

THE LOUISIANA SURVEY 2016

LSU

Manship School of
Mass Communication
Reilly Center For
Media & Public Affairs



As Lawmakers Assess School Reforms, Public Supports Charter Schools & District Grades but Skeptical of Vouchers & Common Core

Funding, Safety, and Discipline Top List of Concerns about
Public Schools

The fourth in a series of reports from the 2016 Louisiana Survey



RELEASED:
March 23, 2016

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Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs

The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, an integral part of Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication, uses the intellectual muscle of the school's faculty to help solve practical problems and advance good government initiatives. The Reilly Center's mission is to generate thoughtful programs, dialogue, and research about social, economic, and political affairs, as well as the developing role of the media in American society. The Center is committed to advancing the Manship School's national leadership in media and politics.

The Center's agenda is diverse and fluid – from the annual John Breaux Symposium, which brings in national experts to discuss a topic that has received little or no attention, to conducting the annual *Louisiana Survey*, a vital resource for policymakers, which tracks advancements and regressions of citizen attitudes about state services. The Center's role, within the state's flagship university, is to respond quickly to the needs of state governance in addressing challenges facing Louisiana, particularly in times of crisis such as during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Its action-oriented and partnership-driven philosophy underscores the Reilly Center's dedication to tackling ideas and issues that explore the relationship of media and the public in democratic society.

About the Louisiana Survey

The *2016 Louisiana Survey* is the fifteenth in an annual series sponsored by the Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication.

The mission of the *Louisiana Survey* is to establish benchmarks as well as to capture change in residents' assessments of state government services. The survey is further dedicated to tracking public opinion on the contemporary policy issues that face the state. Each iteration of the *Louisiana Survey* contains core items designed to serve as barometers of public sentiment, including assessments of whether the state is heading in the right direction or wrong direction, perceptions about the most important problems facing the state, as well as evaluations of public revenue sources and spending priorities.

In the *2016 Louisiana Survey*, this core is supplemented by measures of partisan polarization; public opinion of testing, the Common Core State Standards, and school reforms implemented during the Jindal Administration; support for changing the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS); beliefs about the causes and solutions for poverty; public opinion on raising the minimum wage in Louisiana; perceptions of race relations in Louisiana; attitudes toward public memorials to the Confederacy; and opinions on a variety of social issues such as same sex marriage, religious freedom laws, abortion, and gun rights.

As part of an effort to ensure that the *Louisiana Survey* fulfills its public service mission, the research team drew upon expertise in public policy and polling from Louisiana State University faculty in the Public Administration Institute, the Department of Political Science, and the Manship School of Mass Communication. These faculty members provided invaluable insight into the design of the questionnaire and in identifying the contemporary policy questions that could most benefit from an understanding of the public's views. While we are indebted to them for their time and contributions, they bear no responsibility for any mistakes in the questionnaire, analysis, or interpretation presented in this report.

We especially thank the Reilly Family Foundation for their generous support and vision in helping to create the Louisiana Survey.

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Overview

The current legislative session features several bills aimed at revisiting high profile school policies launched in recent years. But what do voters think of these and similar school policies? The *2016 Louisiana Survey*, a project of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication, shows that Louisiana residents support charter schools and assigning letter grades to school districts, but they are more skeptical of vouchers and the Common Core. The survey reveals:

- About two-thirds of Louisiana residents (68 percent) favor increasing the number of charter schools, and just 29 percent oppose. In contrast, the public is far more divided on the issue of providing vouchers to help pay for students in struggling public schools to attend private schools. About half of Louisiana residents favor vouchers (48 percent), and half oppose (46 percent).
- Opposition to Common Core is on the rise. Support for the standards slipped slightly from 39 percent to 34 percent over the past year, and opposition grew from 51 percent to 59 percent. However, the concept of shared academic standards remains popular when stripped of the label "Common Core." Without the offending phrase, 57 percent of Louisiana residents support the standards and just 37 percent oppose them.
- Close to half of Louisiana residents say there is too much emphasis on testing in their local public schools (46 percent), which is significantly less than recent polls have shown for the nation as a whole (64 percent).
- A majority of residents (55 percent) favor having the Louisiana Department of Education assign letter grades to public school districts based in part on student test scores. However, there is little evidence that people actually use these grades. Just one in ten (11 percent) could correctly identify the grade issued to their district.
- The public's chief concerns about public schools have little direct connection to these recent reforms. Nearly one in four Louisiana residents believe limited funding and teacher pay is the biggest problem the schools face (22 percent). Another 14 percent believe student safety and discipline are the biggest problem.
- Although Louisiana residents give low ratings to the state's public schools overall, they are much more positive about the public schools in their local communities. Just 26 percent of respondents assign a grade of A or B to *Louisiana's public schools overall*, but about half (49 percent) assign a grade of A or B to *the public schools in your local community*. Parents of public school students have especially positive views of their local schools: 60 percent grade their local public schools with an A or B.

