



Public Education through the Public Eye: A Survey of New Orleans Voters and Parents

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The Cowen Institute's Applied Research staff serve as an objective voice to education leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public about what is taking place in public education in New Orleans – particularly in the areas of accountability, operations (mainly finance and facilities), and governance – by disseminating relevant data and research. We draft briefings and conduct forums, meetings, and seminars that inform educators, administrators, media, and the general community on issues impacting public education in New Orleans.

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INTRODUCTION

Public education in New Orleans has undergone a number of major reforms since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005. Before the storm, nearly all schools were operated and governed by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). Following the hurricane, the state of Louisiana took over most public schools in New Orleans and placed them under the control of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). Both the RSD and the OPSB have turned many of their traditional, district-operated schools into charter schools. As a result, the control of public schools in New Orleans is now split between the two districts and an ever-expanding number of charter schools operated by more than 30 different non-profit organizations.

In addition, students are no longer required to attend schools based on where they live. After Katrina, attendance zones that were previously in place were abolished, and students can now attend any school in the city where they can gain admittance. Finally, the work force in public schools has changed markedly since Katrina. When the RSD took over most public schools in New Orleans, the financially-troubled OPSB could no longer pay for its workforce and fired nearly all of its staff and teachers. Many were rehired in the RSD and in charter schools, but at the same time a significant number of new teachers and school leaders were recruited from around the country through programs like Teach for America.

While public education in New Orleans has changed dramatically, its organization remains in flux. In 2010, the State Superintendent of Education must make a recommendation to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) about returning schools in New Orleans to local control. Many charter schools created in the wake of Hurricane Katrina are also coming up for renewal. In New Orleans, a mayoral election in early 2010 could significantly change the relationship between public schools and city government.

Few cities have the opportunity to think through the organization of their public education system in the way that the city of New Orleans has had and will continue to have over the next few years. For this reason, Tulane University's Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives has commissioned a poll to assess the community's opinion about public education reform and the future direction of public education in New Orleans. No previous survey has tried to delve this deeply into the public's opinions about and experiences with school reform and governance since Katrina. As part of our work of informing the educational transformation taking place in the city, we believe that giving voice to citizens and parents is crucial to sustaining positive change.

METHODOLOGY

The survey on which the following analysis is based was conducted between the dates of November 3-14, 2009 by Market Research Insight on behalf of the Cowen Institute. The sample population consisted of 600 randomly selected registered voters in Orleans Parish with an over sample of 300 parents with children enrolled in a public school. This includes schools operated by the OPSB and RSD and charter schools overseen by both BESE, via the RSD, and the OPSB. The population of



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registered voters is somewhat different from the population of adult residents in New Orleans as a whole. Registered voters tend to be slightly older and have slightly more education on average. However, voter lists provide the most comprehensive list of residents that is readily available for surveying. Likewise, because voters decide the outcomes of elections and are heard by elected officials, their opinions are important. In addition, our survey sample approximates well the racial/ethnic and income distribution of the city, giving us confidence that the results accurately reflect the opinions of New Orleans registered voters as a whole.

OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS

Public school parents were asked questions about the importance of school choice and neighborhood schools, as well as their personal experiences in trying to locate information about, choose, and enroll their children in a public school. In addition, parents were asked to grade the quality of the school that they eventually enrolled their child in.

Parents were asked to grade their child's school by giving it an A, B, C, D, or F. Most parents, 63 percent, gave their child's school an A or B. However, these grades varied significantly by school type. While this poll divides schools into two types – charter and traditional – this masks some major differences within each type across RSD and OPSB schools that should be noted in considering these poll results. The Orleans Parish School Board runs four traditional schools and oversees 12 charters that have been historically high performing and, as a result, were not taken over by the state. Many of these schools also have some form of selective admissions policy. The state's Recovery School District operates 33 traditional schools and oversees 37 charters. RSD schools were taken over by the state because they were historically low-performing and currently do not have selective admissions.

Many more charter school parents (82 percent) than traditional school parents (48 percent) graded their child's school as an A or B. Only three percent of charter school parents gave their child's school a D or F compared with 17 percent of traditional school parents. Of those parents who were uncertain how to grade their child's school, the majority (77 percent) had a child who attended a traditional public school.

Nearly all of the parents who were polled (99 percent) agreed that it is important that they be able to choose their child's school. A smaller majority (75 percent) of parents felt that it was also important that their child be able to enroll at their neighborhood school. These responses varied little by parent education or income or by the type of school the child attended. However, those at the highest income and education levels were somewhat less likely to agree that the ability to enroll their child in a neighborhood school was important.

