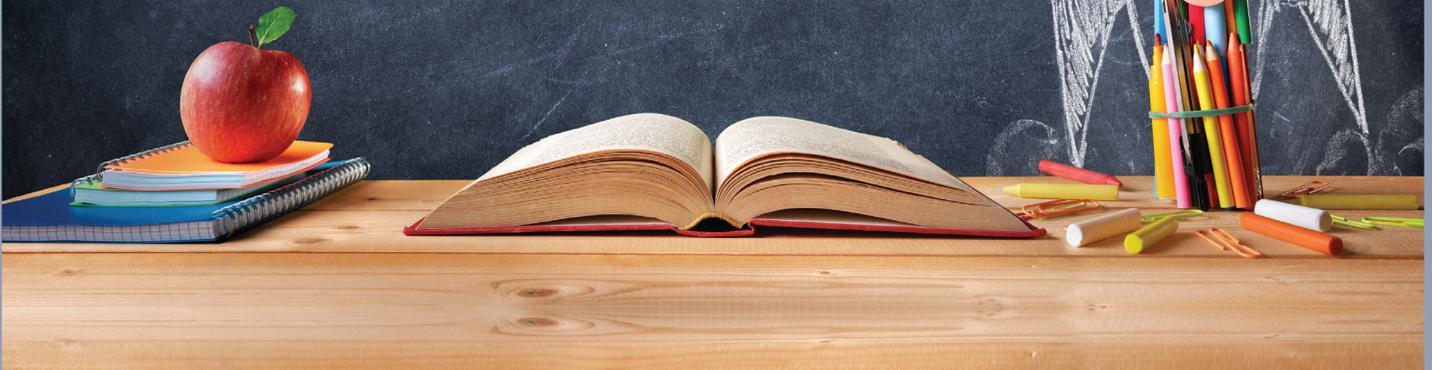




PITTSBURGH
TODAY



The Pittsburgh Today EDUCATION SURVEY



*Pittsburgh Today, a program of the University of Pittsburgh
University Center for Social and Urban Research.*

2019

INTRODUCTION

Public schools educate 115,000 students in grades kindergarten through 12 in Allegheny County, the most populous county in southwestern Pennsylvania. For the first time, a comprehensive survey provides insight into how residents view public education in their local schools, their thoughts about key education issues and the experiences of those whose children are taught in public school classrooms.

The Pittsburgh Today Regional Education Survey was conducted by Pittsburgh Today and the University Center for Social and Urban Research at the University of Pittsburgh (UCSUR) in October 2019. Nearly 2,300 Allegheny County residents identified from the UCSUR Research Registry participated. And survey data were adjusted to make the sample representative of the demographic characteristics of the county.

The responses offer the broad perspectives of county residents as a whole, as well as a glimpse of how race, age, level of education, gender, income and whether people live in the City of Pittsburgh or the suburbs tend to color views and experiences related to local public schools.

The complete survey data are available online in the Special Reports section of the Pittsburgh Today website at <https://pittsburghquarterly.com/pittsburgh-today/pt-special-reports.html>

Here are highlights of the survey findings.

The Pittsburgh Today
**EDUCATION
SURVEY**

CONTENTS

4	EDUCATION FUNDING
4	CHANGES TO IMPROVE SCHOOLS
4	SCHOOL PERFORMANCE
4	TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS
5	EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
5	STANDARDIZED TESTS
6	SCHOOL MERGER
6	SCHOOL CHOICE
7	RACIAL DIFFERENCES
7	INCOME DIFFERENCES
7	AGE DIFFERENCES
8	EDUCATION DIFFERENCES
8	CITY AND SUBURBS



EDUCATION FUNDING

Most Allegheny County residents agree that the amount of money spent on schools influences the quality of the education students receive.

- › Only 5 percent of residents overall don't believe that funding affects the quality of education at all.

An overall majority of residents feel that funding for public schools is adequate. Four in 10 county residents believe the public schools are underfunded.

Residents overall struggle to identify budget line items they'd be willing to reduce if school spending has to be cut.

