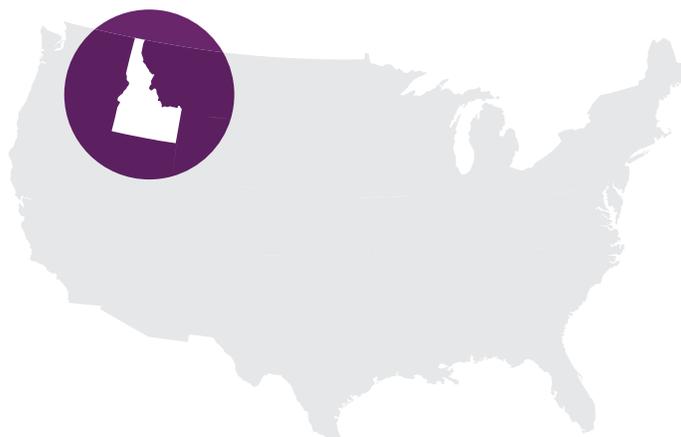


2017

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PERSPECTIVE

# Idahoans Want More **QUALITY** and **EQUITY**

A Statewide Survey Reveals Opinions of  
Idahoans About Their Public Education System



**Idahoans Want More QUALITY and EQUITY:  
A Statewide Survey Reveals Opinions of  
Idahoans About Their Public Education System**

April 2017

The nonpartisan public opinion research firm the Farkas Duffett  
Research Group conducted the research for this study.  
([www.thefdrgroup.com](http://www.thefdrgroup.com))

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# Introduction

**The People's Perspective** is a statewide survey tracking opinions of Idahoans about their public education system, and was conducted for Idaho Education News.

This year's survey is a continuation of the landmark 2016 survey, People's Review of Education in Idaho, with some notable differences. The People's Perspective includes a new series of questions probing school inequity. Questions probe how Idahoans feel about inequity in schools, what measures they support to amend it, and their perceptions of the uses of data in evaluating schools and teachers.

Experts from the Farkas Duffett Research Group, a New York-based, non-partisan opinion research company, conducted the survey again this year.

The pollsters were surprised to find substantial shifts in some key attitudinal areas when compared to the 2016 survey. For example, Idahoans' definition of the critical elements of a good education has broadened dramatically. From basic science to advanced science, from U.S. history to literature, music, and the arts, more citizens want Idaho schools to teach a lot more. And though they are still critical, more Idahoans have positive impressions of their public schools in this year's study.

The findings in the The People's Perspective are based on 1,004 interviews conducted by telephone with a randomly selected representative sample of Idaho adults 18 years old and older in autumn 2016. The survey was preceded by two focus groups of Idahoans in Boise and Pocatello. The survey was paid for by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation.

**Jennifer Swindell, editor**  
**Idaho Education News**



The mission of Idaho Education News is to produce comprehensive, thoughtful and accurate stories about public education policy and practice in Idaho.

We're journalists with a goal to tell those stories through the lens of those who are affected by the news. People care about people, not concepts.

# Highlights of 6 Key Findings

## Education is Idaho's top priority

- 55% say public education is the most important issue facing Idaho today (compared with the economy and the environment).
- 7 in 10 say Idaho's education is OK, but could be a lot better with changes.
- 62% of parents would opt for private or charter schools if they could choose from all options.

**A**

9%

**B**

35%

**C**

36%

Grade their local schools a **C**.**D**

13%

**F**

4%

## A good Idaho education = academics + grit

- 97% believe basic reading, writing, and math are absolutely essential to teach.



75% believe hard work, persistence, and responsibility should also be taught in schools.

## Idahoans want equity in schools

- 75% of Idahoans say it is Idaho's responsibility to make up the difference between poorer and wealthier districts.



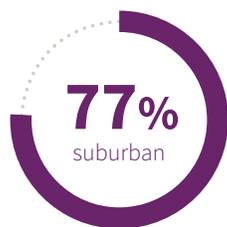
**3 in 4** strongly approve of creating after-school programs to help struggling students.

## Rural residents are tougher critics

- Looking for a top-notch district?
  - 48% of rural residents would recommend their school district.
  - 60% of urban residents would recommend their school district.
- Post-high school education for their children?
  - 24% rural parents say trade school.
  - 8% suburban say trade school.



