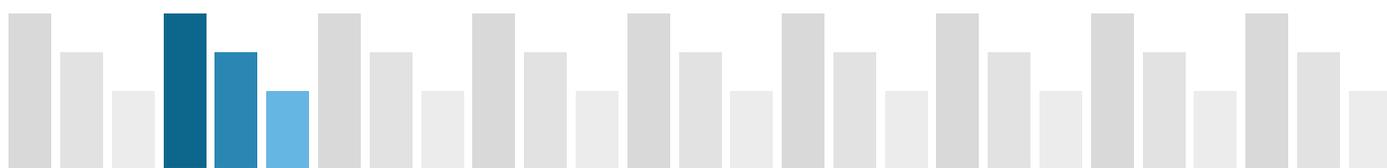


# K-12 Public Education through the Public's Eye:

## Parents' and Adults' Perception of Public Education in New Orleans



May 2015

# Background

In the last ten years, New Orleans' public education system has undergone a dramatic transformation. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failures wrought destruction across the city, leaving the city's population displaced. In terms of academic performance and student achievement, New Orleans' schools had been some of the worst in the nation prior to the storm. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), which had been tasked with governing most city schools, suffered from years of financial corruption, a poor academic track record, and leadership turmoil.

Following the storm, the Louisiana Legislature voted to expand the power of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). As a result, the RSD took control of most New Orleans public schools. Many new charter schools, with independent boards, were authorized to open across the city and to take over low-performing schools. Significant policy changes occurred as well, such as open school enrollment across the city and stricter school accountability measures. Amidst this flux, the OPSB saw its role diminished and was tasked with governance of only a small number of schools that had higher levels of academic performance prior to Katrina.

Now, nearly a decade after these changes first began, New Orleans has developed one of the most unique and decentralized public education systems in the nation. Of the city's 82 public schools, 75 are charters. There are 44 governing bodies and 12 charter networks operating in the city. More than 90 percent of public school students attend charter schools – the highest rate in the nation. Yet, despite this diffusion of governance authority, schools, the RSD, and the OPSB have also adopted many common policies to increase consistency, transparency, and accountability across the city, such as unified expulsion practices and a common enrollment process called *OneApp*.

Since 2009, the Cowen Institute has conducted an annual poll to assess public perception of the public education system in New Orleans. We have done so out of the belief that understanding how the public at-large, and parents in particular, view these changes is a crucial part of evaluating the effect these changes have had on parents, students, and the community as a whole. These perceptions will help to shape how our city's public education continues to evolve in the future.



# Summary of Findings

The survey results highlight the notion that, while progress has been made in New Orleans' public education, there is still room for improvement. The majority of respondents believe that **charter schools have improved education in the city** and were **more likely to send their child to New Orleans' public schools** than before Hurricane Katrina. A majority of parents believe that their child's **school provides a safe place to learn and prepares their child for life after high school**. Parents also tended to believe that there was **sufficient information for choosing a school** in the current open enrollment landscape.

There was also **strong support for career and technical training as well as shared academic standards**, as long as they are not called Common Core. A plurality of respondents believed that **schools are better now than before Hurricane Katrina** and **would recommend New Orleans public schools** to a friend or family member. Respondents most often **agreed with the state's decision to take over most schools** after Hurricane Katrina and believe that current governance policies are best.

Despite these positive takeaways, **respondents still think New Orleans public schools can improve**. Collectively, they **viewed public schools as average** and respondents were still more likely to **believe private schools are better**. While respondents strongly supported career and technical education, many felt the school system could do better at preparing students for life after high school. Finally, respondents still **have not gained complete faith in OPSB's ability to govern** all New Orleans schools.

*Some public schools are incredible and it is the students' and teachers' willingness to learn and teach that makes a difference.*

-Respondent

*There are things that are better, but there are some things that need improvement.*

-Respondent

## Methodology

This public opinion poll is the sixth commissioned by the Cowen Institute to gauge opinion about public education in New Orleans. This poll was done in partnership with The Advocate, though all questions were created by Cowen Institute and Market Research Insight staff.

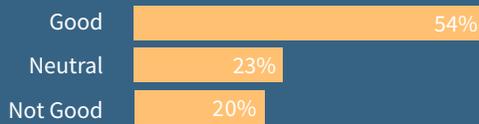
The poll surveyed a random sample of 600 adults over phone and was conducted between April 7 and April 14, 2015. The sample is geographically representative and closely resembles the city's population by race/ethnicity.