About two-thirds (62 percent) of parents agreed that information on different school options was readily available to them and that when deciding on a school for their child there were "good options" to choose from (66 percent). Perception about

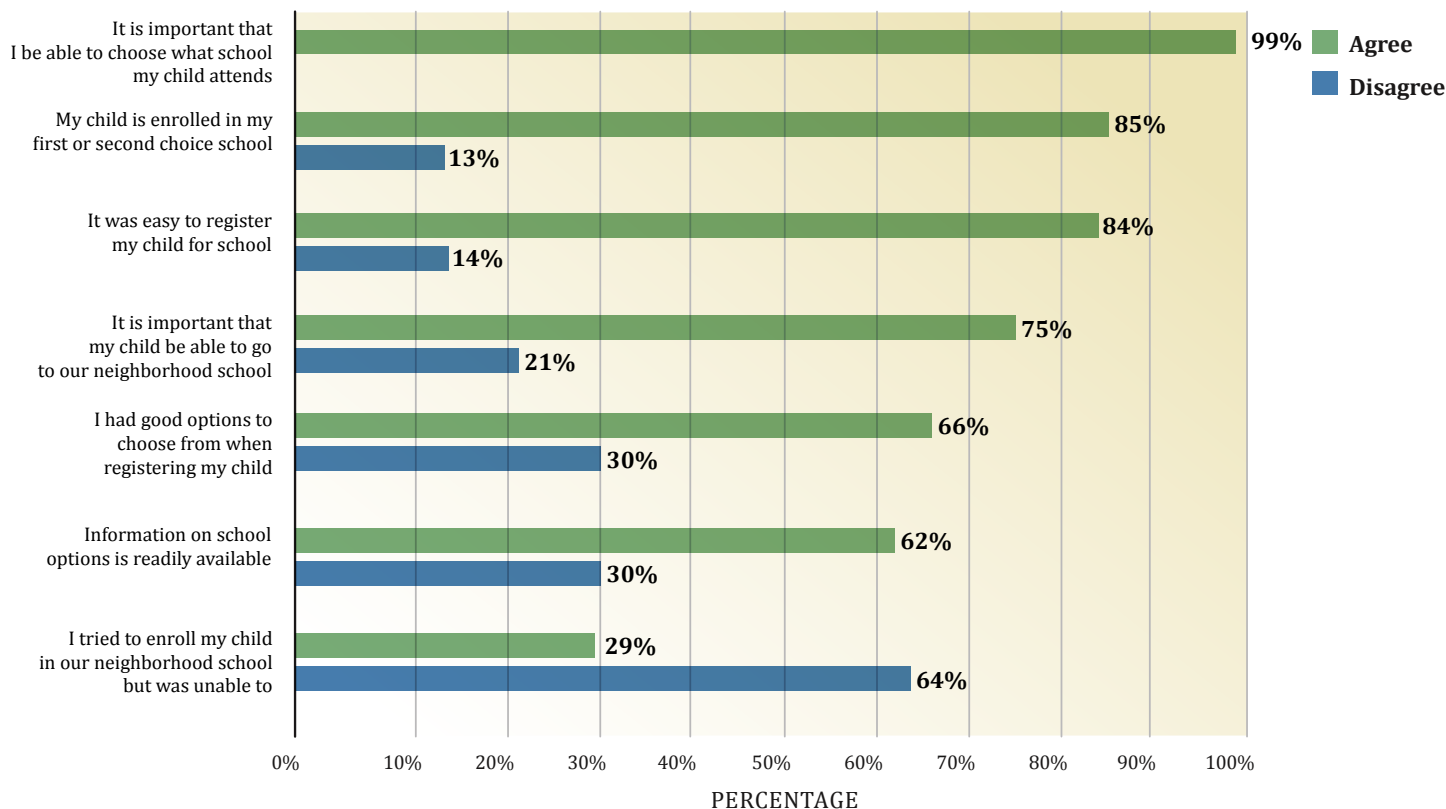


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the availability of school information and options did vary by parent education; parents with less than a high school diploma were more likely to agree that there was enough information available to them (84 percent).