- › Athletic programs and facilities are the only line item a majority of residents favor cutting funding for if education spending has to be reduced.
- › At least 3 in 4 residents oppose spending cuts for buildings, transportation, school personnel, after-school programs, and art, music and library programs.

The survey findings suggest widespread support for greater equity in funding public schools.

- › More than 8 in 10 residents agree that education funding in Pennsylvania should be equitable for all students, even if that means taking money from some wealthier school districts and investing it in ones with leaner resources.

CHANGES TO IMPROVE SCHOOLS

Residents support making several changes to improve their public schools.

- › The most popular was expanding career technical education in the schools, such as training in automotive repair, machine operations and culinary arts. The least popular was tying teachers' pay to the performance of their students.
- › More than 8 in 10 residents overall also favored increasing art and music instruction in the public schools. And 7 in 10 residents favored greater school choice.
- › Residents are the most narrowly divided on whether students of different ability levels should be grouped in the same classes or separated into different classes based on their ability. Nearly 52 percent favor grouping students of different ability levels in the same classroom, while 48 believe they should be separated according to their abilities.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Allegheny County residents were asked to rate 13 characteristics of their local public schools on a scale ranging from excellent to poor. Although no more than 19 percent of residents described any single aspect of public schools as poor, they proved to be tough graders.

- › No more than 15 percent of residents describe any characteristic of their local public schools as "excellent."
- › Classroom safety is rated as being excellent or good by the most residents. Public school funding is described as poor by the most residents.
- › Classroom safety, education standards, classroom instruction, the equitable treatment of students, and technology and innovation are characteristics of public schools that at least half of residents overall describe as either excellent or good.
- › Fewer than half of residents describe student preparation, class size, diversity of the student body, student behavior, parental involvement, school funding, school administrators and their school board as excellent or good.

TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Teachers greatly influence the quality of education students receive in their classrooms. Allegheny County residents, for the most part, hold favorable views of public school teachers, the quality of their work and even the unions that represent them, the survey suggests.

- › Nearly 64 percent of residents overall rate the quality of instruction students receive in public schools as either excellent or good. Only 5 percent describe it as poor.
- › When school budgets must be cut, 78 percent of residents say teachers and administrators should be spared.
- › Paying teachers more is something 75 percent of residents overall favor as a way to improve public schools.
- › More than 6 in 10 residents oppose tying teachers' pay to the academic performance of their students. And 57 percent of residents believe schools benefit from having unions represent teachers in contract negotiations. Only 23 percent of residents disagree.

School administrators and school board members tend to get less favorable reviews.

- › Less than 47 percent of residents rate their school administrators as excellent or good and 15 percent feel they do a poor job.
- › Less than 39 percent of resident describe the quality of their school board as excellent or good.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Allegheny County is of one mind about early childhood education.

- › More than 85 percent of county residents overall describe early childhood education as “very important,” while less than 2 percent don’t think it is important at all.
- › And 88 percent of residents think all school districts should offer childcare and early childhood education.

About 6 percent of residents surveyed have preschool-aged children. Although the sample is small, their responses lend some insight into their thoughts and experiences related to child care.

- › More than 60 percent of families with preschool-aged children regularly use childcare.
- › Families in the City of Pittsburgh are twice as likely to regularly use childcare compared with those who live in the suburbs.
- › And the type of care most commonly used is about equally split between family members and professional caregivers.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

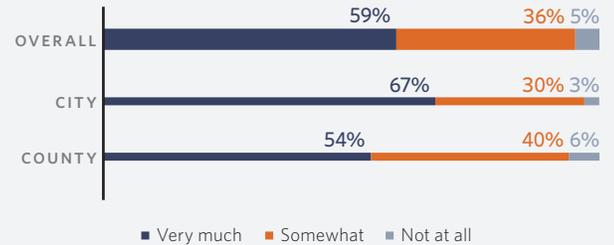
County residents are generally wary of using state-wide-standardized tests in education.

- › More than half of residents overall feel the emphasis placed on the tests is inappropriate.

They do tend to support using standardized tests in certain cases, sometimes strongly.