Demographic	African-American	White	Other
Respondents	60%	34%	5%
Adult Population	60%	31%	9%

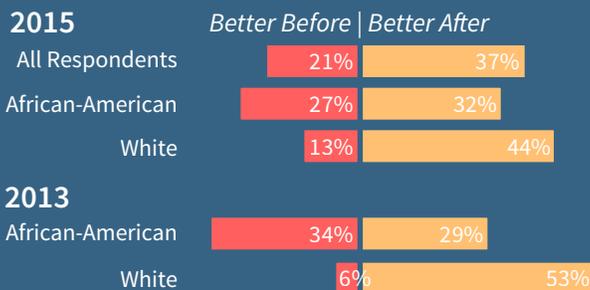
See Appendix A for more details about the methodology.

# What Did Respondents Support?

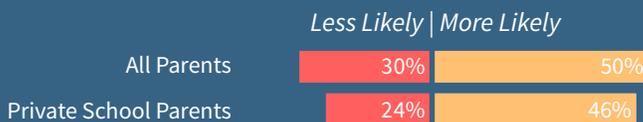
## Most respondents believe the city of New Orleans is headed in a good direction.



## This year, more African-Americans see schools as better post-Katrina than before the storm.



## More parents of both private and public school children say they are more likely to send their child to a public school now than before the storm.



## Respondents are also more likely to recommend public schools to a friend or family than not.



*There is now less violence in the schools and [it] seems like more control in the schools now than before.*  
-Respondent

Given the overhaul of public education, the survey asked respondents numerous questions about their opinions on whether the changes that have occurred have improved education and schools in New Orleans. Overall, respondents expressed support for the changes, while also voicing concern about numerous areas where improvement still needs to occur. These responses echoed an overall optimism about where the city is headed. Fifty-four percent of those polled felt very good or somewhat good about the direction of the city, compared to just 20 percent of those who felt it was headed in a negative direction. These responses were nearly identical to those received when the Cowen Institute asked the same question last year of registered voters.

## Overall Satisfaction

When asked about whether public schools are better or worse than prior to Hurricane Katrina, 37 percent of respondents stated schools are better after, compared to 21 percent who believed they were better before Katrina, and 28 percent who said schools had remained about the same. These responses are very similar to when the Cowen Institute asked the same question of registered voters and parents in 2013. However, compared to 2013, one major shift occurred: responses to questions were not as divided along racial lines this year. In 2013, more African-Americans said schools were better before the storm than did those who thought they were better after, whereas respondents who were white or another race overwhelmingly believed public schools were better after. This year, however, more African-Americans thought schools were better after the storm.

Additionally, of all parents surveyed, 50 percent of those polled stated they were more likely to send their child to a public school than they were before Katrina, whereas 30 percent said they were less likely.

Forty-six percent of respondents also said they would recommend to friends or family that they send their child to a city public school compared to 38 percent who would not. These responses echoed those from last year, when the responses were 45 and 44 percent respectively. Notably, this year, 51 percent of African-Americans would make a recommendation, compared to 39 percent of white respondents.

When the same question was asked of just private school parents, the numbers were similar: 46 percent of parents with children at private schools stated they were more likely to send a child to a public school now, compared to 24 percent who said they were less likely and 24 percent who said there was no difference.

Part of the reason for these responses may be that parents feel confident in the level of security at public schools. Eighty-one percent of public school parents said their child's school provides students with a safe place to learn, while only 12 percent said the school did not.

## School Choice

Public school parents also felt they had enough information to select a school for their child, with 76 percent stating they felt information about the process and available schools was definitely or somewhat sufficient compared to just 11 percent who said it was not.

## Charter Schools

Respondents also expressed strong support for the impact charter schools have had in the city, with 59 percent agreeing that charters have improved public education as opposed to 18 percent who disagreed. This strong support is similar to when the Cowen Institute asked the question of parents in 2009: 69 percent of respondents believed charters had improved education in the city compared to 13 percent who thought they had not. This support for charters extended into the policy of having schools that are consistently rated a D by the state to be turned over to a different operator to be restarted: 59 percent supported this compared to 20 percent who opposed the policy.

*It needed to be done – the school board wasn't doing a good job.*  
-Respondent

*Give the teachers more money and bring them back to the community. They understand what the children need because they also had a great loss.*  
-Respondent



**76%** of public school parents felt they had enough information when selecting a school.

The majority of respondents agree that charter schools have improved education in New Orleans.