The *2016 Louisiana Survey* was administered over the telephone from February 1st to February 26th to both landline and cell phone respondents. The project includes a representative sample of 1,001 adult Louisiana residents. The total sample has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points.

This is the fourth in a series of releases about findings from the *2016 Louisiana Survey*. Previous releases from the *2016 Louisiana Survey* are available at www.pprllsu.com.

Louisiana has seen a flurry of reforms to public schools in recent years: Expansion of choice through charter schools and vouchers; changes in academic standards, including adoption (then review) of the Common Core State Standards; and renewed emphasis on standardized tests in evaluations of schools and teachers. Supporters of these policies argue they promote strong academic growth in a state that has long lagged in national student achievement ratings. Opponents, however, contend the policies threaten the quality of public schools.

Several bills filed in the current legislative session take aim at these and similar policies. As lawmakers prepare to revisit many of these reforms in a new administration, how does the public assess this changing landscape for public education in Louisiana?

The *2016 Louisiana Survey*, a project of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at LSU’s Manship School of Mass Communication, shows that the public has a mixed view of these school reforms. Louisiana residents support charter schools and assigning letter grades to school districts based on student test scores, but they are more skeptical of vouchers and the Common Core.

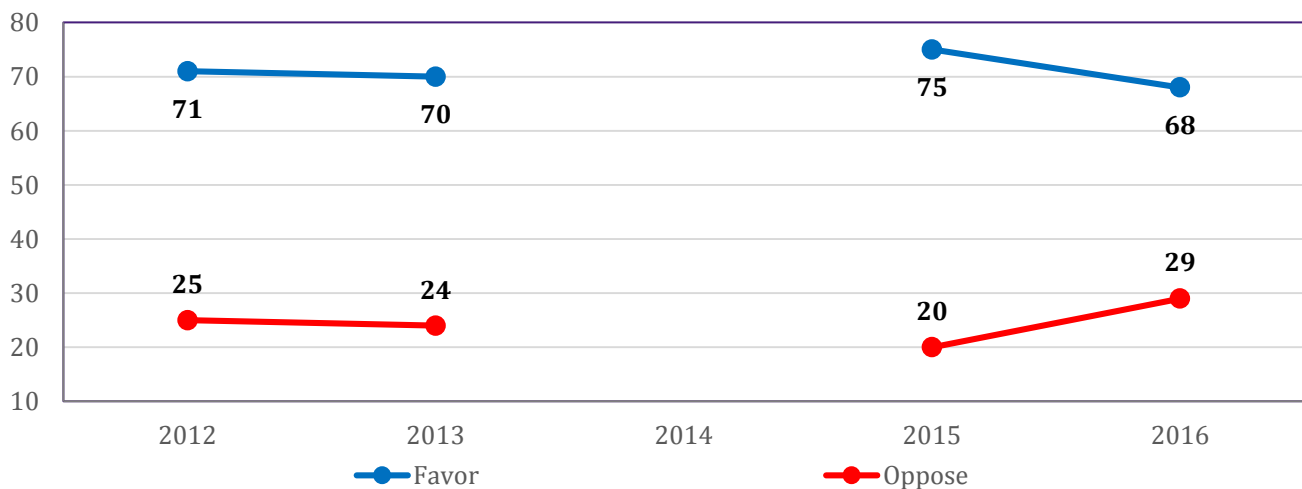
Support for Charter Schools Remains Strong, More Skepticism about Vouchers

Over the past several years, state lawmakers and education officials have expanded school choice in Louisiana. In the spring of 2005, there were little more than a handful of charter schools operating in the state. Today, charter schools number well over 100. While most of these operate in New Orleans, these schools have expanded to other areas of the state as well. For the 2015-2016 school year, 20 of Louisiana’s parishes had at least one charter school. Additionally, during the Jindal Administration, lawmakers launched a statewide voucher program that provides parents of children enrolled in a public school assigned a C, D, or F grade by the Louisiana Department of Education public dollars in the form of a scholarship to pay the cost of attending private school.

