



Philadelphians Give Lowest Rating in Five Years to City's Public Schools

Poll finds that residents expect families to seek other educational options or leave city

Overview

A new poll from The Pew Charitable Trusts finds that Philadelphians have a very low opinion of their city's financially distressed public school district and that most residents think the system's problems will drive families to seek other educational options or leave the city.

Only 18 percent of the Philadelphians surveyed said the schools are doing a good or excellent job. This is the lowest positive rating in the five years that Pew has been polling on this topic; 78 percent described the schools as "only fair" or poor, and 52 percent of all respondents opted for poor. Last year, only 35 percent gave that grade to the schools.

Residents were split on whom to blame for the funding crisis, which has resulted in reduced staffing in schools and larger class sizes. Thirty-one percent said Mayor Michael Nutter and the City Council bear the most responsibility, while the same percentage placed the blame on Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett and the state Legislature. Twenty-one percent cited the school administration and School Reform Commission. And 11 percent named the labor unions representing teachers and other school employees.

As a result of the school district's difficulties, 48 percent of Philadelphians said they expect families to seek other educational options within the city, and 23 percent expect families to start leaving. Twenty percent said the situation will make little difference on where families send their children to school.

In response to a separate question—this one posed to those individuals, roughly one-third of all respondents, who expect to move out of the city in the next five to 10 years—23 percent listed schools and child-rearing issues as a primary reason for departing. Factors cited more frequently were job and career (29 percent) and crime and safety (25 percent).

Concern about the schools also arose when Philadelphians were asked whether they would recommend the city to five different categories of friends: young adults, older adults with no children at home, and people looking to get good jobs, go to college, or raise children. Forty-eight percent of residents said they would not recommend the city as a place to raise children, while 44 percent said they would.

But charter schools, which are publicly funded and independently run, remain a popular option for families, with respondents choosing a positive description of these schools over a negative one by a ratio of more than 2-to-1.

Rating the school system

In each of the past five years, Pew has asked Philadelphians to rate the public school system. In none of those years was the rating high, but the current survey produced the lowest rating yet—and by a significant margin.

Only 18 percent of residents polled described the system as excellent or good, down from 23 percent in 2012 and 30 percent in 2009. Seventy-eight percent gave it a grade of poor or “only fair,” compared with 71 percent last year and 63 percent in 2009. (See Figure 1.) And 52 percent rated the system as poor—a dramatic change from 35 percent in 2012 and 28 percent in 2009.

Parents with children in district-run schools gave the public system slightly higher marks: Twenty-three percent of them described the schools as good or excellent. Only 10 percent of parents who have chosen to place their children in Catholic or private schools described the public schools that way.

The poll was conducted during a widely publicized school funding crisis, which initially prompted Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. to issue 3,783 layoff notices and threaten to delay the opening of schools. As it turned out, schools opened on time with diminished staffs.

