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New Pew Poll: Philadelphians View K-12 Education as Top Issue

Opinions mixed on value of charter schools

Overview

A new poll from The Pew Charitable Trusts finds that Philadelphians view education as the top issue facing the city, have an extremely low opinion of the performance of the public school system, and favor replacement of the School Reform Commission with an elected school board.

In addition, city residents have mixed views on the value of charter schools and their role in the future of education in Philadelphia. A majority sees charters in a positive light. But on the question of how to improve K-12 education in the city, a similar majority also backed the idea of spending more money on traditional public schools rather than creating additional charters and other new options.

Education named most important issue

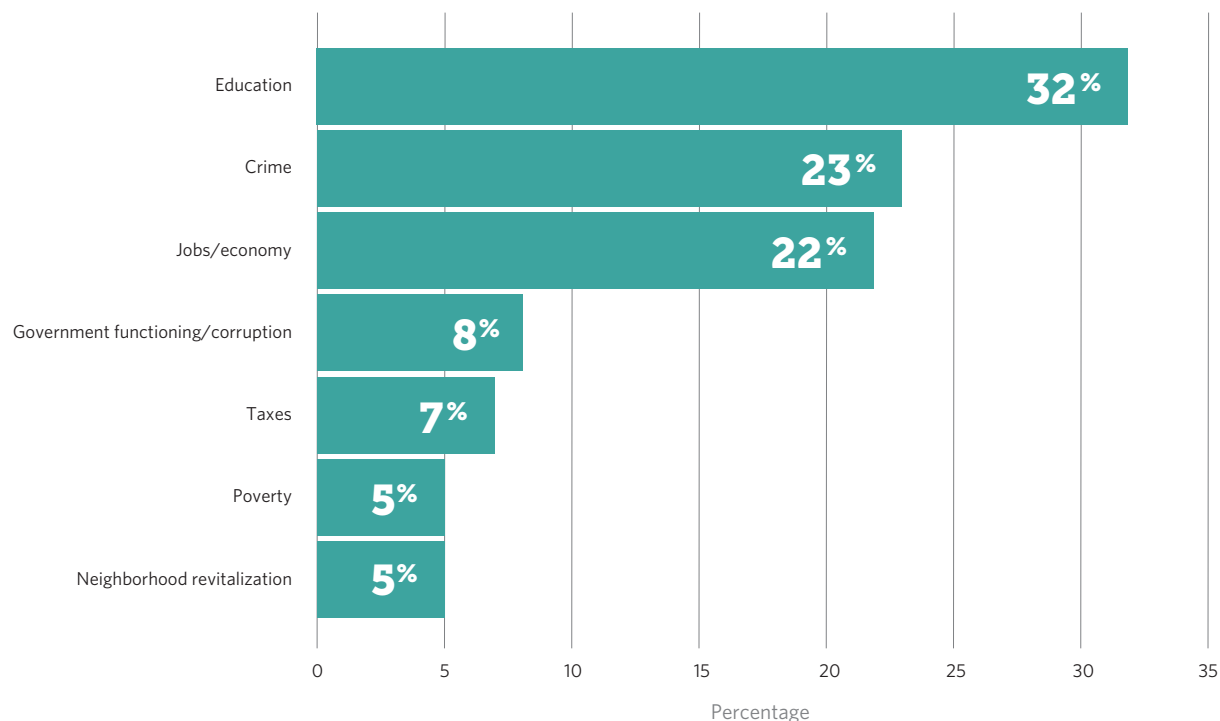
When asked to name the most important issue facing the city and the next mayor, 32 percent of respondents said education. Twenty-three percent chose public safety, and 22 percent selected jobs and the economy. The question was open-ended, meaning that those polled could give any answer they wished and were not required to choose from a list of suggested responses. Some people provided more than one answer. (See Figure 1.)

It is highly unusual for education to be considered more important than jobs and the economy, particularly in a city that has experienced high unemployment and little job growth in recent years, according to pollster Cliff Zukin of Rutgers University, who helped design the survey for Pew.

Citing education as the top issue most often were college graduates (46 percent), people with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (41 percent), and parents of public school students (41 percent). Hispanics and residents of Northeast Philadelphia said they considered public safety to be at least as important as education.

Other issues mentioned as most important included government performance, taxes, poverty, and neighborhood revitalization. Each was named by less than 10 percent of those polled.

