

# The Star-Ledger/**Eagleton-Rutgers Poll**

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## RELEASE INFORMATION

A story based on the survey findings presented in this release and background memo will appear in Sunday's *Star-Ledger*. We ask users to properly attribute this copyrighted information to "*The Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll*."

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### **NEW JERSEYANS SUPPORT EQUAL EDUCATIONAL SPENDING FOR ALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

#### **ASSESSMENT OF THE STATE'S PUBIC SCHOOLS IMPROVES VOUCHERS PREFERRED OVER CHARTER SCHOOLS**

Eight-in-ten New Jersey residents agree that spending for education must be equal in all of New Jersey's school districts. However, when it comes to having adequate local funding, New Jerseyans are divided. Forty-four percent say their school district has enough money to provide a quality education, and 45 percent say their district needs additional funding. However, half of the state's residents would vote against any local property tax increase to provide additional funding for their schools.

Half of the state's residents rate New Jersey's public schools as excellent or good which is a 13 percentage point increase from 1993. In addition, since 1993 there has been an 8 percentage point increase in how people rate their local schools from 52 to 60 percent who now give their local schools positive ratings.

A *Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll* conducted by telephone from February 22 to 29, 1996 with a random sample of 804 New Jersey adults, also found that vouchers are a more popular educational innovation than charter schools. While about two-thirds would consider

using a voucher to shop around for a specific school to send a child to, a much smaller 1-in-5 would consider sending a child to a charter school.

On all of these education issues, there are clear distinctions between the opinions of residents in the 30 special needs districts identified in the Abbot vs. Burke decision, and the opinions New Jerseyans who do not live in these districts. More residents in the 30 special needs districts have negative opinions about the performance of the public schools in the state and locally. They are also more likely to say that their school district needs additional funding to provide a quality education.

### ***OPINIONS ABOUT EQUAL FUNDING FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS***

New Jerseyans are very supportive of having equal spending for education in all of the state's public school districts. Seventy-nine percent strongly (63%) or mildly (16%) agree that spending for education must be equal in all of New Jersey's school districts, while 19 percent mildly (9%) or strongly (10%) disagree with this decision. The current support for equal funding is the greatest it has been since the Abbott vs Burke decision in June 1990. At that time 54 percent of New Jerseyans agreed that spending for education must be equal in all of the state's public schools.

Support for equal funding in all of the state's school districts is strongest among the residents of the 30 special needs districts. Eighty-six percent of the New Jerseyans' who live in these districts agree with equalized funding compared to 77 percent of the residents in other school districts. Also, residents in communities with a lower socio-economic profile (85%) are more likely than those in the higher socio-economic communities (68%) to agree that educational spending should be equal in all of New Jersey's school districts.

Close to half of the state's residents have read or heard a great deal (13%) or some (35%) about the issue of equal funding for the state's school districts. This is an 11 percentage point increase from the 37 percent who were aware of the equal funding issue in 1993.

**EDUCATIONAL FUNDING**

New Jerseyans have somewhat different opinions about educational funding in their local school districts. Forty-five percent say that their school district needs additional funding and 44 percent say they have enough money to provide a quality education. This is a 6 percentage point decrease from the 51 percent of residents who said their local school district needed additional funding in September 1993.

When it comes to assessing local school funding, there are wide differences of opinion between the residents of the 30 special needs districts and those in other school districts. Sixty-seven percent of the residents in the special needs districts say their local schools need additional funding compared to 39 percent of those in other school districts.

A majority (54%) of New Jerseyans would vote against raising local property taxes if their local schools said that they needed more money compared to 37 percent who would vote for an increase in local property taxes for this purpose. This is a 15 percentage point decline from August 1985 when 52 percent of the state's residents said that they would vote for raising local property taxes to support their local schools.

"The strong support for equal funding linked with a reluctance to increase property taxes to support the local schools suggests that New Jerseyans want to level the playing field when it comes to financing public school education," commented Janice Ballou, Poll Director.

**EVALUATION OF NEW JERSEY'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

In the past three years there has been a positive shift in opinion about New Jersey's public schools. Currently, 52 percent of New Jersey residents feel the state's public schools are doing an excellent (10%) or good (42%) job compared to 39 percent who say they are doing an only fair (28%) or poor (11%) job. This is a 13 percentage point increase from September 1993 when the positive ratings were 39%. By a margin of 36 to 57 percent, residents in the 30 special needs districts are less likely than those not in special needs

districts to give the state 's public schools positive ratings. In addition, 58 percent of the parents of school-aged children give the state's schools positive evaluations. This overall rating reverses a downward trend that began after 1987 when 53 percent gave the schools positive ratings.