About two-thirds of Louisiana residents (68 percent) favor increasing the number of charter schools, despite a modest slip from 75 percent a year ago (Figure 1). Opposition to charter schools rose from 20% in 2015 to 29% this year.

Figure 1: Despite Slight Dip, Support for Charters Remains Strong

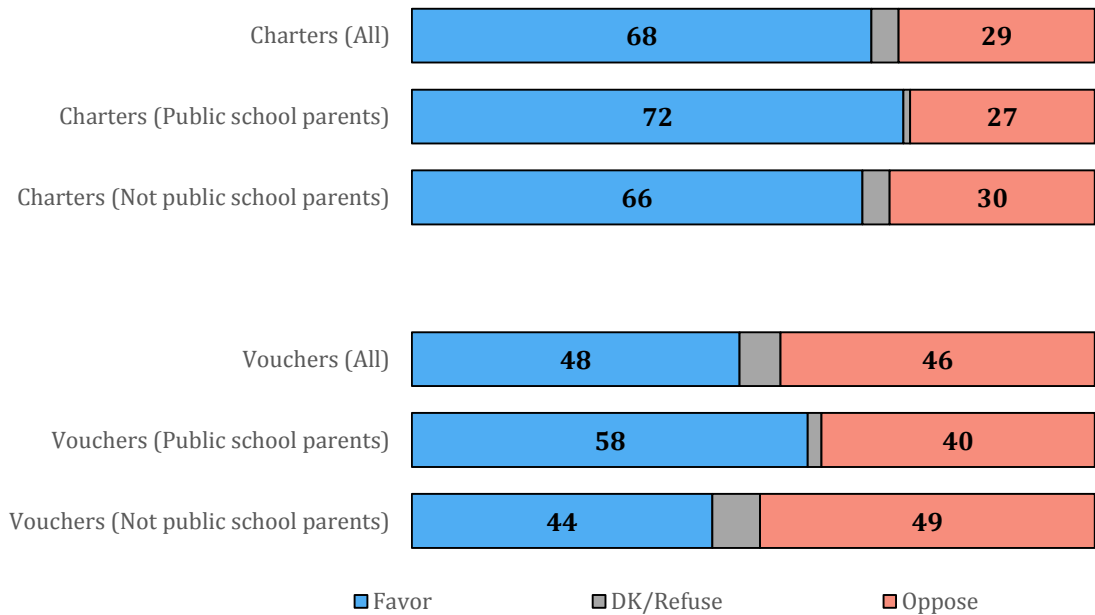
Percent who favor/oppose opening more charter schools



SOURCE: 2012 - 2013, 2015 - 2016 Louisiana Surveys

Figure 2: Majority Support for Charters but not Vouchers

Percent favor or oppose



SOURCE: 2016 Louisiana Survey

In contrast, the public is far more divided on the issue of providing vouchers to help pay for students in struggling public schools to attend private schools instead. About half of Louisiana residents favor vouchers (48 percent), and half oppose (46 percent).

Parents of children attending public schools are generally more attracted to both forms of school choice than residents who do not have children in public schools (Figure 2). Support for charters reaches 72 percent among parents of public school students. A majority of parents of public school students favor vouchers as well (58 percent), while other residents remain split (44 percent for, 49 percent against).

Opposition to Common Core Grows

After adopting the Common Core State Standards in 2010 without political fireworks, state officials have since questioned the use of the standards in the state. Last year, following more than year of heated political debate and tumultuous litigation, the Louisiana Legislature created a committee to review the standards and make recommendations to the state about which should be retained, which revised, and which eliminated.

To track opinion on the Common Core, the 2016 Louisiana Survey uses a version of a question from last year's survey: "As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common Core in Louisiana?"