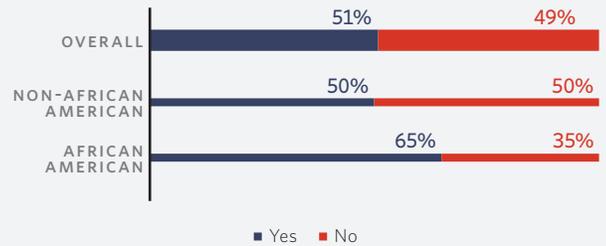
- › More than 93 percent of residents believe the tests should be used to identify areas where students need help.
- › Nearly 8 in 10 residents support using standardized tests to ensure students meet national academic standards.
- › Another 78 percent support using the tests to help identify areas where teachers can improve their skills.

How much does the amount of money spent on public schools affect the quality of a student’s education?



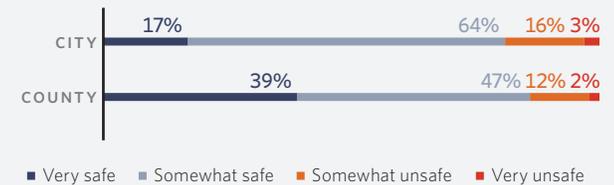
Percentage of City of Pittsburgh residents compared to percentage of Allegheny County residents outside the city. SOURCE: Pittsburgh Today Education Survey, 2019

Would you support merging your school district with a neighboring school district?



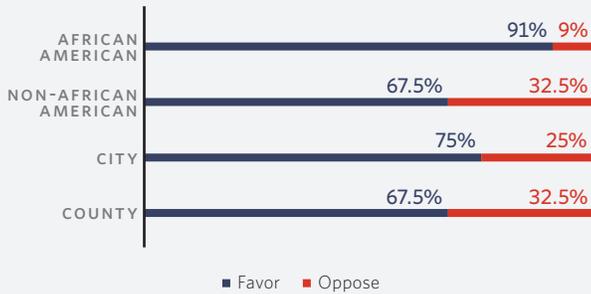
Percentage of non-African American and African American Allegheny County residents. SOURCE: Pittsburgh Today Education Survey, 2019

How would you rate the safety of the public schools in your community?



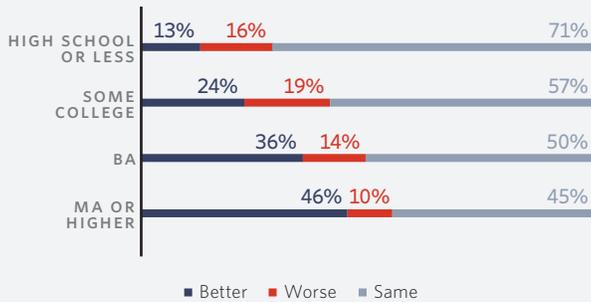
Percentage of City of Pittsburgh residents compared to percentage of Allegheny County residents outside the city. SOURCE: Pittsburgh Today Education Survey, 2019

Do you favor or oppose greater school choice as a way to improve public schools?



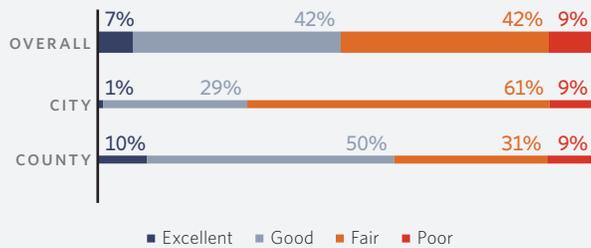
Percentage of African American and non-African American Allegheny County residents. Percentage of City of Pittsburgh residents compared to percentage of Allegheny County residents outside the city. SOURCE: Pittsburgh Today Education Survey, 2019

How does the quality of education in integrated schools compare to other schools?



Percentage of Allegheny County residents by their level of formal education. SOURCE: Pittsburgh Today Education Survey, 2019

How do you rate student preparedness in your local public schools?