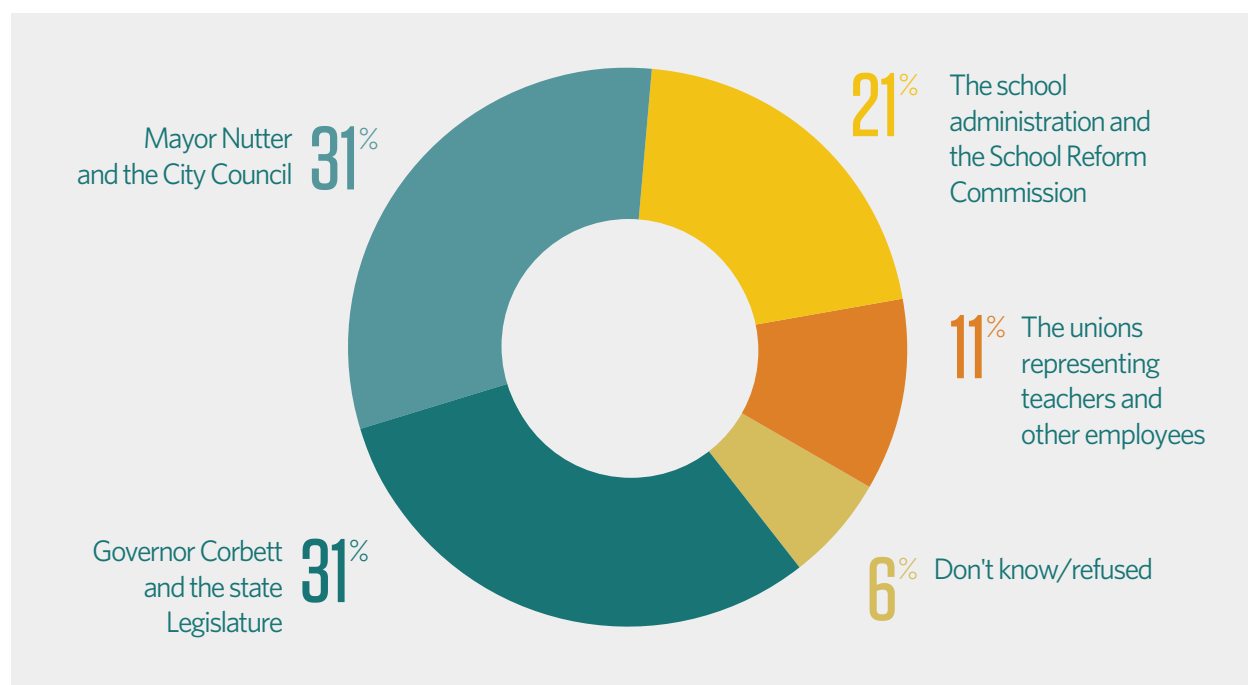
Figure 1
Rating Philadelphia’s Public Schools

	Percentage				
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Good or excellent	30	24	24	23	18
Only fair or poor	63	64	68	71	78
Don't know/refused	7	12	8	6	4

Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll
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Figure 2

Who Is Most Responsible for Philadelphia 's School Funding Crisis?



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll
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Responsibility for the funding crisis

The city and state provide funding for the school district, and the crisis has involved the state government, city government, school administration, and labor unions representing teachers and other school employees. In the survey, residents were asked which party was most responsible for the situation.

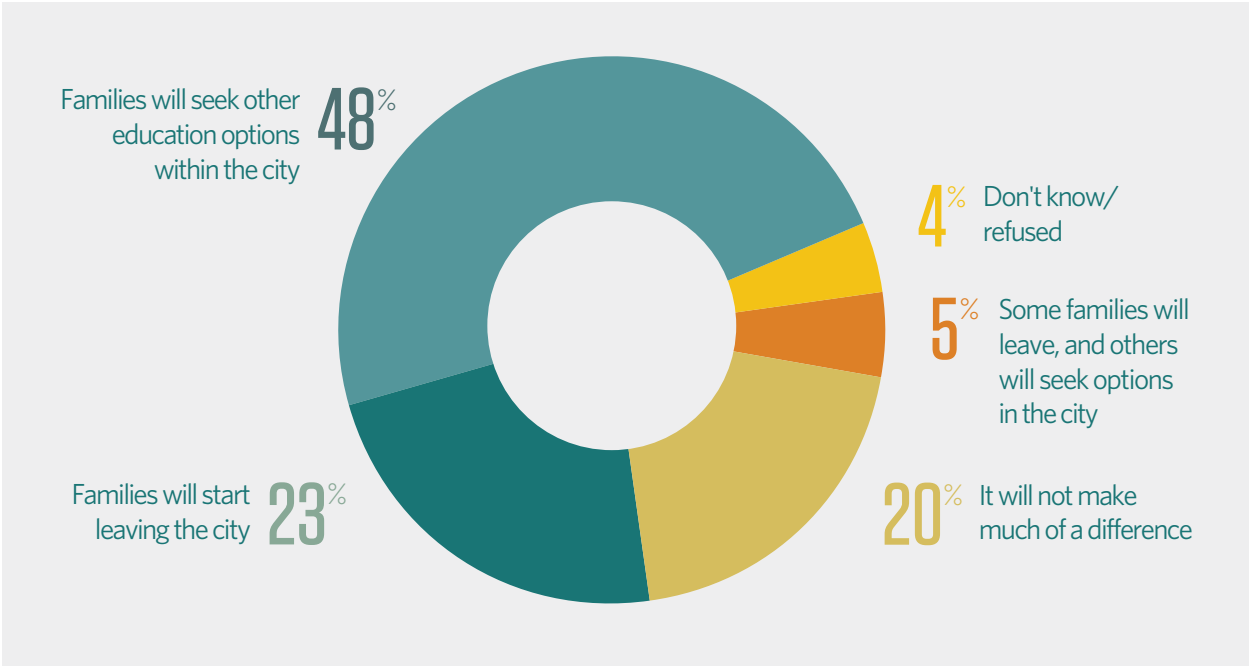
Thirty-one percent selected Mayor Nutter and the City Council as being most responsible for the crisis, and 31 percent chose Governor Corbett and the state Legislature. Twenty-one percent blamed the school administration and School Reform Commission, the appointed body that runs the schools, and 11 percent named the unions. (See Figure 2.)