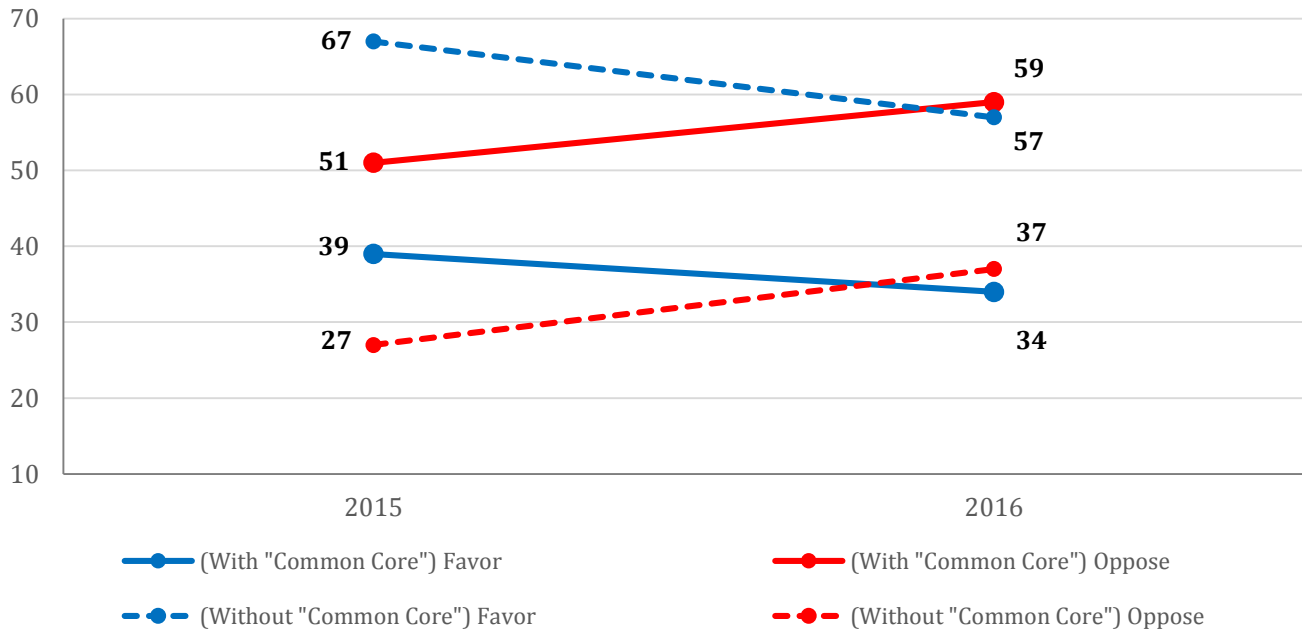
Opposition to the standards is on the rise. A year ago, 51 percent of respondents said they opposed Common Core when asked this question. Today, the share is 59 percent (Figure 3).

However, opposition to the standards still largely reflects the politicized rhetoric that surrounds the standards. We repeated an experiment from last year's survey to examine whether or not this rhetoric – as well as the beliefs, oftentimes erroneous, that many now have about the Common Core – shapes opinion of the standards.

The experiment involves two versions of a question about the standards. Each respondent hears only one of these two questions. The first is the version described above. The second version uses the same wording but removes all reference to the standards by name: "As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their

Figure 3: Declining Support for Common Core and Concept of Shared Standards

Percent who favor/oppose



NOTE: One half of respondents asked question with phrase "Common Core," while the other half was asked the question without that phrase.

SOURCE: 2012 - 2013, 2015 - 2016 Louisiana Surveys

performance. Do you favor or oppose the use of these standards in Louisiana?”

The experiment once again shows that the Common Core brand – and all the connotations it brings to mind – is tainted, but the concept of states using shared standards for reading and mathematics to hold schools accountable for student performance remains popular.

When the Common Core label is dropped from the question, support for the concept is at 57 percent (rather than just 34 percent when the name is used). Only 37 percent oppose the standards without the name “Common Core” (rather than 59 when the name is used).

Even so, a simple rebranding of the Common Core under a different name will not satisfy many residents. The effect of removing the “Common Core” name from the question is smaller this year than it was last year. For example, even without using the name “Common Core” opposition to shared standards is ten percentage points higher than a year ago. The shrinking difference between the two versions indicates that people are growing more skeptical of the concept of shared standards or, just as likely, more adept at recognizing the Common Core even when the name is not used.

