgets. At that time, the state's "rainy day fund" showed a \$1 billion surplus, and the legislature had just established a multi-year budget process for the schools that was hailed as a major advance toward stable school funding. The initial effects of Proposal A – a "leveling up" of per pupil funding for many districts – had kicked in, and wider implementation of school choice programs gave the public a sense that schools were beginning to respond to market forces.

By 2003, circumstances were dramatically different. Both the state and K-12 budgets were in turmoil, and lists of "failing schools" required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act had been released and extensively covered in the media. Many communities are now struggling to come to grips with the significant squeeze that Proposal A has put on school district budgets, as fixed costs outpace revenues tied to student enrollment. The future of Michigan's public school system looks significantly darker than it did in 2001.

What's At Stake

In football, three things can happen when a team attempts a forward pass, and only one of those is good. The current effort to grade Michigan's schools under Education Yes! faces the same challenge.

Option #1: Pass Incomplete. It may turn out that the grades schools awarded by the state largely coincide with parent and community perceptions of their schools. While there is value in confirming popular impressions with

data, the state runs the public relations risk of irrelevancy, if the state's grades just tell people something they think they already know. In this case, state grades might lead people to conclude that the state has little new information to offer that might help Michigan's schools improve their performance.

Option #2: Pass Interception. It may turn out that state grades for schools differ significantly from public opinion, rating them significantly lower or higher than citizens themselves. In this case, the grades awarded by the state must be robust enough to withstand challenges to their accuracy. If the grades awarded to schools lack "face validity," the state risks something even worse than irrelevancy: the charge that the state's accreditation system is fundamentally if not fatally flawed.

Option #3: Pass complete. It may turn out that state grades for schools in fact differ from public perception, and that they come across both as credible and as helpful to parents and communities in understanding what is really happening – and *not* happening – in their schools. In this case, the state's grades may help citizens make accurate and informed judgments about their schools and what can be done to make them better.

The theme of NCLB and Education YES! is accountability, and the refrain is evidence-based decisions about school improvement. If school grades can prompt educators and the public alike to shift from relying on anecdotal impressions and fond (or not so fond) memories about their own schools to looking at factual evidence and recent trends, both within schools and across the state, they will have served a valuable role in improving education in Michigan.

The Survey

The survey on which this report is based was administered as part of the 31st wave of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research's State of the State Survey. A total of 965 phone interviews were completed using list-assisted random-digit sampling procedures between June 27 and August 11, 2003. The margin of overall sampling error is +/-3.2

percent. The data reported in this policy report are weighted to be representative of the adult population in Michigan. Data from 2001 were obtained from the 21st wave of the State of the State Survey, conducted between May 30 and July 12, 2001. The 2001 survey was based on 958 interviews. The margin of error was +/-3.2 percent.

For more information about this survey and related policy issues visit the Education Policy Center website at www.epc.msu.edu or the Institute for Public Policy and Social research website at www.ippsr.msu.edu.



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