



2008 Joint Center National Survey of African American Families' Views on Education

The 2008 Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Education Survey is a national survey of 750 African American households, conducted between September 16 and October 6, 2008. The findings should be interpreted with a margin of error of +/- 3.6 percentage points.

David A. Bositis, Ph.D.

African Americans continue to view education as a major issue and a critical determinant of their children's economic future. They are dissatisfied with public schools in the abstract and support alternatives to standard schools, including vouchers. At the same time, they are not dissatisfied with their own children's schools, which are presumably the ones they are most familiar with. There is strong evidence they believe that quality teaching is the core issue in improving public schools. When casting their votes for most public offices, African Americans consider education as one of their top priorities.

Fewer than three in ten African Americans view their local public schools as excellent or good [see table]. In contrast, 68 percent rate them as fair or poor with one in three rating their local public schools as poor. African Americans' evaluation of their local public schools in 2008 was significantly more negative than in previous years when the Joint Center has polled on the same question; the proportion rating their local public schools as excellent or good has declined about 25 percent since 2004, while the proportion of African Americans rating their schools as poor has increased by approximately half.

African Americans rate their local charter schools more favorably than their local [non-charter] public schools, and they rate their local private schools much more favorably than their local public schools; however, about one quarter of African Americans say they do not know enough about their local charter or private schools in order to rate them. Almost equal numbers of African Americans rate their local charter schools as excellent or good (35 percent) as fair or poor (40 percent). However, those rating charter schools excellent or good outnumber those rating them poor (15 percent) by more than two to one; thus, ratings of charter schools contrast favorably with those for public schools, where poor ratings outnumbered excellent or good ratings.

African Americans rate their local private schools much more favorably than either public or charter schools. A majority (52 percent) rate their local private schools as excellent or good—more than twice the proportion of those who rate them as fair or poor (24 percent). Seven times as many African Americans rated their local private schools as excellent or good as rated them poor (seven percent).

A majority of the children of the African Americans interviewed in the survey attend public schools; 68 percent attend regular public schools and 14 percent attend public charter schools. Less than one in five of the respondents interviewed have children in nonpublic schools with roughly equal numbers in private schools (10 percent) and parochial schools (eight percent).

When the respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their own children's schools, the responses were much different than for those regarding schools in general. A large majority of African American parents were satisfied with their children's schools, with 38 percent saying they were very satisfied and 42 percent saying they were somewhat satisfied. Only five percent said they were not satisfied with their children's school with an additional 15 percent saying they were not too satisfied.

The apparent inconsistency of African American parents giving largely failing grades to public schools in the abstract but passing grades to the schools their children attend mirrors the way African Americans view race relations. In Joint Center surveys over the past 25 years, large majorities of African Americans have expressed the belief that race relations in the United States are generally fair or poor. In contrast, similarly large majorities have stated that race relations in their own communities are excellent or good. The pattern seems to be a higher level of negative judgments when asked about abstractions (local schools or race relations in the U.S.) than when asked about experience-based specifics (your child's school or race relations in your community).

There is a hierarchy of attributes that black families are looking for in the schools their children attend. The paramount characteristic they seek is safety (90 percent), followed by academic excellence (84 percent) and school environments that instill discipline in their students.

The idea that hard work can compensate for a poor education is largely passé among African American families, as almost all of the survey respondents (94 percent) said that a quality education is very important in determining their children's future economic

prospects. Perhaps for this reason, there is almost universal agreement among African Americans that the government is spending too little on education (85 percent); only 10 percent think current spending is sufficient.

Among African American families, support for school vouchers in the Joint Center's 2008 survey is at its highest level ever recorded, and opposition at its lowest level (see table). Close to two-thirds (63 percent) of African Americans supported school vouchers in the survey, and only 29 percent expressed opposition. What was new about the findings in this survey from previous Joint Center surveys on education was support for school vouchers from older [than 50 years] African Americans. In past surveys, as in this survey, there is a generation gap, with younger African Americans being more receptive to school vouchers than older African Americans; in 2008, African Americans younger than 50 years were 11 percentage points more likely to support vouchers than those over 50 years. While older African Americans are less attracted to vouchers than younger African Americans, for the first time a majority of older African Americans support vouchers, and this is what accounts for the record support for vouchers in 2008.

In comparing the results of this survey to earlier Joint Center surveys on education,

there is a definite relationship between evaluations of local public schools and support for vouchers. When African Americans' evaluations of their local public schools are improving, there tends to be a corresponding decline in support for school vouchers, and when their evaluations are trending in a negative direction, support for vouchers increases. Since 2004, black opinions of their local public schools have been in decline and, since then, support for school vouchers has spiked.

The respondents were asked how important education is in determining their vote for federal, state and local offices. Substantial majorities of the African Americans interviewed said education is an important factor in their vote for every office, ranging from President of the United States to seats on the local school board. The variation across offices was not great: 87 percent said education was very important to their votes for school boards followed by governor (82 percent), President of the United States (79 percent), state legislator (75 percent), U.S. Senator (74 percent) and U.S. Representative (73 percent) and mayor (71 percent). 🗳️

David A. Bositis, Ph.D. is a senior research associate at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

	Rating Local Public Schools		
	Excellent/Good %	Fair %	Poor %
1996	41	37	17
1997	34	38	23
1998	46	30	17
1999	40	35	23
2000	30	34	33
2002	35	37	25
2004	40	32	21
2008	28	36	33

	Support for Vouchers		
	Yes %	No %	(N)
1996	48	44	750
1997	57	38	850
1998	48	40	850
1999	60	33	850
2000	57	37	850
2002	57	43	850
2004	48	47	850
2008	63	29	750