Few Think Academic Standards for Students are Too High

There is no consensus about a need to adjust the rigor of the state’s standards for student achievement. Opinion is largely split between those who say the state’s current standards are about right (46 percent) and those who say standards are too low (37 percent). Only ten percent of state residents feel current standards are too high.

Less Pushback against Testing

In recent years, several states have seen a pushback against standardized testing. In some areas of the country this has taken the form of opt-out movements, in which parents refuse to have their children participate in standardized tests. [National polling from late 2015](#) shows that 64 percent of Americans think there is too much emphasis on testing in their local public schools.

Using an identical question as in the national survey, the *2016 Louisiana Survey* shows that 46 percent of Louisiana residents feel the same way about testing in their local public schools. This is significantly less than what national polling shows, but it remains the most common response here as well. About one-third (34 percent) feel there is about the right amount of emphasis on testing, and 12 percent say there is not enough emphasis.

Parents with children in public schools are much more likely to say there is too much emphasis on testing. Indeed, a majority of these parents (57 percent) think there is too much emphasis on testing. Among the rest of the public, only 42 percent think there is too much emphasis on testing.

Public Likes Idea of Grading Districts, but Unfamiliar with Results

Even as many Louisiana residents – especially parents of public school students – are questioning the emphasis on testing in public schools, most want the state to use these tests scores to assign letter grades to public school districts. Since the late 1990s, the Louisiana Department of Education has released summary information about how public school districts are performing based on the state’s accountability program. During the Jindal Administration, the state switched to issuing letter grades (A, B, C, D, or F) to schools and school districts. School letter grades are based almost entirely on test scores for elementary (100%) and middle schools (95%), but they comprise 50% of a high school’s letter grade. The state then assigns a letter grade to the school district based on a weighted average of school scores. Supporters claim this approach is more intuitive and useful for parents and the public when evaluating their schools and districts and the leaders who govern them.

The idea is popular among Louisiana residents: 55 percent favor these letter grades. Parents with children in public schools are just as supportive as people who do not have children in public schools (55 percent in both groups). However, they are more likely to oppose issuing these grades than people without children in public schools (45 percent among the former and 36 percent among the later).

Despite support for the letter grades, there is little evidence that the public generally – or even public school parents specifically – are familiar with the actual grades the state issues to their districts.

We asked respondents: “As you may know, each year the Louisiana Department of Education grades each local public school district in the state. To the best of your knowledge, what grade

did the state Department of Education give your local school district?"¹

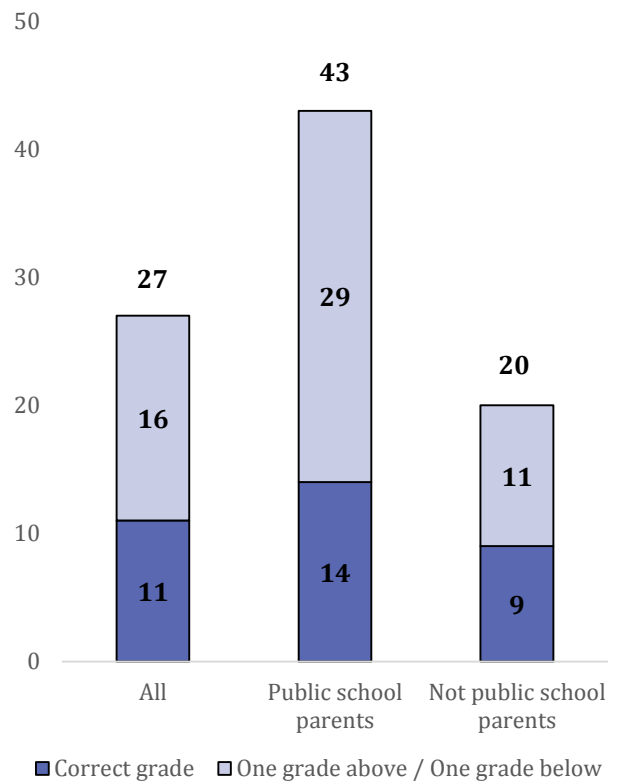
Because we can identify the parish in which respondents live (and, in the cases of parishes that include more than one school district, the cities in which they live as well), we are able to match respondents to public school districts and compare their responses to the actual grades issued to those districts by the Louisiana Department of Education.