Blacks were slightly more likely than whites to blame city and state officials. Whites were slightly more likely than blacks to blame the school administration and the unions.

Impact of the crisis on families

City officials and civic activists have long said that the performance and perception of the school system are key factors in whether families, particularly those with higher incomes, choose to stay in the city or to leave for the suburbs when their children reach school age. Those concerns, which have been elevated by the funding crisis, were reflected in the poll in several ways.

Figure 3
 Philadelphians' View of the Consequences of the School Funding Crisis on Families



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll
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Asked about the potential consequences of the school funding crisis, 48 percent of Philadelphians said families would seek other education options within the city, 23 percent said families would start to leave the city, and 5 percent said families would do both. Only 20 percent said the situation would not make much of a difference. (See Figure 3.) Among parents with children under 18, the answers were virtually the same.

Separately, residents were questioned about whether they expected to be living in Philadelphia five to 10 years from now. Thirty-six percent said they definitely or probably would leave, and they were asked why. This was an open-ended question (as opposed to multiple choice), and respondents were permitted to give more than one answer.

Schools and factors related to children were cited by 23 percent of this group as a reason for leaving the city. Two other sets of factors—job/career concerns (29 percent) and crime/safety issues (25 percent)—were mentioned more often. Other frequent responses included a general feeling that the city is going downhill (15 percent); personal reasons related to family and friends (12 percent); a preference for a suburban lifestyle (11 percent); and government-related factors including taxes and the quality of public services (11 percent).

Recommending the city as a place to live

To get a sense of residents' views of the city's strengths and weaknesses, including the schools, the survey asked Philadelphians whether they would recommend the city to a friend. Overall, 61 percent said they would, a level

Figure 4
 Recommending Philadelphia to a Friend

	Percentage			
	Would	Would not	Depends	Don't know/ refused
To get a college education	85	12	2	1
For young adults	65	29	5	1
For older adults with no children at home	61	33	4	2
To get a good job	48	39	7	5
To raise children	44	48	7	1

Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll
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that is down marginally from years past, when it ranged from 62 percent to 66 percent. Residents were bullish on the city as a place to get a college education (85 percent), for young adults (65 percent), and for older adults with no children at home (61 percent). Forty-eight percent would recommend it as a place to get a good job, while 39 percent would not; the local unemployment rate was above 10 percent in the first half of 2013.

