

The Harris Poll® #59, June 2, 2008

## Are Public Schools Flunking or Passing?

As the 2007/2008 school year winds to a close, the picture of the quality of education around the country is dim, according to a new Harris Poll of 2,602 U.S. adults surveyed online by Harris Interactive® between May 5 and 12, 2008:

- Public schools fall to the bottom of the list when it comes to the quality of education they provide. Just one in six U.S. adults (15%) say public schools, grades K-6 provide excellent or very good education while 13 percent say the same about public schools for grades 7-12;
- When it comes to local public schools, those do a little better as one in five U.S. adults say both grades K-6 and 7-12 are providing an excellent or very good quality of education (20% and 19% respectively);
- Where public schools have declined is in looking to attitudes from two years ago. In 2006, one-quarter (26%) said grades K-6 were doing an excellent or very good job while 23 percent said the same about public schools, grades 7-12;
- Private, church related schools are considered the best, whether it is in the U.S. as a whole (38% saying excellent/very good for grades K-6 and 37% saying the same for grades 7-12) or their local schools (35% for K-6 and 34% for 7-12 saying excellent/very good).

Different types of schooling do better in specific subject or skill areas, and in looking more closely at three types of schooling (i.e., public, private and home schooling), there are different strengths associated with each type:

- A majority believe that public schools are better at providing students a chance to get along better with people from different backgrounds (53%) while a plurality believes public schools are better for social skills with peers (42%);
- Public schools also do better than private schools or home schooling in physical education (38% versus 20% and 3% respectively);
- In looking at private schools, half of U.S. adults say it provides the better education in education gifted or talented children (51%) and preparing students for college (49%). Pluralities believe that private schools provide a better education than public schools or home-schooling in art/music (43%), mathematics (43%), foreign languages (42%), English literature (41%), science (41%) and reading/writing (40%);
- Education for special-needs children is an area where public and private receive similar marks (28% and 29%) respectively. It is also the area where home-schooling receives the highest of all the categories (12%).

### Looking Back in Time

In 1965, *The Harris Poll* looked at education, more specifically how money was being spent for teachers and for public schools in general. Please note, these surveys were conducted in-person, so this data should not be directly trended, but rather looked at in comparison.

- At that time, just over half of U.S. adults believed that teachers in public schools were paid about the right amount (56%), two in five said they were paid too little (42%) and 2 percent said they were paid too much.
- Flash forward 43 years and attitudes have changed. Now, three in five U.S. adults (59%) believe that teachers are paid too little while one-quarter (24%) say they are paid about the right amount and 6 percent say teachers are paid too much;
- In looking at public schools in their communities, there is also a change in four decades. In 1965, over half (56%) believed about the right amount is being spent on public schools, one-third (32%) said too little is being spent and 12 percent said too much. In 2008, almost three in five (57%) say too little money is being spent on public schools in their community while one in five (20%) say it's about the right amount and 13 percent say too much.

### So What?

According to Peter Shafer, Vice President and Head of Harris Interactive's Youth Center of Excellence, "The continued decline in the public's perception of the quality of education should be a call to action for administrators and policymakers at all levels of government. It is appalling that one of the best areas of performance in public education the quality of gym classes."

Shafer also notes, "We are not surprised in one regard – these data confirm what we have been hearing and seeing in our studies of principals, teachers, and administrators for the past decade – it is increasingly more difficult to make real and significant changes in the education system. The demands on all educational institutions from the community are growing, budgets are being trimmed and the quality has definitely suffered."

"Data from the Harris Interactive School Poll study conducted in various districts across the country show that when parents, teachers, administrators and students take ownership of improving education, the quality rises – as does the perception of its value," Shafer concluded.

TABLE 1

### EVALUATION OF EDUCATION QUALITY: NATIONAL AND LOCAL AREA PERSPECTIVE

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"Overall, how would you rate the quality of education provided by the following in ...? Excellent, very good, good, fair, poor, not sure?"

Percent saying excellent/very good

Base: All adults

	2006		2008	
	The United States	Your Local Area	The United States	Your Local Area
	%	%	%	%
Private, church-related schools, grades K-6	35	34	38	35
Private, church-related schools, grades 7-12	34	33	37	34
Private, non-church-related schools, grades K-6	32	25	36	30
Private, non-church-related schools, grades 7-12	31	25	36	30
Homeschooling, grades K-6	25	18	20	21
Homeschooling, grades 7-12	23	17	20	20
Charter schools, grades K-6	18	16	20	21
Charter schools, grades 7-12	18	15	20	21
Public schools, grades K-6	17	26	15	20
Public schools, grades 7-12	14	23	13	19

TABLE 2

**BEST MODES OF EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUAL SUBJECT AREAS**

"For each of the following areas, please indicate which type of schooling provides a better education."

Base: All adults

	Public Schools	Private Schools	Home schooling	No Difference	Not Sure
	%	%	%	%	%
Getting along with people from different backgrounds	53	15	4	9	20
Social skills with peers	42	24	3	10	21
Physical education	38	20	3	15	24
Education for special-needs children	28	29	12	7	24
Preparation for employment	26	32	5	14	23
Good citizenship	23	31	10	14	23
Art / Music	19	43	6	11	22
Science	18	41	6	12	22
History	18	35	9	15	23
Foreign language	17	42	5	12	24
Preparation for college	16	49	5	10	21
Mathematics	14	43	8	12	22
English/ Literature	14	41	8	14	22
Reading and writing	14	40	11	13	22
Education for gifted or talented children	13	51	7	7	22

TABLE 3

**BEST MODES OF EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUAL SUBJECT AREAS - Trend**

"For each of the following areas, please indicate which type of schooling provides a better education."

Base: All adults

	2006			2008		
	Public Schools	Private Schools	Home schooling	Public Schools	Private Schools	Home schooling
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Getting along with people from different backgrounds	59	12	4	53	15	4
Social skills with peers	47	20	4	42	24	3
Physical education	42	15	4	38	20	3
Education for special-needs children	23	26	18	28	29	12
Preparation for employment	29	25	7	26	32	5
Good citizenship	23	27	12	23	31	10
Art / Music	19	41	6	19	43	6
Science	20	35	6	18	41	6
History	17	31	11	18	35	9
Foreign language	18	40	5	17	42	5
Preparation for college	17	44	7	16	49	5
Mathematics	14	43	8	12	43	22
English/ Literature	14	41	8	14	41	22
Reading and writing	14	40	11	13	40	22
Education for gifted or talented children	13	51	7	7	51	22

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English/ Literature	15	36	10	14	41	8
Reading and writing	13	33	16	14	40	11
Education for gifted or talented children	13	49	10	13	51	7

**TABLE 4**

**PAYING PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS**

"Do you feel teachers in the public schools in your community are paid too little, too much, or about the right amount?"

Base: All Adults

	1965	2008
	%	%
Too little	42	59
About the right amount	56	24
Too much	2	6
Not sure	n/a	10

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Note: The 1965 survey was conducted by in-person interviewing, so the data should not be used as a direct trend, but rather for comparison purposes.

**TABLE 5**

**FUNDING PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

"Do you feel too much money is being spent on public schools in this community, too little money or about the right amount of money?"

Base: All Adults

	1965	2008
	%	%
Too little	32	57
About the right amount	56	20
Too much	12	13
Not sure	n/a	10

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Note: The 1965 survey was conducted by in-person interviewing, so the data should not be used as a direct trend, but rather for comparison purposes.

**Methodology**

This Harris Poll® was conducted online within the United States between May 5 and 12, 2008 among 2,602 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

***These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.***

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