School Performance and Accountability in Michigan: Results from the 2001 State of the State Survey

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In May 2001, the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University asked a representative sample of Michigan residents to assign grades to Michigan schools and their own local schools. We also asked them to rate the importance of a variety of school performance measures, including MEAP scores and teacher quality. In this report we present the results of this survey.

How Do Michigan Residents Grade Their Schools?

Overall, residents are happier with the performance of their local schools than they are with the performance of Michigan schools in general. More than half of the respondents in our survey gave Michigan schools an A or a B. Almost 75 percent gave the schools in their own community an A or a B. But local schools also receive low grades from some citizens. Among those surveyed, only 5 percent gave Michigan schools a D or an F, but 8 percent gave the schools in their own community a D or an F.

There has been some improvement in the public perception of Michigan schools since 1998. Residents gave Michigan schools fewer A's in 2001, but many more B's and C's. Slightly fewer than half of those surveyed in 1998 gave Michigan schools A's and B's, whereas slightly more than half gave Michigan schools A's or B's in 2001. The decrease in the number of D's and F's is especially striking. In 1998, 19 percent of residents gave Michigan schools D's and F's. In 2001, only 5 percent gave D's or F's.

The public's perception of their
Local schools has improved even more since 1998. The percentage of survey respondents who assigned a grade of A to the schools in their own community increased dramatically, from 14 percent in 1998 to 22 percent in 2001. Local schools received As or Bs from 62 percent of respondents in 1998, and from 72 percent in 2001. Survey respondents also gave the schools in their own community fewer failing grades in 2001 than they gave in 1998. The percentage of Ds and Fs that respondents assigned to local schools fell from 12 percent in 1998 to 8 percent in 2001.

These improvements in the public perception of schools are good news—but not for everyone. Urban residents are the most dissatisfied with their local schools. Only 10 percent of urban residents gave schools in their community an A. More than a quarter gave their local schools a grade of D or F. Rural respondents generally awarded higher grades than urban, but 6 percent of rural residents gave their local schools a D or F. These perceptions contrast sharply with those of suburban residents. In the suburbs, 85 percent of residents gave their local schools an A or a B, and barely 1 percent gave grades of D or F.

Detroit residents gave their schools lower marks than other urban residents. In Detroit, 43 percent of survey respondents gave their local schools an A or a B. Among urban residents outside Detroit 68 percent gave their local schools As or Bs. More than a quarter of Detroit residents assigned a grade of D or F to their local schools, compared with 21 percent in other urban areas.

How Can We Explain These Results?

Two findings from the survey results stand out. The first is the significant improvement in how Michigan residents perceive their local schools. The second is the continuing gap between urban and other schools in survey respondents’ assessment of their performance. How can we explain these findings?

- **Big changes in Michigan education policy in the past few years have had some positive effects.** A booming economy and the school finance changes brought about by Proposal A have supported big increases in revenues and per pupil expenditures in many districts. There has been a strong statewide focus on MEAP and school performance, which has given parents and citizens more information about how their schools are doing. In addition, the introduction of school choice and charter schools has encouraged educators to think more about “consumer satisfaction” in their schools. These changes are now paying dividends in many parts of Michigan, and citizens’ perceptions of the schools in their own communities have improved.
• These policy changes have not helped urban schools as much as other schools. The main benefits of Proposal A went to low-spending rural schools, not urban schools, and MEAP scores remain low in many urban districts. The introduction of choice and charter schools has produced a spiral of decline in some urban districts, overwhelming their capacity to respond effectively to new demands. As a result, many urban residents are still waiting for improvements in their local schools.

What Measures of School Performance are Important?

We also asked survey respondents to rate the importance of various criteria that are often used to evaluate school performance. We asked them “What’s Important?” and they responded “Everything!” Teacher qualifications, graduation rates, school safety, per pupil spending, extracurricular activities, MEAP scores, and athletic success are all viewed as important measures of school performance by more than 70 percent of all respondents. Not all of these measures are considered equally important, though. Teacher quality, school safety, and high school graduation rates are considered very important by nearly all survey respondents. Opinions about extracurricular activities, MEAP scores, per pupil spending, and athletic success are not as uniform. A substantial majority of survey respondents clearly believes that these are important criteria for evaluating school performance, but a significantly smaller percentage regards them as very important.
Implications for Policy

These survey results have two main implications for educational policy in Michigan. First, current policies are bringing about improvement in most parts of Michigan, but not all. Urban residents continue to give their schools relatively low grades, and some rural residents do too. The Legislature, the State Board of Education, and the Michigan Department of Education have all recently turned their attention to the problems of underperforming schools. Our survey results offer strong support for these and other efforts aimed at improving the performance of Michigan’s poorest urban and rural schools. The key policy challenge in Michigan’s education system is to ensure that all schools, and especially urban schools, are meeting public expectations.

Second, these survey results should encourage policy makers to put first things first. Virtually all Michigan residents view teacher quality as a very important criterion in their evaluation of school performance. Urban and rural schools face particular difficulties in attracting and retaining talented and committed teachers. Policies that aim to improve the quality of teaching for Michigan’s neediest students should therefore be a top priority.

The Survey

The survey on which this report is based was administered as part of the 21st wave of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research’s State of the State Survey. A total of 958 phone interviews were completed using list-assisted random-digit dial sampling procedures between May 30 and July 12, 2001. The margin of overall sampling error is +3.2 percent. The data reported in this policy brief are weighted to be representative of the adult population in Michigan.

For more information about this survey and related policy issues visit the Education Policy Center website at www.epc.msu.edu or the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research website at www.ippsr.msu.edu.