Figure 1
Top Issues Facing Philadelphia, 2015

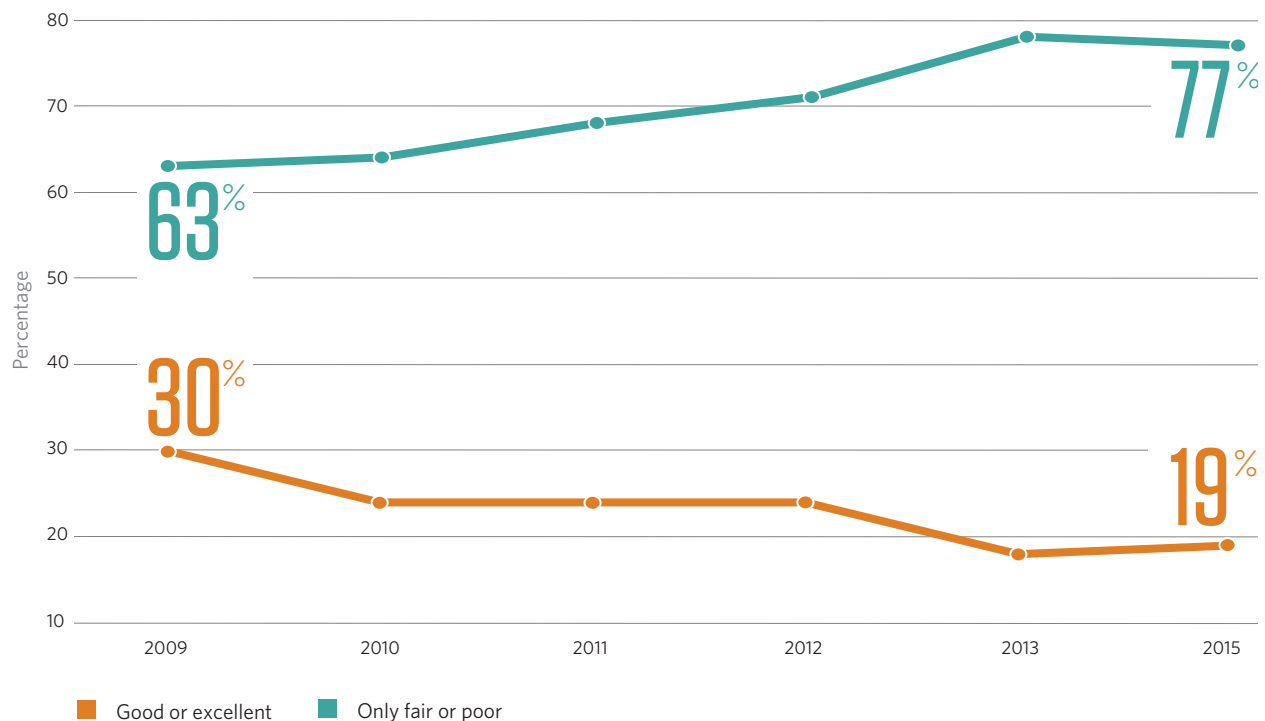


Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2015
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Rating the Philadelphia schools

The overall rating of the Philadelphia schools was statistically unchanged from the summer of 2013, when the last Pew poll was conducted. This time, 19 percent of residents rated the performance of the schools as good or excellent; the 2013 share was 18 percent. Thirty percent gave the school system high marks in 2009. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2
Rating the Public Schools in Philadelphia



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2015
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Of the 77 percent who gave the schools lower marks, most gave them the lowest grade available, “poor,” rather than “only fair.” In fact, 48 percent of the entire sample—and 47 percent of parents of public school students—consider the schools’ performance to be poor.

The School Reform Commission

On the question of who should run the schools, 48 percent said they were in favor of eliminating the current governing body, the five-member School Reform Commission, a majority of which is appointed by the governor. Only 11 percent said they favor retaining it. A large share of those questioned (41 percent) had no opinion. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3
 What to Do About the Philadelphia School Reform Commission

Response	Percentage
Continue it	11%
Replace with local school board	48%
No opinion	41%

Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2015
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If the School Reform Commission were eliminated, nearly two-thirds of Philadelphians would prefer replacing it with an elected school board rather than an appointed board, an option favored by only 11 percent. A quarter of those questioned had no opinion. (See Figure 4.) Before the commission’s creation in 2001, Philadelphia had a nine-member school board with members appointed by the mayor.