Parents overwhelmingly perceived the registration and enrollment process as uncomplicated. Most parents found that it was both easy to register their child for school (84 percent) and that they were able to enroll their child in either their first or second choice school (85 percent). This did not seem to vary according to school type. In addition, similar numbers of traditional (81 percent) and charter (88 percent) parents' children got into their first or second choice schools. Though most parents were able to enroll their child in one of their top choices, nearly a third of those polled (29 percent) said that they tried to enroll their child in their neighborhood school but were unable to. It is unclear whether this was due to the lack of a neighborhood school serving the necessary grade level(s), a lack of capacity at the neighborhood school, or a selective admissions policy that restricted enrollment. In addition, the term "neighborhood school" was not defined for survey respondents and differences in its meaning may have affected the responses.

Public School Parent Opinions and Personal Experiences



This chart does not include respondents who answered "uncertain."



REFORM: CHOICE, CHARTERS, AND NEW TEACHERS

After Hurricane Katrina, public education in New Orleans underwent a number of reforms, beginning with a state takeover of the majority of the public schools. When asked if the state made the right decision to take over the majority of schools in the aftermath of the storm, 66 percent of voters agreed with the decision while 21 percent disagreed. However, there was a large difference in opinion by race, with 57 percent of African American voters agreeing, compared to 80 percent of all other voters. Parents' opinions mirrored that of voters as a whole, with 66 percent agreeing and 21 percent disagreeing.

The poll revealed general support for other reforms, including school choice, the introduction of a large number of charter schools, and the hiring of a large number of new teachers. Seventy percent of all voters and 69 percent of all parents agreed that charter schools have improved education in New Orleans. This varied slightly by race, with fewer African American voters (64 percent) agreeing compared to all other races (77 percent). When asked whether new teachers are improving education in New Orleans, a little more than half of all voters (54 percent) agreed while only 17 percent disagreed, with a large number remaining uncertain. Fewer parents were uncertain, with 68 percent in agreement and 17 percent in disagreement.