Disagree | Agree

All Respondents 18% 59%

Most respondents also agree that schools that are consistently rated a D should be turned over to another charter operator.

Disagree | Agree

All Respondents 20% 59%

**Most respondents support open school enrollment over geographic school assignment.**

*Geographic Assignment | Open Enrollment*



**The majority of respondents also believe that open enrollment has had a positive impact on education.**

*Negative | Positive*



*The schools and parents should decide when they want to make any changes.*  
-Respondent

## Open Enrollment

Respondents also backed New Orleans’ policy of open enrollment, in which parents can send their child to any open enrollment school in the city: 72 percent supported open enrollment compared to 23 percent who preferred assigning students to schools based on geography alone. Additionally, 52 percent believed open enrollment has had a positive impact on public education compared to 17 percent who felt the policy has had a negative impact. These results are similar to those in our 2014 poll, when 53 percent stated the impact was positive and 20 percent negative.

As to how public school parents choose what school their children attend, 50 percent stated word of mouth was how they first heard about the school, followed by 15 percent who said they either had or knew other children who attended the school. Forty-one percent of public school parents said academic performance was the most important factor in selecting a school, followed by 20 percent who ranked location as the key reason for their choice. When asked what was the second most important reason for their school selection, 27 percent of public school parents stated academic performance, 24 percent the school’s safety or discipline policies, and 15 percent the school’s location.



**50%** of public school parents said word of mouth was how they learned of their child’s school.

**41%** of public school parents said academic performance was the most important factor in selecting a school.

## College & Career Readiness

Over the past ten years, many of the charters that have opened in the city have had a “college for all” goal in which they aim to have all of their students eventually enroll in college. Yet, in recent years, educators have also begun to reconsider vocational and technical training as opportunities for students, regardless of whether they go to college or not. Last year, with its JumpStart initiative, the Louisiana Department of Education put an increased focus on ensuring that high school students across the state graduate with the skills necessary to find employment. Overall, public school parents believe New Orleans’ schools are preparing children for life after high school, with 59 percent stating that the school their child attends prepares students for college or a career, compared to 32 percent of parents who do not believe their child’s school is doing so.

Unequivocally, all respondents also supported the idea that city high schools should be providing the type of career and technical training JumpStart will encourage, with 91 percent stating that high schools should provide such training, compared to just three percent who did not support it.

**The majority of public school parents think their school prepares students for college or a career.**

Disagree | Agree

Public School Parents 32% 59%

**91%** *of all respondents believe public high schools should provide career & technical training.*

## Common Core

In 2010, Louisiana adopted the Common Core State Standards. Currently, 43 other states and the District of Columbia also have adopted the standards. The goal of Common Core is to ensure that regardless of their home state, students nationally are being taught the same reading, writing, and math skills, which will benefit them academically and professionally once they become adults.

While Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal originally supported Louisiana’s adoption of Common Core, he has since reversed that position. The standards have become highly politicized in the state, with Superintendent of Education John White and the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education continuing to support the state’s adoption of Common Core, while Jindal and some legislators have introduced bills that would allow the state to opt-out.

The highly politicized nature of Common Core was reflected in the perceptions of those polled. By a 62 to 27 margin, respondents believed that the academic performance of public schools should be measured by the same benchmarks and tests as those used in other states. Yet, when those polled were asked directly about Common Core, rather than national standards, 38 percent stated they opposed Common Core, compared to 31 percent supported it.

*We should not be left behind, so that means we must all be on the same level.*

-Respondent

**While most respondents support sharing common academic standards with other states, they do not support them when they are called Common Core.**

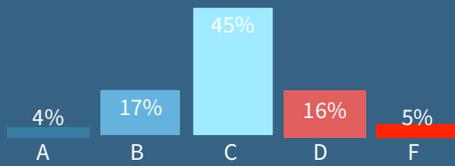
Don't Support | Support

Same Academic Standards as Other States 27% 62%

Common Core 38% 31%

# What Can Be Improved?

A plurality of respondents believe the school system is performing about average.



While respondents supported many aspects of education reform in New Orleans, there are also elements of the system they believe could be improved. Notably, a plurality of those polled view the quality of city's school as mediocre, with 45 percent giving all public schools a C grade, which is what the Louisiana Department of Education rates the city's schools.