Figure 4
 What Should Follow the School Reform Commission

Response	Percentage
An elected school board	64%
An appointed school board	11%
No opinion	25%

Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2015
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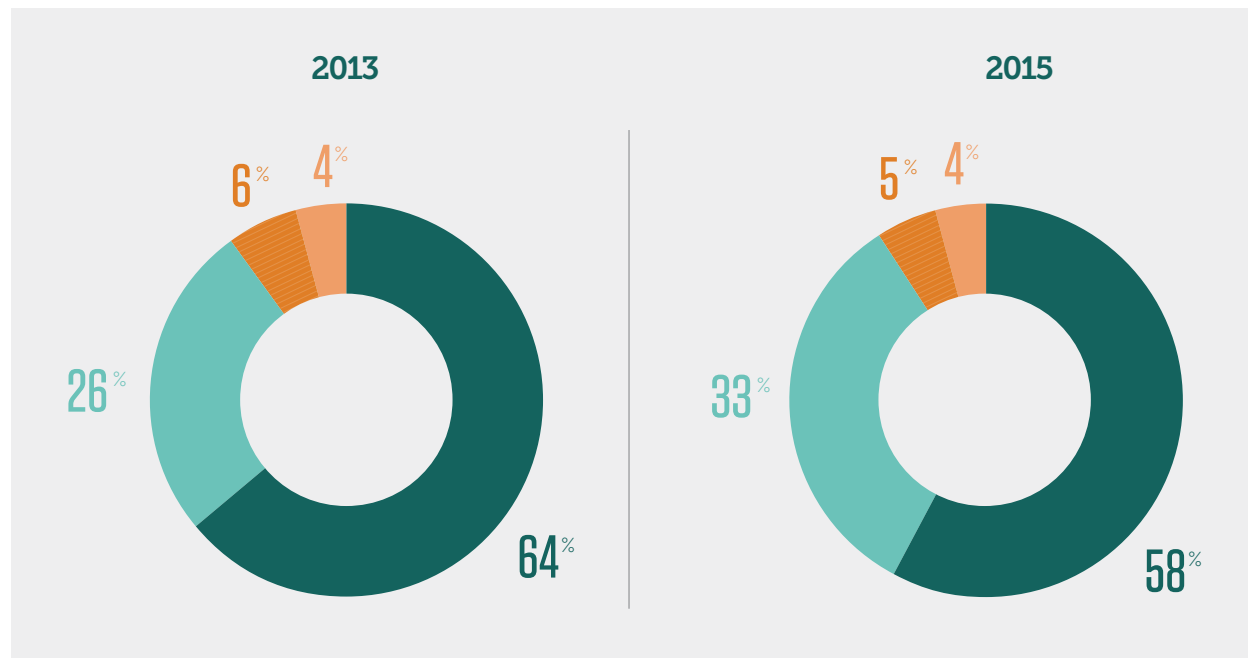
Charter schools

Sentiments were mixed on charter schools, which are publicly funded and independently run. Philadelphians indicated that they like charters but do not see them as the primary path toward creating a better K-12 educational system in the city. This conclusion is based on responses to two questions.

First, residents were asked which of two statements—one positive, one negative—more accurately represented their view of charters. Fifty-eight percent chose the positive statement, which described charters as improving education options and helping to keep middle-class families in the city. Thirty-three percent selected the negative one, which said that charters take too much money away from the public schools and lack sufficient oversight.

Although respondents supported charters by a substantial margin, they were less supportive than when the same question was asked in 2013. At that time, 64 percent selected the positive description while only 26 percent opted for the negative one. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5
 Philadelphians' Opinions of Charter Schools



■ Improve education options and help keep middle-class families in the city
■ Take too much money away from the public schools and lack sufficient oversight
■ Both/can't choose ■ Don't know/refused