Both voters (79 percent) and parents (88 percent) supported school choice, agreeing that parents should be able to send their children to any school in the city. Support was even stronger among African American voters, 88 percent of whom agreed. While there was widespread support for citywide school choice, both voters (93 percent) and parents (96 percent) also strongly agreed that parents should have the right to enroll their children in their neighborhood schools.

Given the number of reforms that have been implemented since Hurricane Katrina, voters and parents were asked whether or not they believed that schools are better since Katrina, were better before, or are about the same both before and after. While the major reform measures described above were largely supported by voters and parents, only 32 percent of all voters responded that schools are better since Katrina, while 17 percent said they were better before the storm, and 30 percent responded that they are about the same. These numbers vary, however, according to race and parental status.

Only 24 percent of African American voters thought that schools are better since Katrina, compared to 44 percent of all other voters. Twenty percent of African American voters thought that schools were better before Katrina and over half (56 percent) thought that schools were either about the same before and after the storm or were uncertain. Among parents, 90 percent of whom were African American, 31 percent believed that schools are better since Katrina. Interestingly, only 6 percent of parents were uncertain how to answer this question, compared to 20 percent of the sample of voters.

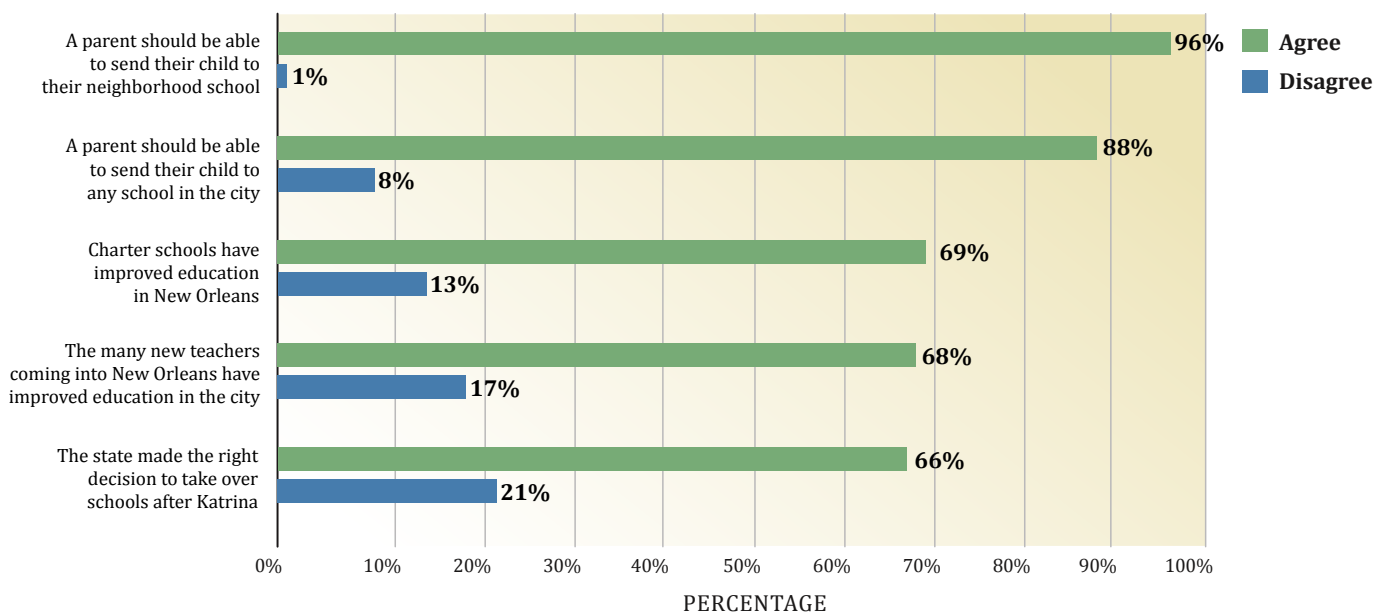
These findings are different from a recent poll by Democracy Corps, which also asked voters whether they thought schools were getting better or worse since Katrina. In this poll, 50 percent of those polled said schools were getting better, 25 percent