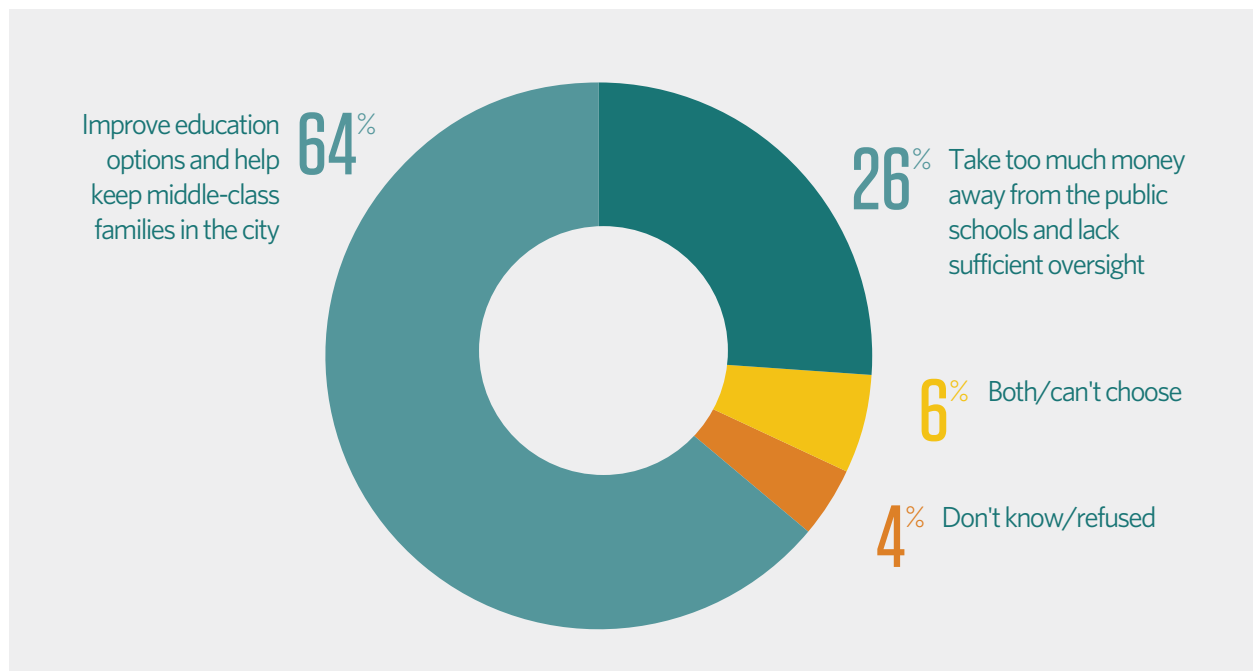
Only 44 percent said they would endorse the city as a place to raise children, while 48 percent would not, the one case in this category in which the negative responses outnumbered the positive. (See Figure 4.) Among those with the lowest opinion of Philadelphia as a place to raise children were the young adults who have helped fuel the city's recent population increase.

Only 38 percent of individuals ages 18 to 34 said they would recommend the city for the raising of children, compared with 55 percent who said they would not. Among young African American adults, there was a similar result, with 36 percent of blacks under age 40 touting the city as a good place for young families, and 57 percent voicing a negative view.

Charter schools

Charter schools, which are publicly financed and independently run, have become an increasingly significant player in K-12 education in Philadelphia, with enrollment tripling over the past 10 years. The school district's difficulties are likely to increase demand for charter seats, even though the academic performance of the schools has varied widely and several have experienced financial mismanagement.

Figure 5
Philadelphians' Opinions of Charter Schools



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll
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Residents who said they were aware of charters (78 percent) were asked to choose which of two common perceptions of the institutions best matched their views. Sixty-four percent selected the positive choice, that the schools “improve education options and help keep middle-class families in the city,” while 26 percent chose the negative perception, that charters “take too much money away from the public schools and lack sufficient oversight.” Six percent said they could not make a choice, and 4 percent refused to answer or did not know. (See Figure 5.)