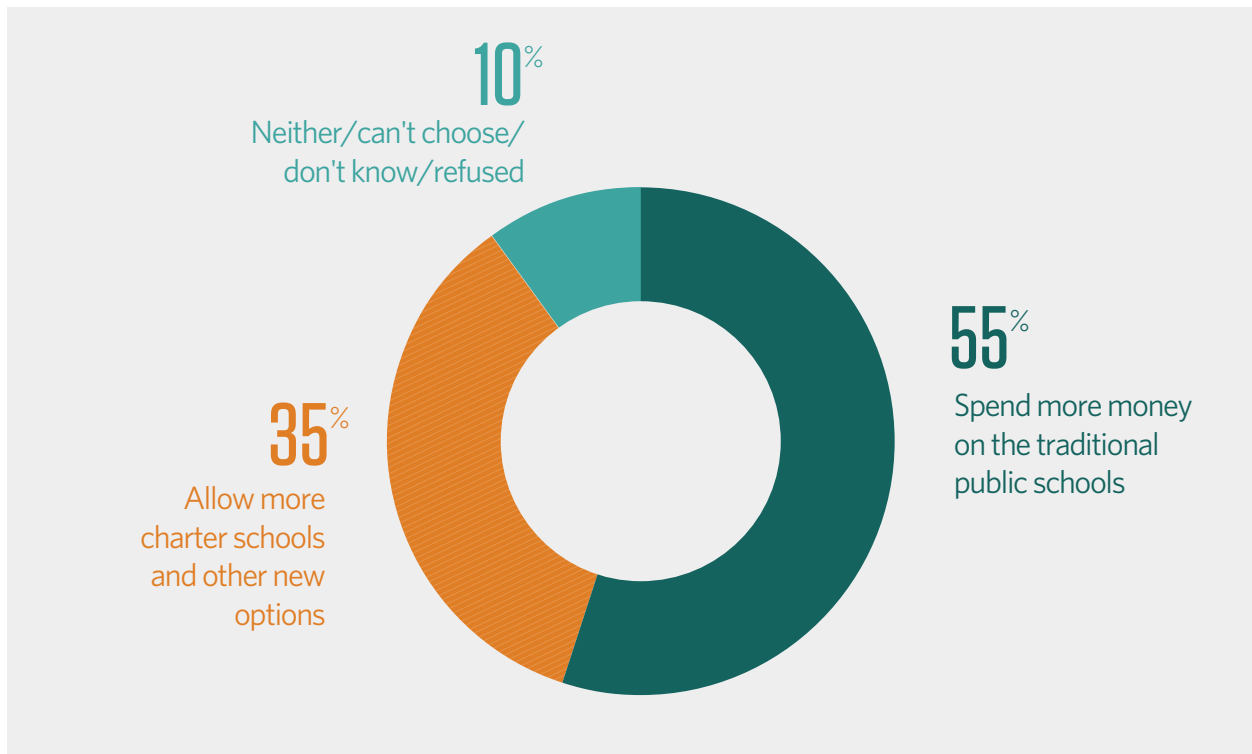
Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll
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Among the strongest supporters of charters this time were people with school-age children, those with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000, and residents of South and Northeast Philadelphia. Those least supportive were college graduates, people ages 65 and over, and residents of North Philadelphia. Overall, whites and blacks expressed little difference of opinion on charter schools.

Next, residents were asked which of two statements came closer to their views about how to improve the city's educational system. Fifty-five percent endorsed a statement calling for government to spend more on the traditional public schools, while 35 percent selected the second, which called for creation of more charter schools and other options. The rest had no opinion or said they could not choose. (See Figure 6.)

Support for spending on traditional schools was high among college graduates and residents of Northwest Philadelphia. Support was low among residents of Northeast Philadelphia and individuals with no more than a high school education.

Figure 6
How to Improve Education in Philadelphia



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2015
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About the survey

The Pew survey was conducted by telephone from Jan. 28 to Feb. 19, 2015, among a citywide random sample of 1,603 residents age 18 and older. Interviews were conducted with 640 landline users and 963 cellphone users to reach a broad representative sample of Philadelphians.

The final sample was weighted to reflect the demographic breakdown of the city. The margin of error for the entire sample is approximately plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. The margin of error is higher for subgroups. Surveys are subject to other error sources as well, including sampling coverage error, record error, and respondent error.

Abt SRBI designed the survey and conducted all interviews, working with Cliff Zukin, a veteran pollster and professor of public policy and political science at Rutgers University.

This brief was written by Larry Eichel, a director of Pew's Philadelphia program who oversees the Philadelphia research initiative.

About the Philadelphia research initiative

Pew's Philadelphia research initiative provides timely, impartial research and analysis on key issues facing Philadelphia for the benefit of the city's residents and leaders.

For further information, please visit:

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