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believed they had stayed the same, and 17 percent said they were getting worse. This difference may be due to the wording of the question. While the Cowen Institute poll asked whether or not schools “are” currently better or worse than they were before Katrina, the Democracy Corps asked whether or not schools were “getting” better or worse. Some voters might feel that, while schools are either worse or the same as they were before Katrina, the system is in the process of improving.

Public School Parent Opinions on Post-Katrina School Reforms



This chart does not include respondents who answered “uncertain.”

FUTURE GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NEW ORLEANS

Due the state takeover of low-performing schools in 2005, and the establishment of an increasing number of charter schools, school governance in New Orleans remains in flux. As a result, voters were asked whether or not they favored or opposed a series of potential options for the future governance of public education in New Orleans. Some options included an elected or appointed board, state or mayoral control, or an all charter system. While there was consensus on some proposed options – voters were staunchly against mayoral involvement and favored a new city-wide elected board – responses to some questions varied by race and parental status.

When voters were asked whether they favored or opposed giving control of all schools back to the Orleans Parish School Board, a little more than half (55 percent) opposed this option. Parents responded similarly, with 57 percent opposing. However, response to this question varied according to race: while 49 percent of African Americans opposed giving control



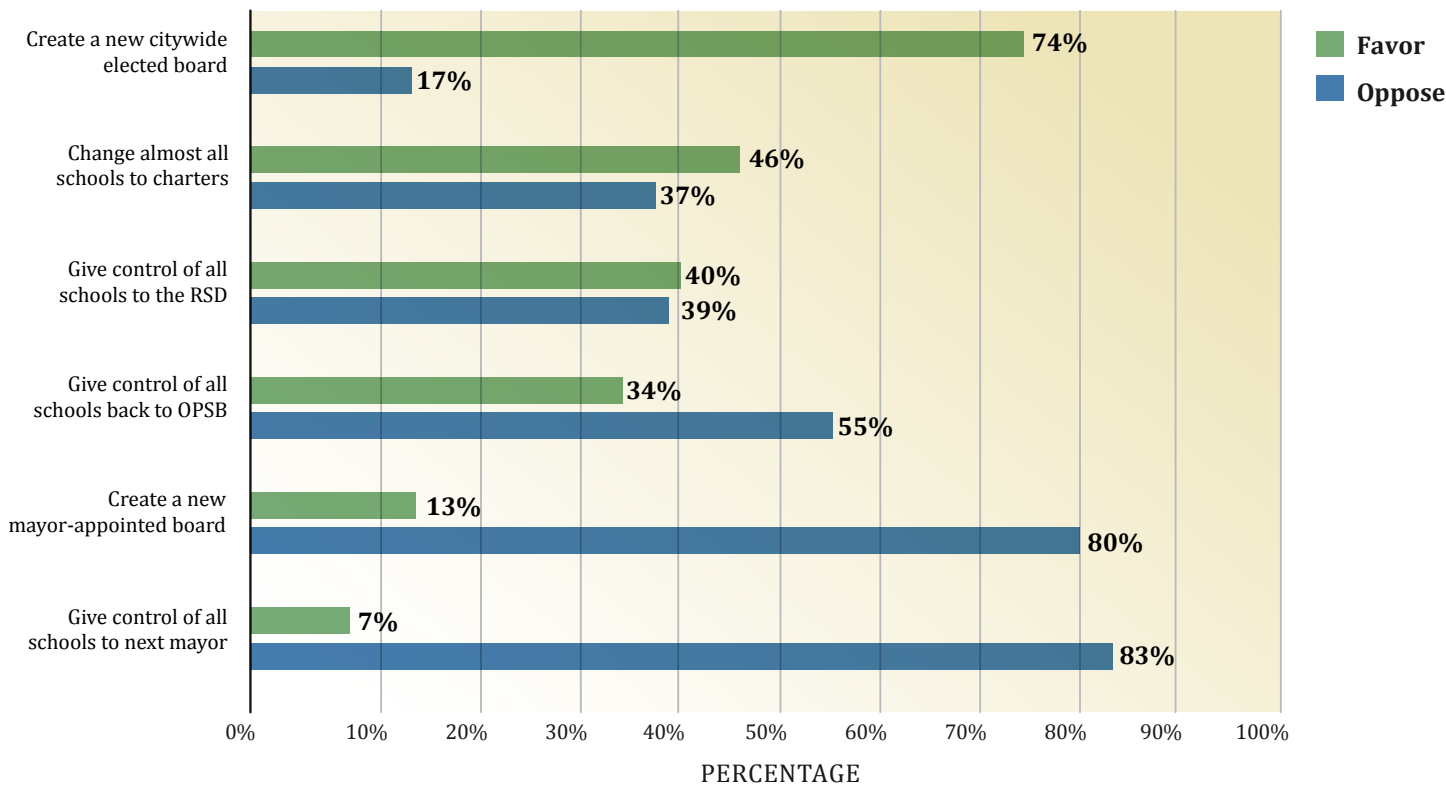
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back to the OPSB, 63 percent of all other voters opposed. In addition, 40 percent of African American voters favored giving all schools back to the OPSB as compared to 25 percent of all other voters.

While the majority of voters (66 percent) agreed that the state made the right decision in taking over most schools in the aftermath of Katrina, the public is split on whether the RSD should have control of schools going forward. Forty percent of voters agreed that the RSD should be given control of all schools while 39 percent opposed the idea.

There was overwhelming opposition to mayoral involvement in public education in the two forms that it was proposed: total mayoral control over schools or the creation of a new school board appointed by the mayor. Only 7 percent of voters favored giving the next mayor of New Orleans control of all schools, and only 13 percent favored the creation of a mayor-appointed board. The vast majority (83 percent and 80 percent, respectively) opposed both options. The one governance option that did garner widespread favor was the creation of a new school board to be elected citywide (as opposed to by district, which is currently the case), with 74 percent of voters in favor and only 17 percent opposed. Support was even stronger among current parents (79 percent).

Voter Opinions on Public Education Governance Options



This chart does not include respondents who answered "uncertain."