New Jerseyans are even more positive about the performance of their local schools with 60 percent giving positive evaluations of excellent (20%) or good (40%) compared to 31 percent saying their local schools are only fair (20%) or poor (11%). This is an 8 percentage point increase from the 52 percent who gave positive ratings in September 1993. However, there are clearly differences in the evaluations of the local schools given by those who live in the 30 special needs districts compared to those in other school districts. While 43 percent of the residents in the 30 special needs districts give their schools excellent (6%) or good (37%) ratings, 65 percent of those who do not live in the special needs districts rate their schools as excellent (24%) or good (41%).

### ***NEW EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS***

Charter schools and school vouchers are two new educational programs being discussed in New Jersey. Charter schools have recently been approved by the state, but there has not been any legislation related to any type of school voucher system. While 41 percent of the state's residents report that they have read or heard a great deal (15%) or some (26%) about vouchers, a much smaller 17 percent have read or heard a great deal (4%) or some (13%) about charter schools.

After New Jerseyans were read a brief description of the charter school approach, by a margin of 58 to 31 percent more give the charter school idea negative ratings of only fair (26%) or poor (32%) than say it is an excellent (6%) or good (25%) idea. Thirty-six percent of parents say it is an excellent (5%) or good (31%) idea compared to 32 percent of those without children who feel this way.

When New Jerseyans consider participation in a charter school program, by a margin of about 3-to-1 they would prefer to send a child to a regular public school (65%) than to a charter school (19%). Sixty-eight percent of parents say they would prefer to send a child to a regular public school.

New Jerseyans are more receptive to a voucher system than they are to charter schools. After being read a general overview of how a voucher system could work, 2-in-3 residents say they would be very (39%) or somewhat (28%) likely to use a voucher to shop around for a specific school to send a child compared to 29 percent who are not very (13%) or not at all likely (16%) to participate in a voucher program. Parents of school-aged children (77%) and New Jerseyans who live in the 30 special needs districts (77%) are more likely than other residents to say they would use a voucher to shop around for schools. Residents in communities with a high socio-economic profile (57%) are less likely to say they would use vouchers to shop around than those in upper socio-economic areas (62%), middle socio-economic areas (72%), or low socio-economic areas (76%).

### ***IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN RESIDENCE SELECTION***

Seven-in-ten New Jersey residents say that the quality of the public schools was very (62%) or somewhat (11%) important in their decision about where to live. As would be expected, by a margin of 87 to 49 percent New Jerseyans who have school-aged children are more likely than those who do not have children to say the quality of the schools was very or somewhat important in their decision about where to live. Also, residents in the special needs districts (66%) are less likely than those in other districts (75%) to say local school quality was very or somewhat important in their decision about where to live.

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The latest *Star-Ledger*/Eagleton Poll was conducted between February 22 and 29, 1996, when a random sample of 804 New Jerseyans, 18 years and older, was interviewed by telephone. Figures based on this sample size are subject to a sampling error of about  $\pm 3.5$  percent at a 95 percent confidence interval. Sampling error is the probable difference in results between interviewing everyone in the population versus a scientific sample taken from that population. The questions and figures referred to in this release are presented below. The location of each question on the actual questionnaire is in brackets.

**BACKGROUND MEMO – RELEASE SL/EP56-2 (EP106-2), SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 1996**

“When you were deciding where to live, how important was the quality of the public schools in your decision – very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important?” [Q.7]

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not At All Important	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	79	8	5	6	2	100	(265)
--Children	64	12	5	13	5	99	(332)
--No children	38	11	13	32	6	100	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>							
--Special needs	55	11	6	24	4	100	(140)
--Not special needs	64	11	7	14	4	100	(664)
<u>Community Social/Economic Status</u>							
--Low	58	12	7	20	4	101	(203)
--Middle	63	11	8	15	3	100	(178)
--Upper	60	11	8	15	6	100	(198)
--High	70	9	5	12	4	100	(225)

“In general, how would you rate the job the public schools are doing here in New Jersey – excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” [Q.8]

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	12	46	27	12	2	99	(265)
--Children	11	40	27	11	10	99	(332)
--No children	7	39	30	10	15	101	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>							
--Special needs	3	33	37	14	14	101	(140)
--Not special needs	12	45	25	11	7	100	(664)
<b>PAST SURVEYS</b>							
September, 1993	7	32	33	22	6	100	(801)
January, 1992	9	33	32	20	6	100	(800)
October, 1987	11	42	29	10	8	100	(1,000)

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August, 1985	9	36	31	14	11	101	(800)
October, 1983	8	40	32	12	8	100	(802)

