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Are New Yorkers Satisfied with the Public Education in their Communities?

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Public education is viewed by many people as fundamental to a democratic, civil, and productive society. Community support, public engagement, and adequate resources are seen as essential to the success of public education (Public Education Network). New Yorkers view education as one of the top issues facing their communities (see our July *Rural New York Minute* issue, #7). But how *satisfied* are New Yorkers with public education in their communities? Does this support vary across the state?

In the 2007 Empire State Poll, 1,100 New York residents were interviewed by telephone on a number of issues and topics. Respondents were asked: "Every community has good points and bad points about living within it. Thinking about availability, cost, quality, and any other considerations important to you, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the public education in your community?" Overall, New Yorkers are relatively satisfied with public education in their communities, but this varies significantly by where people live.

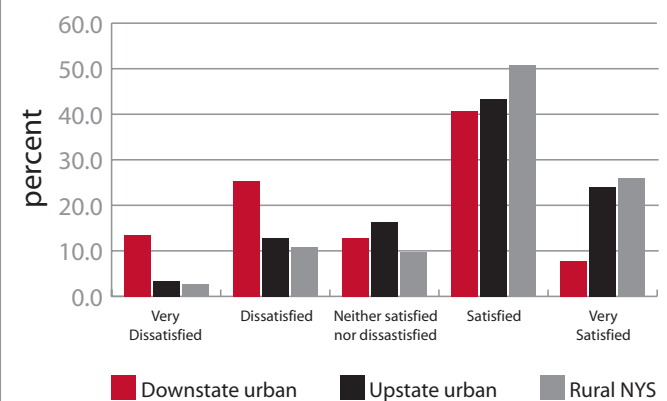
Almost half (49%) of downstate urban respondents report satisfaction (almost 8% are *very* satisfied with the public education in their communities), though almost 39% report being *dissatisfied* (with 13% being *very* dissatisfied). Rural New Yorkers, on the other hand, differ dramatically from their downstate urban counterparts. Almost 77% of rural New Yorkers interviewed report satisfaction with the public education in their communities (with one in four being *very* satisfied). Only about 12% of rural respondents reported dissatisfaction (less than 3% are *very* dissatisfied). Upstate Urban respondents fall somewhere in between downstate urbanites and rural New Yorkers. Just over 67% of upstate urban respondents report being satisfied with their communities' public education (24% are *very* satisfied), while 16% report being dissatisfied (just over 3% are *very* dissatisfied).

Why do citizens tend to report high or low levels of satisfaction? On the one hand, satisfaction with a public service may suggest a belief (based on firsthand information or simply reputation) that the school is providing a quality education program. On the other hand, reported levels of satisfaction may be more a reflection of contentment with the relative tax burden or quality of local leadership (school board and/or Superintendent), rather than a direct assessment of the quality of the educational program offered. If, for instance, current levels of taxation and investment in one's local public school are considered reasonable, then

overall satisfaction with the schools is often indicated. Conversely, in communities with relatively high school tax rates, research has documented that citizens often report higher levels of dissatisfaction. Moreover, researchers have used superintendent turnover and school budget failure as community-level indicators of satisfaction with their local school.*

Despite all the attention on measuring academic growth and success, parents often judge the quality of local schools on the availability of extracurricular activities (e.g., band, sports, arts). Given the dramatic increase in academic requirements imposed by the New York State Board of Regents and the Federal government through the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, there is evidence that school districts are responding by either increasing tax rates to continue to support a full academic and extracurricular program, or are maintaining level tax efforts and cutting into some of these optional extras. Since satisfaction with local education is a mixture of local leadership, tax burden, educational programs, and extracurricular offerings, these responses are likely to affect satisfaction levels with community public education.

Figure 1: How satisfied are you with the public education in your community?



Source: 2007 Empire State Poll, Survey Research Institute and CaRDI, Cornell University

* References available on the CaRDI website