New Orleans has a strong tradition of private school enrollment, with one of the highest rates in the nation. Thus, one measure of success for public school reform would be creating enough high-achieving schools to attract more students who traditionally would have gone to a private school. Based on the opinions of respondents, that has not yet occurred. Those polled expressed

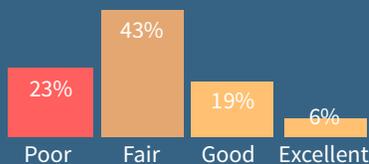
strong preference for the quality of education in private schools, with 65 percent stating private schools offer better quality compared to 13 percent who said public schools do so. There was some variance in responses across races, with 72 percent of white respondents saying private schools offered a better education compared to 61 percent of African-Americans polled. Additionally, 80 percent of private school parents stated they had never applied for admission at a public or charter school.

## Enrollment

The vast majority of schools in New Orleans participate in a unified application process called *OneApp*. The goal of the process is to make it easier for parents and students to find the right school by using a single application for multiple schools. Parents and students rank up to eight schools they would like to attend and then are assigned a school based on an algorithm that takes into account factors such as where students live and if they have a sibling at a particular school.

Only 47 of the parents polled this year had used *OneApp*. However, of those who had, 53 percent said they were dissatisfied using the process, compared to 38 percent who were satisfied. The poll did not ask the reason for this dissatisfaction, meaning the dissatisfaction may have stemmed from the system itself or with the school to which their child was ultimately assigned. The extremely small sample size also limits the reliability of these results.

A plurality of respondents believe high schools only do a fair job of preparing students for college.

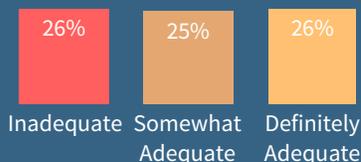


## School Performance

Respondents also believe that public high schools can do a better job preparing students for college. A plurality of 43 percent of those polled stated high schools do a fair job with college preparation, with an additional 23 percent stating schools do a poor job, and 19 percent that schools do a good job. Only six percent said schools are doing an excellent job of college preparation.

Respondents were also asked an open-ended question about what their top concern in education was, but no clear consensus emerged, with the most common responses being nothing or not sure.

There was no consensus among parents of public school special education students on service quality.



## Special Education

There were 85 respondents who had a child in their household who had qualified to receive special education services. When asked if the services provided by the child's school were adequate, respondents gave mixed responses with 26 percent stating services were inadequate, 26 percent stating they were definitely adequate, and 25 percent saying the services were somewhat adequate. The remaining respondents were not sure.

# How Should Schools Be Governed?

One of the most important questions in the future for New Orleans education will be who has ultimate governance control over schools. We asked a series of questions to assess what adults in the city believe is the best long-term governance strategy for city schools.

## School Takeovers

Ten years later, 47 percent agree with the state's decision to take over most schools in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, compared to 28 percent who disagree. Fifty-five percent of white respondents agreed with the decision compared to 44 percent of African-Americans. When the Cowen Institute asked the same question of registered voters and parents in 2009, 66 percent of those polled agreed with the decision to take over schools. This decision to take over the schools led in large part to the decentralized structure of schools today.

## School Oversight

A plurality of respondents also support the status quo when it comes to the current governance structure in which the RSD oversees the majority of schools in the city: 35 percent support the current policy, while 31 percent believe that all RSD schools should return to OPSB oversight within the next two years, 13 percent believe the return should happen within the next three to five years, and nine percent think that schools should never return.

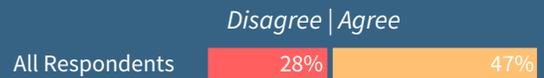
When this question was asked of registered voters in 2014, 41 percent supported staying with the current policy, compared to 18 percent who sought a return to OPSB in the next two years, 16 percent who thought schools should never return, and 11 percent who believed schools should return to the OPSB in the next three to five years.

## Governance Structure

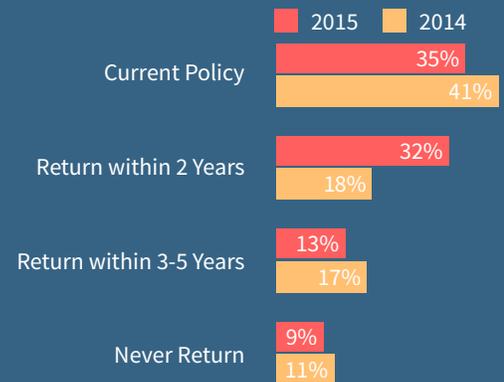
No clear picture emerges about what respondents believe is the best long-term governance structure. When asked who should have long-term governance of charter schools, 34 percent of respondents said a local board with some elected and some appointed members, while 22 percent said OPSB, 18 percent said the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and nine percent said a local board of all appointed members. In 2013, when asked the same question, 41 percent of respondents preferred a local board with mixed appointed and elected members, 22 percent opted for BESE, 16 percent for OPSB, and nine percent for a local board of all appointed members.