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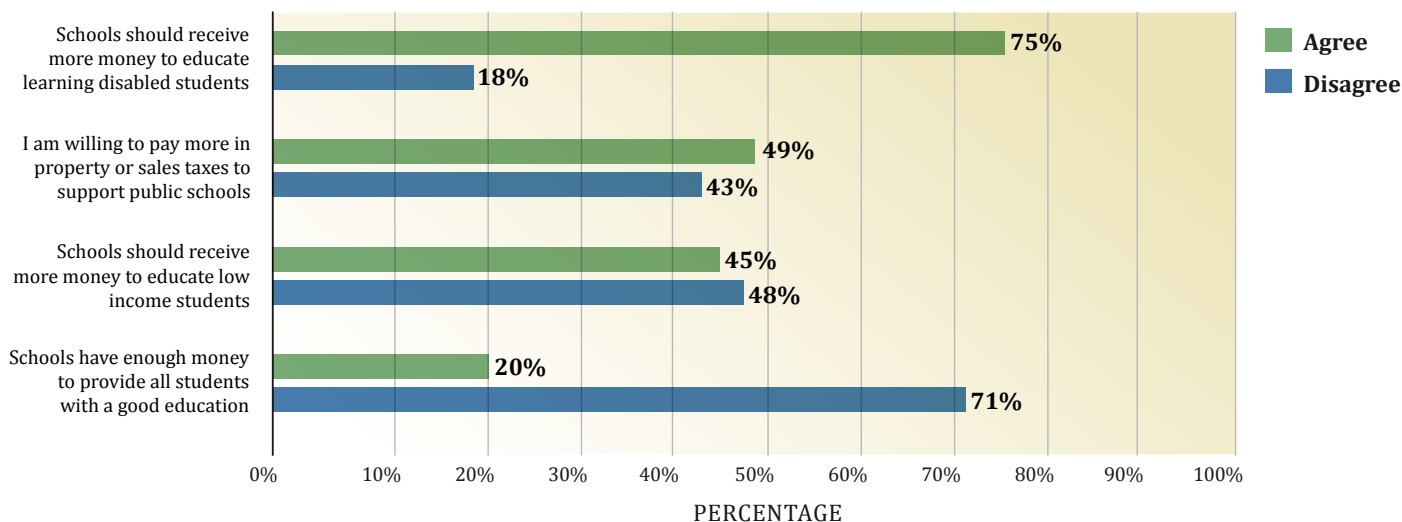
Voters were also split on whether or not they supported turning all public schools in New Orleans into charter schools, with 46 percent in favor and 37 percent opposed. However, responses varied both by race and, for parents, by the type of school their child attends. About the same number of African Americans favored (41 percent) and opposed (43 percent) turning all schools into charters. However, 55 percent of all other voters favored this option with 29 percent opposed. Among charter school parents, 63 percent favored and 32 percent opposed the idea. Among traditional school parents, 38 percent favored and 40 percent opposed turning almost all schools into charter schools.

FUNDING OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Voters and parents were asked if public schools in New Orleans have enough money to provide all students with a good education. Though 71 percent of all voters disagreed, this sentiment was slightly stronger among public school parents (80 percent). While most of those polled agreed that schools could use additional money, only about half of all voters (49 percent) and parents (51 percent) said they would be willing to pay more in sales or property taxes in order to support public education.

Voters were also asked whether or not schools should be given additional money to educate different types of students. Voters were much more likely to support giving a school more money to educate a student with a learning disability (75 percent) than to support giving more money to educate a low income student (45 percent). Support for more money for

Voter Opinions on Public School Funding



This chart does not include respondents who answered "uncertain."



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learning disabled students did not vary by race, though there were differences in support for more money for low income students according to race. While 52 percent of African Americans agreed that schools needed more money to educate low income students, only 32 percent of all other voters agreed.

CONCLUSION

The Cowen Institute's opinion poll provides some clarity about voter sentiment and the experiences of parents while leaving other questions open. Parents clearly want school choice and the ability to enroll their children in a neighborhood school, two policies that are hard to implement at the same time, at least in their purest form. However, it is clear that giving some preferences to parents living near a school, while keeping open the option of choice, would have some support. Parents also generally think that registration processes are easy and that they were able to enroll their child in their first or second choice school. However, smaller majorities felt they had "good options" to choose from. Obviously getting into a first choice school in the absence of good options is not good enough. Likewise, there is a sizable minority of parents that tried to get into a neighborhood school and could not, meaning that the current system is producing a significant amount of involuntary bussing. This is especially important, given the already high cost of transportation to schools across the city.

Taken reform by reform, voters and parents generally support the state takeover of schools, the implementation of school choice, the rapid expansion of charter schools, and the influx of new teachers into public schools in New Orleans. Interestingly though, there is far less agreement among voters and parents that schools are now better than they were before Katrina. Since questions on a previous survey indicate that voters are more optimistic when looking into the future, this may indicate that while New Orleanians are hopeful about the direction of public education, they still see a lot of room for improvement.

In the area of governance, voters and parents are generally opposed to giving schools back to the Orleans Parish School Board, but nonetheless favor a new body, elected citywide, to oversee schools. Voters are overwhelmingly opposed to mayoral control of any kind in public schools. Slight pluralities of voters favor allowing the Recovery School District to maintain control of schools and turning nearly all schools into charter schools, but there is not strong support for these options. There is a strong preference for local control among voters in New Orleans and also for elected control of schools; however, most voters do not support returning schools to the OPSB.

Finally, voters and parents agree that schools do not have enough money to provide a good education for all students. However, only half are willing to pay more in taxes to supplement what schools currently receive. It remains to be seen if, as optimism grows about the direction of public education in New Orleans, more voters are willing to contribute resources to public education.

