

The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll

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A story based on the survey findings presented in this release and background memo will appear in the Sunday, October 31 Star-Ledger. We ask users to properly attribute this copyrighted information to "The Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll."

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NEW JERSEY: PARENTS PLEASED; SPECIAL NEEDS DISTRICTS LAG IN SATISFACTION

PARENTS RESOUNDINGLY FAVOR SCHOOL UNIFORMS

How would parents react to the sight of their children going off to school in uniforms? Surprisingly, with great enthusiasm, according to a new survey conducted by the Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll.

The poll also finds parents in New Jersey to be highly satisfied with the quality of education their children are receiving and with the job that public school teachers are doing in the classroom, although those living in the Abbott or "special needs" districts are less enamored with the state's educational system than are others.

Also, parents throughout the state are ambivalent about standardized tests—just over half feel they do an excellent or good job of accurately measuring their child's ability or the job classroom teachers are doing.

The most recent Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll was conducted by telephone between September 15 and 22 with a random sample of 800 New Jersey adults, 257 of who said they had children attending public school in New Jersey. The sampling error is ± 3.5 percent for the full sample of 800; it is ± 7 percent for the sample of parents.

The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll • Eagleton Institute of Politics

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Statewide Ratings

Statewide, 52 percent rate public schools in New Jersey positively as doing an “excellent” or “good” job, while 40 percent give negative ratings of “only fair” or “poor.” However, positive assessments outnumber negative ones by a margin of 59 to 36 percent among parents of school-aged children.

Local schools fare much better than ratings given to the state system as a whole. Two-thirds of those who say they follow what is going on in their local schools either “very” or “somewhat” closely rate the schools’ performance as excellent or good; just 29 percent say their local schools are doing only a fair or a poor job.

Public School Parents’ Perceptions

In general, parents are happy with what their children are getting in the state’s schools. Forty-four percent say they are “very” satisfied with the quality of education their children are receiving and another 39 percent are “somewhat” satisfied. About one-in-six is dissatisfied.

New Jersey teachers also get good grades: 32 percent of parents say that teachers in their public schools are doing an excellent job and another 47 percent feel most are doing a good job. About one-in-five gives public school teachers bad grades of only fair or poor in evaluating their job performance.

New Jersey parents are far less enamored with standardized tests. Many feel the tests used at their child’s schools leave much to be desired in how accurately they measure either their child’s ability or their child’s teachers’ effectiveness.

- Just five percent of parents feel standardized tests do an excellent job of measuring their child’s ability, although half (48%) feel they do a good job. Thirty-six percent

give standardized tests a rating of “only fair” in measuring ability, while 8 percent offer the harsher assessment of poor.

- Just over half (54%) of parents feel the standardized tests in use at their child’s school do an excellent or good job of accurately measuring the job teachers are doing; 30 percent believe they do only a fair job, 10 percent a poor job, and the remainder express no opinion.

The Rutgers-based survey also finds strong support for having standardized uniforms for school children. Two-thirds of public school parents favor the idea of school uniforms “where all children attending a school wear the same clothes and colors—with some approved outfits for boys and girls.” Just 26 percent say this would be a bad idea at their child’s school.

Cliff Zukin, director of the poll, commented, “The amount of parental support for school uniforms is probably the most surprising finding of the survey. It far surpassed our expectations and we will probably explore the topic in more depth in the future.”

While most public school parents are favorably disposed toward the state’s public school education, and more see it getting better (42%) than worse (6%) since the new core curriculum standards program was implemented a few years ago, substantial numbers have at least toyed with the idea of putting their child in a private or charter school. One-third of public school parents say they have considered moving their child from the public school system to a charter or private school because they were dissatisfied with their local school. Another 11 percent have actually done so—most using private schools. Prohibitive cost is the main reason those who have considered moving their children to a different school have not done so.

The Abbott Districts

Perceptions of the quality of public education varies by location and district wealth. Looking only at those who say they follow what is going on in their school system “very” or “somewhat” closely, just 50 percent of those living in the Abbott or “special needs” districts give their schools positive ratings of excellent or good compared to 46 percent rating them as only fair or poor. In stark contrast, 80 percent of those living in the state’s wealthiest districts offered positive assessments of excellent or good, while just 18 percent described their local schools as only fair or poor. Other districts were in the middle, with 68 percent offering positive and 30 percent offering negative assessments.