*They need to develop a good exit strategy before releasing the system back.*  
-Respondent

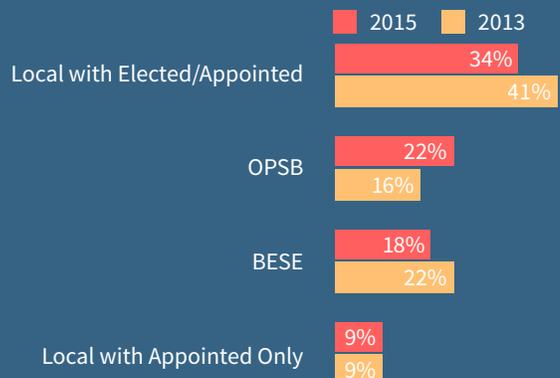
### More respondents agree with the state's decision to take over most of the schools after Hurricane Katrina.



### More respondents advocate for RSD schools to return to OPSB within two years than last year.



### More respondents support local control, including OPSB control, than last year.



## OPSB Governance

New OPSB Superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr. has expressed his desire to have all schools eventually return to the OPSB but has acknowledged that the board, as well as its administration, will need to make changes before that happens. Yet, respondents expressed skepticism about the OPSB's capacity to manage and oversee all New Orleans schools. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said that the OPSB would need to change in order to manage all schools if schools were mandated to return to OPSB oversight, and there was consistency across races on the need for change. Yet, when asked an open-ended question about what changes OPSB would need to make in order to be able to manage all schools, 34 percent of respondents said they were unsure and 21 percent said nothing. Additionally, 38 percent of respondents stated that Lewis' recent selection as superintendent made no difference in their level of confidence as to the OPSB's ability to govern or run schools, compared to 23 percent who said his selection gave them more confidence and 13 percent who said it gave them less.

Clearly, respondents do not yet have a clear vision of what they would like long-term governance of public education in New Orleans to look like.

*There are problematic issues – more and more crisis management and no long-term solutions.*  
-Respondent

*It seems to me that things are better the way they are now, so why go back?*  
-Respondent

## Looking Ahead

The year's poll echoes findings from previous years showing that there is continued support from parents and the public at-large for many of the changes that have occurred in New Orleans' public education since Hurricane Katrina. While parents and the public at-large see improvements in public schools, they also recognize the need for continued progress: this year's poll reflects that parents would like to see improvements in the overall quality of public schools. There is also no majority sentiment around the best path forward for governance of schools. Yet, public support of charter schools and the city's decentralized model has remained strong.



# Appendix A: Full Methodology

This public opinion poll is the sixth commissioned by the Cowen Institute to assess opinion about public education in New Orleans. This poll was done in partnership with The Advocate, though all questions were created by Cowen Institute and Market Research Insight staff.

The poll was conducted by phone from April 7 to April 14, 2015, by Market Research Insight, a nationally recognized firm. A sample of 600 individuals was randomly drawn from the latest list of registered voters in New Orleans by city council district to ensure geographical representation. The list was telephone matched to ensure current land-line numbers and cell numbers. The questionnaire was programmed into a CATI system and multiple attempts, at least two, were made to reach each individual. Interviews were conducted from a call center with trained and experienced staff. Two monitor stations constantly observed and listened to interviews to oversee quality. Results were compared with census and voter registration demographics to be certain the collected sample represented important characteristics of the Orleans population. The sample provides an error factor of 4.1 percent at the .95 level of confidence that account for the fact that council districts and other populations have error factors based on the cell size of each group. Both public and private school parents were proportionately and well represented based on their makeup of the Orleans population.

After Market Research Insight had completed the polling and tabulated the results, staff followed up with respondents for the quotes that can be found throughout this document. The quotes that were selected were chosen because they were representative of and expanded on the data.

Overall, 60 percent of respondents were African American, 34 percent were white, and five percent were classified as other, closely matching the ethnic distribution of the adult residents in the city. A total of 148 parents were interviewed, 103 of which had children at public schools, 45 who had children at private schools, and 25 who had children at both.

Demographic	African-American	White	Other
Respondents	60%	34%	5%
Adult Population	60%	31%	9%

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