Percentage of City of Pittsburgh residents compared to percentage of Allegheny County residents outside the city. SOURCE: Pittsburgh Today Education Survey, 2019

The survey also identifies several aspects of public education that residents generally feel should not be influenced by the results of statewide standardized tests.

- › Nearly 82 percent of residents believe the tests should not be used to determine the funding that public school districts receive.
- › Nearly 62 percent say statewide standardized tests shouldn't be used to rank schools.
- › More than half of residents believe the test results shouldn't determine whether students are promoted or graduate.
- › Less than 56 percent of residents believe state standardized tests are accurate measures of a student's progress and abilities.

SCHOOL MERGER

Allegheny County holds more than 40 public school districts. And the few attempts to merge one with another have been controversial. The survey suggests that residents overall are split over whether they support merging their school district with a neighboring one.

- › 51 percent of county residents overall would support a merger; 49 percent would not.
- › Support for a school merger is the strongest among African American residents, people who live in the City of Pittsburgh and residents with an annual household income of \$100,000 or greater.

SCHOOL CHOICE

County residents as a whole widely embrace school choice, the survey suggests.

- › More than 70 percent overall favor greater school choice as a way to improve public schools.

But their support isn't unconditional. They generally have a dim view of home schooling.

- › More than half of residents overall believe the quality of education for home-schooled children is worse than what they'd receive if they attended school. Only 22 percent think home schooling results in a better education.

While residents tend to support giving families greater choice in schools, they're much less inclined to provide vouchers to help families pay for the alternatives.

- › Only 45 percent of residents overall favor school vouchers.

School choice, however, is one of several issues in which views can differ significantly depending on the race of the person who is asked.

RACIAL DIFFERENCES

The survey allows for comparing the views of African American residents of Allegheny County with those of non-African American residents. In several cases, the differences are pronounced.

African American residents more widely favor school choice and giving parents vouchers to help pay for educating their children somewhere other than their local public schools.

- › Asked what changes they favor to improve their local schools, 91 percent of African American residents identify greater choice in the schools children attend as one of them, compared to 67.5 percent of residents other races.
- › Nearly 60 percent of African American residents favor providing vouchers to help pay for schools of their choice compared to 43 percent of other races.
- › African Americans tend to be much less satisfied with their public schools than residents of other races.
- › African American residents are at least three times less likely to describe the class size and the diversity of the student body in public schools as good or excellent than non-African American residents.
- › African American residents are about two times less likely than residents of other races to describe public schools as good or excellent for safety, educational standards, funding, parental involvement, student behavior, student preparedness and administration.
- › And African American residents are three times more likely to rate the educational standards and technology and innovation in their local schools as poor.

Perceptions of equity also vary widely among races.

- › More than 68 percent of African Americans residents believe the education black students receive is worse than what students of other races receive in the public schools.
- › While 60 percent of non-African American residents rate schools favorably for their equitable treatment of all students, only 25 percent of African Americans feel that way about their schools.

INCOME DIFFERENCES

The overall responses of Allegheny County residents sometimes mask pronounced differences in how people of varied income levels view certain aspects of local public education.

School safety is one example.

- › Nearly 1 in 4 residents earning less than \$25,000 a year say their schools are unsafe, making them three times more likely to have such concerns than those with incomes of \$100,000 or higher.

How residents rate other characteristics of their local public schools can also vary significantly depending on their level of income.

- › Residents with incomes under \$25,000 rate nearly all characteristics of their local schools less favorably than those who earn more, especially when compared with the highest earners. Only 27 percent of residents in the lowest income bracket describe school funding as excellent or good compared to 61 of residents in the highest income bracket.
- › At least 6 in 10 residents earning between \$25,000 and \$50,000 a year fail to give schools better-than-fair ratings for class size, student diversity, parental involvement, funding, administration and the quality of their school board.

AGE DIFFERENCES

Age often matters when it comes to residents' views of educational issues and the performance of their local public schools. In some cases, the divide is wide, particularly between 18-29-year-old residents – the youngest age group surveyed – and residents aged 65 years or older.