“How would you rate the job that your local schools are doing – excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” [Q.9]

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Only Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<i><u>Children in the Household</u></i>							
--School age children	22	43	19	13	3	100	(265)
--Children	21	40	21	8	11	101	(332)
--No children	13	37	21	12	16	99	(190)
<i><u>Type of School District</u></i>							
--Special needs	6	37	25	23	10	101	(140)
--Not special needs	24	41	19	7	9	100	(664)
<b><u>PAST SURVEYS</u></b>							
September, 1993	16	36	29	14	5	100	(801)
January, 1992	15	38	26	15	5	99	(800)

“New Jersey is currently working on a plan to insure that the same amount of funding goes to the state's 30 poorest school districts as goes to the wealthier districts. How much have you read or heard about the issue of equal funding for school districts – a great deal, some, not much or nothing at all?” [Q.10]

	<u>A Great Deal</u>	<u>Some</u>	<u>Not Much</u>	<u>Nothing At All</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<i><u>Children in the Household</u></i>							
--School age children	11	35	25	27	--	98	(265)
--Children	16	38	24	21	1	100	(332)
--No children	10	29	32	29	--	100	(190)
<b><u>PAST SURVEYS</u></b>							
September, 1993	8	29	27	36	--	100	(801)

"In general, do you agree or disagree that spending for education must be equal in all of New Jersey's school districts? Do you (agree/disagree) mildly or strongly?" [Q.11]

	Agree Strongly	Agree Mildly	Disagree Mildly	Disagree Strongly	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	62	16	10	10	1	99	(265)
--Children	62	15	9	10	4	100	(332)
--No children	68	16	7	9	1	101	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>							
--Special needs	75	11	7	8	--	101	(140)
--Not special needs	60	17	9	11	3	100	(664)
<u>Community Social/Economic Status</u>							
--Low	74	11	6	8	1	100	(203)
--Middle	68	15	7	9	1	100	(178)
--Upper	59	19	8	11	3	100	(198)
--High	48	20	16	13	4	101	(225)
<b>PAST SURVEYS</b>							
September, 1993	58	18	9	11	3	99	(801)
July, 1990*	32	22	15	23	9	101	(615)

\* Question wording in July, 1990 – "In June the New Jersey Supreme Court decided in the Abbott vs. Burke case that the state's present system of financing public education is unconstitutional because of the wide differences in funding between the rich and the poor school districts. The court decision also said that a new system of financing public education was needed to give students in poorer school districts an opportunity for an education that was equal to that of students in richer school districts."

"In general, do you agree or disagree with the decision made by the court? Do you (agree/disagree) strongly or mildly?"  
[Asked only of those who have heard of the Abbott vs. Burke case.]

"Based on what you have read or heard, do you feel your school district has enough money to provide a quality education for students or do you think your school district needs additional funding?" [Q.12]

	Has Enough Money	Needs Additional Funding	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>					
--School age children	38	56	5	99	(265)
--Children	50	37	12	99	(332)
--No children	43	44	14	101	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>					
--Special needs	17	67	16	100	(140)
--Not special needs	51	39	9	99	(664)
<u>Community Social/Economic Status</u>					
--Low	21	64	15	100	(203)
--Middle	45	44	12	101	(178)
--Upper	51	37	11	99	(198)
--High	66	30	4	100	(225)
<b>PAST SURVEYS</b>					
September, 1993	42	51	7	100	(801)



"Suppose your local public schools said they needed more money. Would you vote for or against raising local property taxes for this purpose?" [Q.13]

	<u>For</u>	<u>Against</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>						
--School age children	40	52	3	5	100	(265)
--Children	33	57	6	5	101	(332)
--No children	42	50	6	2	100	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>						
--Special needs	40	51	4	5	100	(124)
--Not special needs	37	55	5	4	101	(664)
<u>Community Social/Economic Status</u>						
--Low	39	52	3	7	101	(203)
--Middle	42	52	4	2	100	(178)
--Upper	35	56	7	2	100	(198)
--High	34	57	6	4	101	(225)

**PAST SURVEYS**

	<u>For</u>	<u>Against</u>	<u>Depends/ Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
August, 1985	52	34	14	100	(800)
Parents	63	22	15	100	(221)
October, 1983	47	37	16	100	(804)

"There have been some suggestions for different ways to provide public school education. One way is the charter school. How much have you read or heard about the charter school bill that was recently passed here in New Jersey – a great deal, some, not much, or nothing at all?" [Q.14]