Few Louisiana residents have any inkling about the grade their own school district received from the state (Figure 4). Just one in ten (11 percent) correctly identify the grade issued by the state to their district, and only 27 percent come within one grade of the correct response (identifying either the correct grade, the grade above, or the grade below).

Parents of public school students are more likely to know the letter grade (or, at least, to come close to the correct letter grade) than people without children in the public schools. About one in seven (14 percent) public school parents correctly identify their district's grade, but 43 percent are within one grade of the correct response. In contrast, only nine percent of respondents without children in public schools identify the correct grade assigned to their school district, and just one in five (20 percent) come within one grade of the actual one assigned.

Figure 4: Few Know Their District's Grade

Percent who correctly name grade issued to local public school district or who come within grade of the correct response



SOURCE: 2016 Louisiana Survey.

¹ Residents of Orleans Parish were asked two questions – one asking about the grade assigned to the local public school district and one asking about the

grade assigned to the Recovery School District-New Orleans. Results reported here are nearly identical regardless of the question used.

Funding Considered Biggest Problem, Safety & Discipline Next

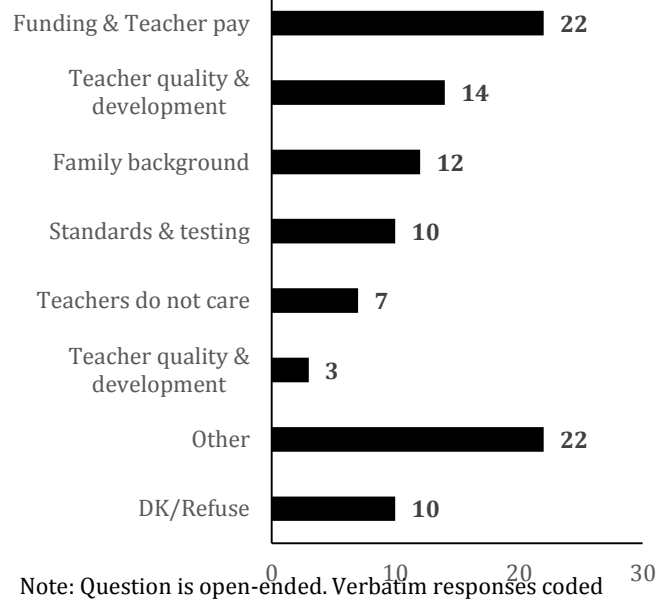
Why does the public have such mixed reactions to recent school reforms? One possibility is that they do not recognize a direct connection between those policies and the problems for public schools that are of the greatest concern to them.

We asked respondents an open-ended question about the challenges facing public education in Louisiana: “In your own words, what do you think is the biggest problem that public schools in Louisiana must deal with?” Responses were coded into seven categories (Figure 5).

Nearly one in four (22 percent) name funding issues as the biggest problem for public schools. Another 14 percent name safety and discipline issues. Family background – including home life and socio-economic conditions – was mentioned third most frequently.

Figure 5: Funding and Discipline/Safety Top List of Concerns

Percent naming each as the biggest problem public schools in Louisiana must deal with



Note: Question is open-ended. Verbatim responses coded into categories.

SOURCE: 2016 Louisiana Survey

Low Evaluations for Public Schools across State, but Higher Evaluations for Public Schools in Local Community

Another possible reason why Louisiana residents have mixed views of these school reforms is that when it comes to their own local public schools they see little need for change. Louisiana residents may take a dim view of public schools as a whole in the state, but they are much more