REINVENTING THE ABBOTTS—A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

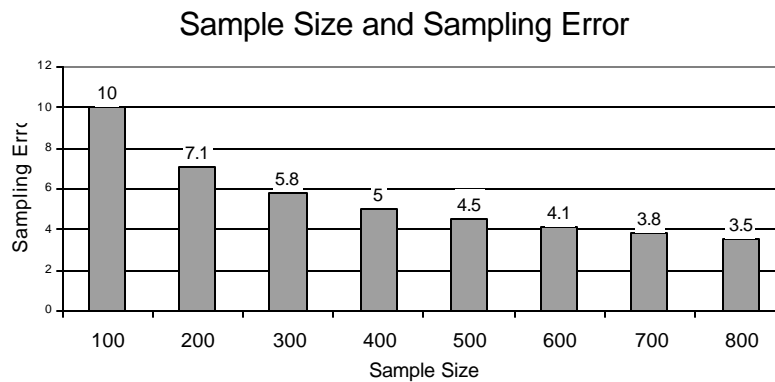
New Jersey school districts are classified by a DFG or district factor grouping, which is based on wealth and urban status. Groups A and B contain the Abbott or so-called “special needs” districts at the heart of the issue of school funding court challenges.

In order to take a statistical look at this group the Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll pooled the 800 respondents contacted in September of 1999 with a sample of 800 who were asked the identical questions in September of 1998. The resulting 1,600 respondents were separated into DFG categories according to their zip code, enabling comparisons to be made between the Abbott districts (a portion of the DFG codes A & B) the state’s wealthiest districts (DFG codes I & J) and the great number in the middle. Sample sizes and the associated sampling error figures are as follows:

Abbott n = 138 Sampling error = \pm 9 percent; Wealthiest districts n = 202 Sampling error = \pm 7 percent; Other districts n = 851 Sampling error = \pm 3.4 percent;

BACKGROUND MEMO — (EP123-5), SUNDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1999

The latest *Star-Ledger/Eagleton* Poll was conducted between September 15 and 22, 1999, when a scientifically selected random sample of 802 New Jersey adult residents was interviewed by telephone. All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. The sampling error for the total sample size of 802 is ± 3.5 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval. Thus if 50 percent of New Jerseyans were found to have a favorable opinion of the Governor, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 46.5 and 53.5 percent (50 ± 3.5) had all New Jerseyans been interviewed, rather than just a sample. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such separate figures reported for men and women, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. The following chart shows the relationship between sample size and sampling error.



Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording or context effects. The verbatim wording of all questions asked are reproduced in this background memo. The sample has been stratified based on county and the data have been weighted on age and education to insure an accurate proportional representation of the state.

“How closely do you follow what is going on in your local public schools – very closely, somewhat, or not at all?” [E1]

	Very	Somewhat	Not at all	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	28%	43%	29%	--	100%	(802)
<u>PAST SURVEYS</u>						
September, 1998	30	48	22	--	100	(804)
October, 1987	25	41	33	1	100	(1000)
October, 1986	27	49	23	2	101	(793)
August, 1985	27	43	27	3	100	(800)
October, 1983	24	45	31	1	101	(812)

“In general, how would you rate the job the public schools are doing here in New Jersey – excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” [E2]

	Excellent	Good	Only fair	Poor	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	11%	41%	31%	9%	9%	101%	(802)
<i>Parental Status</i>							
--Has school age children	15	44	25	11	5	100	(301)
--Does not have school age children	9	38	34	7	11	99	(501)
<u>PAST SURVEYS</u>							
September, 1998	11	42	29	9	9	100	(804)
<i>Parental Status</i>							
--Has school age children	13	44	27	11	5	100	(272)
--Does not have school age children	10	41	29	9	11	100	(532)
January, 1992	9	33	32	20	6	100	(800)
October, 1987	11	42	29	10	8	100	(1000)
August, 1985	9	36	31	14	11	101	(800)

“How would you rate the job your local schools are doing – excellent, good, only fair, or poor?”
[E3]

***STATEWIDE figures** are based on those respondents who said they followed what was going on in their local schools “very” or “somewhat” closely.

****Methodological note on Districts:** New Jersey school districts are classified by a DFG or district factor grouping, which is based on how wealthy and how urban the districts are. Groups A and B contain the Abbott or so-called “special needs” districts at the heart of the issue of school funding court challenges. In order to take a statistical look at this group, the Star Ledger/Eagleton Poll pooled the 800 respondents contacted in September of 1999 with a sample of 800 who were asked the identical questions in September of 1998. The resulting 1,600 respondents were separated into DFG categories according to their zip code, enabling comparisons to be made between the Abbott Districts, the state’s wealthiest districts (I and J), and the great number in the middle. Sample sizes and associated sampling error figures are as follows:

Abbott Sampling Error = \pm 9 percent; Wealthiest Districts’ Sampling Error = \pm 7 percent; Other Districts’ Sampling Error = \pm 3.4 percent