	<u>A Great Deal</u>	<u>Some</u>	<u>Not Much</u>	<u>Nothing At All</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	4	15	26	53	2	100	(265)
--Children	4	14	24	58	--	100	(332)
--No children	3	9	18	70	--	100	(190)

"Charter schools operate independently of the local school districts and do not have to follow most rules and regulations. A charter school is a contract between those starting the school and the state. The contract details how the school will be run and what will be taught. A charter school can be started by any individual or group. Overall, how do you rate the idea of charter school – do you think this is an excellent, good, only fair, or poor way to provide public education?" [Q.15]

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Only Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	5	31	25	32	6	99	(265)
--Children	6	21	26	34	14	101	(332)
--No children	7	25	31	30	8	101	(190)

"If you could choose, would you send a child to a regular public school or to a charter school?" [Q.16]

	Public School	Charter School	Depends	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>						
--School age children	68	19	8	5	100	(265)
--Children	63	21	8	8	100	(332)
--No children	64	17	14	6	101	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>						
--Special needs	64	21	11	4	100	(140)
--Not special needs	65	19	9	8	101	(664)

"Another suggested change for public education is to give vouchers that could be used to send a child to any school a parent or guardian wanted to. How much have you read or heard about the voucher program – a great deal, some, not much, or nothing at all?" [Q.17]

	A Great Deal	Some	Not Much	Nothing At All	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	14	26	23	37	--	100	(265)
--Children	16	27	13	43	1	100	(332)
--No children	12	27	15	46	--	100	(190)

"While there are a variety of ways the voucher system could work, generally the voucher would have a certain set value and it could be used to enroll a student in any public or private school they wanted to attend. Thinking about this voucher system, if it were available, how likely would you be to use a voucher to shop around for a specific school to send a child to – very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?" [Q.18]

	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Not Very Likely	Not At All Likely	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<b>February, 1996</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(804)</b>
<u>Children in the Household</u>							
--School age children	48	29	10	12	1	100	(265)
--Children	35	25	14	20	6	100	(332)
--No children	37	34	14	11	5	101	(190)
<u>Type of School District</u>							
--Special needs	52	25	10	11	3	101	(140)
--Not special needs	36	29	14	17	4	100	(664)
<u>Community Social/Economic Status</u>							
--Low	46	30	10	11	3	100	(203)
--Middle	42	30	9	13	5	99	(178)
--Upper	36	26	17	17	4	100	(198)
--High	30	27	17	22	4	100	(225)

**EAGLETON POLL REGIONAL CLASSIFICATIONS**

Region of State: Region is classified according to county boundaries:

**North** -- Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Sussex, Union, and Warren

**Central** -- Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, and Somerset

**South** -- Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, and Salem

Type of Town/Community: All municipalities in the state have been classified into one of five groups or "types," based on location, settlement patterns, population density and growth.

**Major NJ Cities** -- New Jersey's largest cities: Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, Trenton, and Camden.

**Other Urban Centers & Surrounding Areas** -- This category is generally based on the cities of the state over 25,000, but also includes densely populated suburbs of urban areas which also have similar socio-economic characteristics. For example, all of Hudson county (outside of Jersey City), and much of Union, eastern Essex and southern Bergen counties are included in this category.

**Older Suburbs & Towns** -- This category includes two types of municipalities: urban suburbs which are not as densely populated and/or have significantly higher socio-economic characteristics than the nearby urban center; and densely populated towns which are not near urban centers, and have not experienced major development in the past decade.

**Newer Suburbs** -- These are primarily suburban areas which are "outside central city" proportions of the Census Bureau's Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas and have continued to experience growth in the past 20 years. These municipalities are usually within a short distance of urban centers.

**Rural** -- This includes municipalities not in any of the categories above. These are small communities with scattered populations and somewhat denser small towns which are surrounded by rural areas.

Municipal SES: This typology is based upon the 10 District Factor Groups determined by the New Jersey Department of Education. This classification gives weight to each school district's per capita income, educational and occupational background of residents, poverty and unemployment levels, degree of urbanization, and population density and mobility. Each district was placed into one of ten categories of roughly equal size. Eagleton's typology applies these groupings to the relevant municipalities, and collapses the categories as follows:

**Poor Towns** -- Groups A and B

**Lower-Middle Class Towns** -- Groups C, D, and E

**Upper-Middle Class Towns** -- Groups F and G

**Wealthy Towns** -- Groups H, I, and J

The New Jersey Supreme Court decided in the Abbott vs. Burke case that the state's present system of financing public education is unconstitutional because of the wide differences in funding between the rich and the poor school districts. The court decision also said that a new system of financing public education was needed to give students in poorer school districts an opportunity for an education that was equal to that of students in richer school districts.