- › Younger residents, who are more likely to have children in school, are more likely to be skeptical about statewide standardized test and how they are used. Nearly 75 percent of residents 18-29 years old think the tests are generally inappropriate compared to 40 percent of seniors.
- › More than 71 percent of residents 65 or older believe school funding is adequate compared to 46 percent of the youngest residents.
- › Nearly 95 percent of the youngest residents support paying teachers more as a way to improve public schools, even if it results in higher taxes. Less than 66 percent of residents aged 65 years or older agree.
- › And nearly 3 in 4 residents 18-29 years old oppose extending the school day or year to improve school

performance, while more than half of seniors support the idea, even if it meant raising taxes.

The age gap is particularly apparent in issues related to race and equity.

- › Nearly 73 percent of seniors in the county believe white and nonwhite students receive the same quality of education in public schools. But nearly 73 percent of residents aged 18-29 years believe the quality of education that nonwhite students receive is worse.
- › Younger residents are more likely to see value in racially integrated classrooms. Nearly 62 percent of residents 18-29 years of age believe such classrooms result in a better education for all. Less than 21 percent of residents 65 or older feel the same way.

EDUCATION DIFFERENCES

The level of formal education a resident has attained lends to significant differences in how he or she views certain educational issues and the performance of local public schools.

The more education residents have, the less likely they are to favor greater school choice and vouchers to help pay for educating children in schools other than traditional public schools.

- › More than 78 percent of residents with a high school diploma or less favor expanding school choice as a way to improve education compared to less than 54 percent of those with a master's degree or higher.

Residents with the lowest level of education are generally less skeptical of the use of statewide standardized tests than those who've attained higher levels of education.

- › More than 58 percent of residents with the lowest level of education believe the test should be used to determine student promotion or graduation compared to less than 39 percent of residents with the highest education.
- › And 88 percent of residents with the lowest level of education favor using the tests to identify teacher deficiencies compared to 65 percent of residents with a master's degree or higher.

The higher the level of education they have, the more likely residents are to see value in educating children in integrated schools.

- › Nearly 46 percent of residents with a master's or higher degree believe students receive a better education in racially integrated schools compared to 13 percent of residents with a high school diploma or less.

Residents with the least education are the most likely to have children in public school. Nearly 89 percent of residents with school-aged children rely on public schools to educate their children compared to 68.5 percent of residents with the highest level of education.

CITY AND SUBURBS

City of Pittsburgh residents have markedly different views of certain public education issues than suburban residents of Allegheny County.

- › More than 60 percent of city residents, for example, feel the funding for the Pittsburgh Public Schools is inadequate, while only 26.5 percent of suburbanites believe their public schools are underfunded.

Where people live also tends to influence their view of the quality of education offered students of different races.

- › Some 60 percent of city residents feel African American students receive a lesser quality of education than students of other races. Outside the city, 29 percent of residents feel the same way.
- › Nearly 42 percent of city residents believe students in racially integrated schools get a better education compared to 26 percent of people in suburban school districts.

County residents who live outside of the city tend to give their local schools better grades.

- › Residents of school districts outside of the City of Pittsburgh are more likely to describe the educational standards of their public schools as excellent or good by a 69-to-37-percent margin.
- › Residents outside of the city twice as likely as city residents to give student preparedness high ratings and nearly twice as likely to describe student behavior as excellent or good.

One thing city and suburban residents have in common is a lack of engagement in the governance of their public schools.

- › Only 8 percent of city residents and 12 percent of those outside the city have, in the last two years, attended a school board meeting, where decisions that influence the quality and future of their public schools are made.

CONTRIBUTORS

PITTSBURGH TODAY

Douglas Heuck

Director

Jeffery Fraser

Senior editor

Julia Fraser

Staff writer and research specialist

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR SOCIAL AND URBAN RESEARCH

Scott Beach, PhD

Interim director/director of survey research

Rhaven Nelson

Research database programmer

Janet Schlarb

Senior project coordinator

Jeffery Fraser writer

Corin Green designer



Pittsburgh Today
3343 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
pittsburghtoday.org



University of Pittsburgh
University Center for Social and Urban Research
(UCSUR)
3343 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
ucsur.pitt.edu