About the survey

The Pew survey was conducted by telephone from July 23 to Aug. 13, 2013, among a citywide random sample of 1,605 city residents 18 and older. Interviews were conducted with 530 landline users and 1,075 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 Public Affairs 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 report 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.

Visit www.pewtrusts.org/philaresearch for more information.

Pew Philadelphia Poll/Abt SRBI

Topline Results for Selected Questions

July 23-Aug. 13, 2013

Base is 1,605 Philadelphia residents, except where noted.

All things considered, do you think you would or would not recommend Philadelphia to a friend as a place to live?

Would	61%
Would not	31%
Depends	7%
Don't know/refused	1%

And do you think you would or would not recommend Philadelphia for each of the following?

To get a good job	
Would	48%
Would not	39%
Depends	7%
Don't know/refused	5%
For older adults with no children at home	
Would	61%
Would not	33%
Depends	4%
Don't know/refused	2%

For young adults	
Would	65%
Would not	29%
Depends	5%
Don't know/refused	1%
To raise children	
Would	44%
Would not	48%
Depends	7%
Don't know/refused	1%
To get a college education	
Would	85%
Would not	12%
Depends	2%
Don't know/refused	2%

How would you rate the job public schools are doing in Philadelphia?

Excellent	4%
Good	14%
Only fair	26%
Poor	52%
Don't know/refused	4%

So you may know, the Philadelphia school district has been struggling with a major budget crisis. I'm going to read you four groups of people and ask you how much each is to blame for the problem.

The Philadelphia school administration and School Reform Commission	
A great deal	45%
Some	33%
Just a little	14%
None	2%
Don't know/refused	6%

Mayor Nutter and the City Council	
A great deal	49%
Some	31%
Just a little	14%
None	3%
Don't know/refused	4%
Governor Corbett and the state Legislature	
A great deal	44%
Some	32%
Just a little	15%
None	3%
Don't know/refused	7%
The unions representing the teachers and other school employees	
A great deal	22%
Some	36%
Just a little	28%
None	8%
Don't know/refused	5%

And which one do you think is most to blame?

Base: 1,218 people who said one or more groups were a great deal to blame

The Philadelphia school administration and School Reform Commission	21%
Mayor Nutter and the City Council	31%
Governor Corbett and the state Legislature	31%
The unions representing the teachers and other school employees	11%
Don't know/refused	6%

How much of a difference will the school crisis make: Do you think...?

Families will start leaving the city	23%
Families will seek out other education options within the city	48%
Won't make much of a difference	20%
Both leave and seek other options in city	5%
Don't know/refused	4%

Have you heard or read anything about charter schools in Philadelphia?

Yes	78%
No/don't know	22%

I'm going to read you two statements about charter schools and would like you to tell me which one you agree with more.

Base: 1,281 people who said they were aware of charter schools

Charter schools improve education options and help keep middle-class families in the city	64%
Charter schools take too much money away from the public schools and lack sufficient oversight	26%
Both/can't choose	6%
Don't know/refused	4%

Thinking about how your own life might unfold over the next five to 10 years, how likely are you to be living in Philadelphia? Do you think you...?

Definitely will	29%
Probably will	33%
Probably will not	21%
Definitely will not	15%
Don't know/refused	3%

Why do you think you will leave the city?

Base: 566 people who definitely/probably will not be living in Philadelphia

Respondents could give more than one answer

Job/career	29%
Crime/safety/drugs	25%
Schools/child rearing	23%
City going downhill/dying/decreasing quality of life	15%
Family/friends/personal	12%
Prefer suburban lifestyle/tired of living in city	11%
Politics and government/taxes/government services/corruption	11%
Other	6%
Don't know/refused	3%

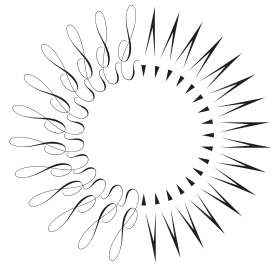
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