	Excellent	Good	Only fair	Poor	Don’t know	Total	(n)
--September, 1999							
<u>STATEWIDE*</u>	22%	46%	20%	9%	3%	100%	(569)
<u>PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS</u>, September 1999							
	25	49	13	11	1	99	(257)
<u>By District STATEWIDE**:</u>							
Abbott (Special Needs)							
Districts	13	37	31	15	4	100	(138)
I and J (Wealthiest Districts)							
Districts	34	46	12	6	2	100	(202)
All Other Districts	23	45	23	7	2	100	(851)
<u>PAST SURVEYS</u>							
<u>STATEWIDE*</u>							
--September, 1998	23	44	23	8	2	100	(622)
--October, 1987	17	53	21	5	4	100	(339)
--October, 1986	18	41	26	11	3	99	(621)
--August, 1985	17	44	27	10	2	100	(576)
--October, 1983	20	45	23	9	3	100	(568)
--March, 1982	20	38	29	10	3	100	(454)
--September, 1980	15	43	30	10	2	100	(381)
<u>PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS</u>							
--October, 1987	29	43	22	6	--	100	(242)
--August, 1985	23	47	21	7	1	99	(205)
<u>FULL SAMPLE</u>							
--October, 1987	14	46	23	6	11	100	(500)

“Do you have school-aged children in your household – Kindergarten through High School? IF YES, PROBE: Is that grade school, High School or both?” [E4]

	Grade (includes Kindergarten)	High School	Both	No	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	22%	8%	8%	61%	--	99%	(802)
September, 1998	17	10	7	66	--	100	(804)

ASKED ONLY OF THOSE RESPONDENTS WHO SAID THEY HAD SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN IN THEIR HOUSEHOLD (38%):

“Is that public school, private school, or both?” [E5]

	Public	Private	Both	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	79%	14%	7%	--	100%	(301)
September, 1998	78	15	5	2	100	(272)

QUESTIONS E6 THROUGH E9 WERE ASKED ONLY OF THOSE WHO SAID THEY HAD A CHILD IN PUBLIC SCHOOL.

“Overall, would you say you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the quality of education your children are receiving? IF CHOICE MADE, PROBE: Is that very or somewhat (SATISFIED/DISSATISFIED)?” [E6]

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	44%	39%	9%	6%	2%	100%	(257)
September, 1998	42	40	9	7	2	100	(226)

“How would you rate the job that the teachers in your local schools are doing--excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” [E7]

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	32%	47%	13%	5%	2%	99%	(257)

“What kind of job do you think the standardized tests used in your children’s schools do at accurately measuring their ability---excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” [E8A]

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	5%	48%	36%	8%	3%	100%	(257)

“What kind of job do you think the standardized tests used in your children’s schools do at accurately measuring the job teachers are doing---excellent, good, only fair, or poor?” [E8B]

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor	Don’t know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	8%	46%	30%	10%	7%	101%	(257)

“About three years ago the state implemented a new core curriculum standards program. Thinking back over the last few years, would you say the quality of education your children are receiving has been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same?” [E9]

	Better	Worse	Same	Don’t Know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	42%	6%	44%	8%	100%	(257)

Have you ever considered putting your child in a private or Charter school because you were dissatisfied with your local school, has that never been something you have seriously considered, or have you actually done this? [E10]

	Considered It	Not Considered it	Done it	Don’t Know	Total	(n)
PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS, September 1999	32%	56%	11%	1%	100%	(257)

ASKED ONLY OF PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS WHO HAVE “CONSIDERED PUTTING THEIR CHILD IN A PRIVATE OR CHARTER SCHOOL”:

And why have you not actually done it--Did you stay in the public schools because of cost or some other reason? [E11]

	Cost	Other reason	Other Answer	Don’t Know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	59%	35%	5%	1%	100%	(81)

QUESTIONS E12 AND E13 WERE ONLY ASKED OF PARENTS WITH A CHILD IN PUBLIC SCHOOL.

In the average year, how often do you go to school to attend events--meetings, performances, or ceremonies--for each of your children? Is this something you aren’t able to do, do once or twice a year, 3 to 5 times, or more often than that? [E12]

	Can’t do/haven’t done/zero times	Once or twice	3 to 5 times	6 or more times	Don’t know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	3%	10%	38%	45%	4%	100%	(257)

There has been some discussion of SCHOOL UNIFORMS lately, where all children attending a school wear the same clothes and colors—with some approved outfits for boys and girls. What's your opinion—do you think this would be a good idea or a bad idea at your child's school? [E13]

	Good idea	Bad idea	Other/different kids/depends	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1999	68%	26%	3%	3%	100%	(257)