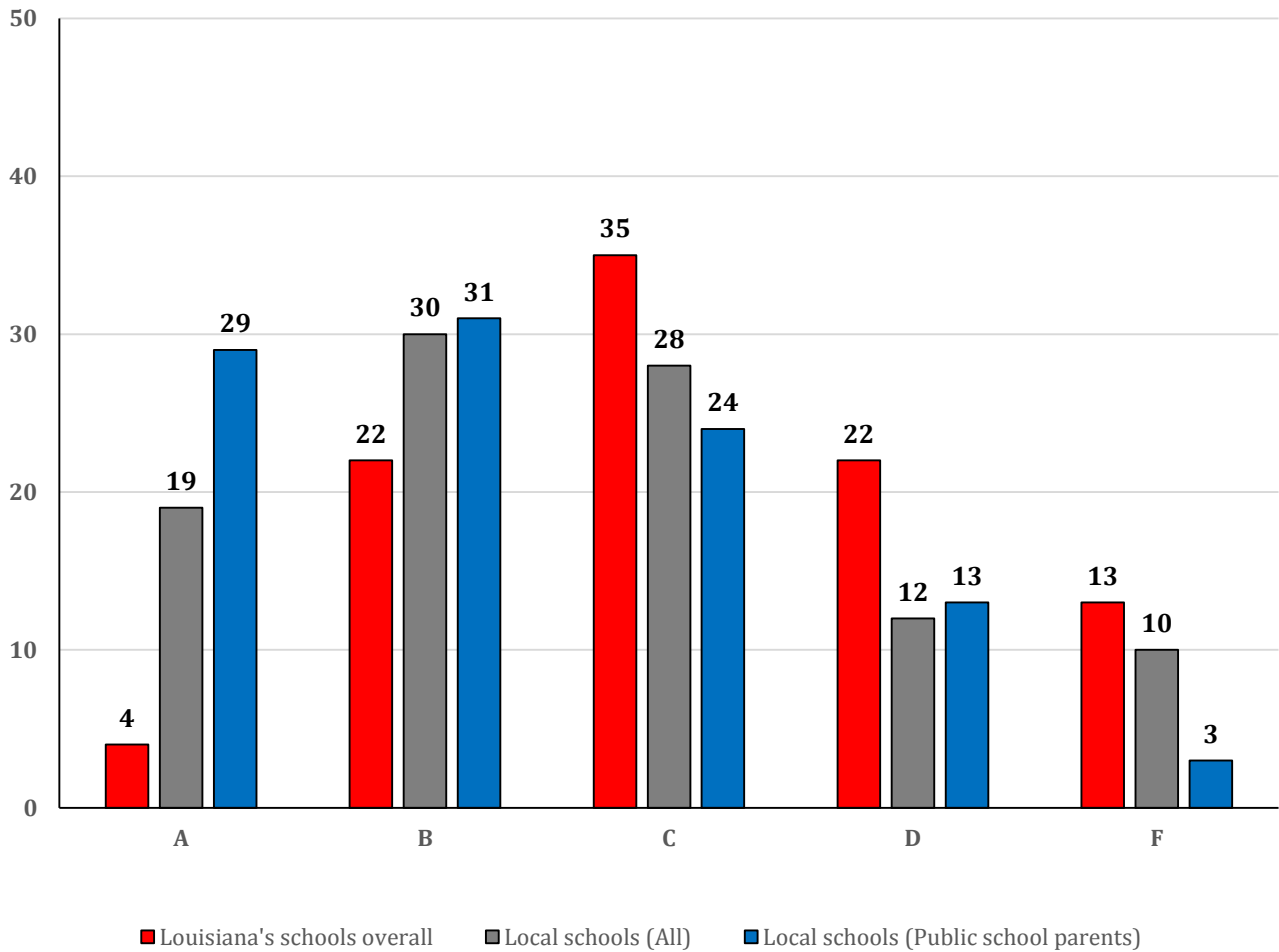
satisfied when considering the public schools in their local community.

Just 26 percent of respondents assign a grade of A or B to *Louisiana's public schools overall*, but when asked to grade *the public schools in your local community* about half (49 percent) assign a grade of A or B (Figure 6).

Parents of public school students have especially positive views of their local schools: 60 percent grade their local public schools with an A or B. Only 16 percent assign them a grade of D or F.

Figure 6: Critical of Public Schools Statewide, but Higher Grades for Local Schools

Percent giving each letter grade to "Louisiana's public schools overall" and to "the public schools in your local community"



SOURCE: 2016 Louisiana Survey

Survey Methodology

The data in this report were collected from a randomly selected sample of adult (18 years or older) residents of Louisiana via telephone interviews conducted from February 1 to February 26, 2016. The project includes live-interviewer surveys of 302 respondents contacted via landline telephone and 699 respondents contacted via cell phone, for a total sample of 1,001 respondents. The design of the landline sample ensures representation of both listed and unlisted numbers by use of random digit dialing. The cell phone sample is randomly drawn from known, available phone number banks dedicated to wireless service.

The response rate is 3%. This response rate is the percentage of residential households or personal cell phones for which an interview is completed. The rates are calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's method for Response Rate 3 as published in their Standard Definitions. Response rates have declined steadily for all surveys over the past several decades. Response rates for telephone have been on decline for several decades and frequently fall in the single digits even among the very best survey research organizations.

The combined landline and cell phone sample is weighted using an iterative procedure that matches race and ethnicity, education, household income, gender and age to known profiles for Louisiana found in the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. The sample is also weighted for population density by parish. Weighting cannot eliminate every source of nonresponse bias. However, proper conduction of random sampling combined with accepted weighting techniques has a strong record of yielding unbiased results.

The sample has an overall margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points.

In addition to sampling error, as accounted for through the margin of error, readers should recognize that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab, a division of the Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs, designed the survey questionnaire and sampling strategy, computed the survey weights, and conducted all statistical analysis. Telephone interviews were conducted by Reconnaissance Market Research.

Question Wording & Topline Frequencies

NOTE: Frequencies for a given question represent percentages among only those respondents who were asked that particular question. Not all respondents were asked each question, and questions asked to a subset of respondents are labelled accordingly. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Q1. What grade would you give to Louisiana’s public schools overall?

A	4
B	22
C	35
D	22
F	13
Don’t know/Refused (Volunteered)	3

[Half of respondents randomly selected to answer both Q2 and Q3a/b]

Q2. What grade would you give to the public schools in your local community?

A	19
B	30
C	28
D	12
F	10
Don’t know/Refused (Vol.)	2

[Version Q3a used only if respondent does not live in Orleans Parish]

Q3a. As you may know, each year the Louisiana Department of Education grades each local public school district in the state. To the best of your knowledge, what grade did the state department of education give your local school district? Or, if you don’t know, just tell me that.

A	7
B	8
C	11
D	3
F	1
Don’t know	69
Refused (Vol.)	0

[Version Q3b used only if respondent lives in Orleans Parish]

Q3b. As you may know, each year the Louisiana Department of Education grades each local public school district in the state. To the best of your knowledge, what grade did the state department of education give to the Orleans Parish School Board's district? Or, if you don't know, just tell me that.

A	0
B	14
C	5
D	7
F	8
Don't know	67
Refused (Vol.)	0

[Q4 asked only if respondent lives in Orleans Parish and assigned to Q2 and Q3]

Q4. As you may know, each year the Louisiana Department of Education grades each local public school district in the state. To the best of your knowledge, what grade did the state department of education give to the Recovery School District in New Orleans? Or, if you don't know, just tell me that.

A	0
B	10
C	6
D	2
F	0
Don't know	82
Refused (Vol.)	0

Q5. Switching to another topic, in your own words, what do you think is the biggest problem that public schools in Louisiana must deal with?

[Open-ended]

Q6. Do you favor or oppose the state department of education rating each public school district with an A, B, C, D, or F letter grade based mostly on how students perform on standardized tests?

Favor	55
Oppose	39
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	7

Q7. In your opinion, is there too much emphasis on standardized testing in the public schools in your community, not enough emphasis, or about the right amount?

Too much	46
Not enough	12
About the right amount	34
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	8

Q8. In your opinion, are student achievement standards in the public schools in your community too high, about right, or too low?

Too high	10
About right	46
Too low	37
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	6

[Respondents randomly assigned to Q9a or q9b]

Q9a. As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you favor or oppose the use of the Common Core in Louisiana?

Favor	34
Oppose	59
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	7

Q9b. As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you favor or oppose the use of these standards in Louisiana?

Favor	57
Oppose	37
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	6

Q10. Do you favor or oppose providing parents with children in failing public schools with tax money in the form of scholarships to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools?

Favor	48
Oppose	46
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	6

Q11. A charter school is a public school that functions independently of local school district control. Would you favor or oppose opening more charter schools as long as they maintain certain standards set by the state government?

Favor	68
Oppose	29
Don't know/Refused (Vol.)	4