52% rural say 4-year college for their children

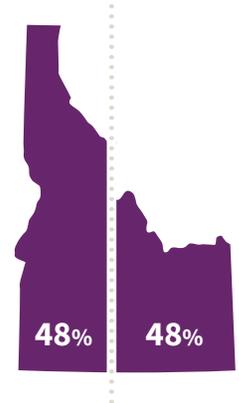


77% suburban say 4-year college for their children

## Good teachers and schools matter

- 83% believe it is generally a good idea to measure teacher effectiveness by measuring student growth.

Use students' standardized test scores to evaluate school performance? 48% good idea vs. 48% bad idea.



## Idahoans support charter schools

- 54% of rural residents say there's a charter school in their area compared with 86% of suburban residents.

54% of Idahoans who report a charter school in their area think they outperform the regular public schools.





# 6 Key Findings Explained

**The People's Perspective reveals the voice of the average Idahoan.** It's a voice that's often missing from conversations about Idaho's public education system.

Idahoans have said, in this survey and others, that education is their No. 1 priority, out-ranking the economy and the environment.

This survey also reveals what Idahoans value in teaching and learning and what solutions they support. In short, Idahoans want the state to provide more quality and more equity in schools.

The following pages detail The People's Perspective. Idaho Education News believes these insights are crucial to the continuing conversations about Idaho's education system.

“Education is the key not only for economic prosperity but also for critical thinking skills, diversity, understanding who your neighbors are, and contributing to society.”

- **Boise** focus group participant



# Education is Idaho's top priority

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Idahoans say their public schools have made a little progress but are still falling short.

“My feeling as an education consumer and as a citizen of my community is that public education is a crapshoot.

It depends on what teacher your children get, what school district they land in and what the leadership is in that district.” - *Pocatello focus group participant*



The public's disappointment with Idaho's public school system has slightly moderated over the year but it is still substantial.

- A scant 7% believe “the state’s public school system is in very good shape and needs little change,” unchanged from the previous study. The percentage saying “there’s so much wrong with it that a complete overhaul is necessary” has dropped to 20% from 26%; the percentage saying “it’s OK but could be a lot better with some changes” has gone up to 69% from 65%.
- Most Idahoans still give unsatisfactory grades to the public schools in their communities: 44% grade their local schools A or B, while 53% grade them a C or lower. In the previous study, those numbers were essentially the same (42% and 53%, respectively).
- Most Idahoans who know there’s a charter school in their area say those charters offer a better education than the regular public schools – a 54% to 26% margin. In previous study, it was a 58% to 23% margin.
- The reputational indicator of Idaho’s public schools has also notched a small gain. Today, more than half (53%) would encourage a family looking for top-notch public schools to move to their school district, up from 48% in the last study. Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) would suggest they look elsewhere.

Idaho’s parents do not stand out as particularly strong advocates of the regular public schools, but their perceptions are improving slightly.

- If money were not an issue, most parents would opt for alternatives to regular public schools for their children: 20% would pick private non-religious, 23% private religious schools, and 20% charter schools. Still, the percentage that would choose regular public schools for their kids has gone up to 35% from 26%.

A good education  
= academics + grit

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There has been a dramatic broadening in how Idahoans define a good education.

“The most important thing a school can do is not teach numbers and facts but develop a child’s mind where they can think for themselves.

Being an independent individual as opposed to a group follower.”

- **Boise** focus group participant

In just over one year, Idaho citizens have dramatically expanded their expectations of what it means to get a good education and what they want their local public schools to teach.

Since last year's study, large shifts in the percentages saying it is "absolutely essential" for the public schools in their communities to teach students have occurred:

- Basic science, to 76% from 60%
- U.S. history and civics, to 71% from 56%
- Advanced science and math like physics and calculus, to 55% from 42%
- Literature, music, and art, to 54% from 41%

Other subject areas remain stable, for example computers and technology (79% now, 77% in the first study); basic reading, writing, and math (97% now, 94%).

- Idahoans' definition of a good public school education is not limited to academic subjects: 75% believe it's "just as important for them to teach the value of such things as hard work, persistence, and responsibility." Only 22% believe their schools should "mostly focus on academic subjects" (although this number represents a growth from 16% in the 2016 study).
- 3 in 4 Idahoans (76%) believe it is absolutely essential for the schools in their community to teach "critical thinking" (no change from 75% last year).



# Idahoans want equity in schools

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The state is responsible to make up the difference.

“I believe education is the key component to securing democracy and an educated electorate is essential to having people that can make good decisions for the course of their government and society.

Equal and broad access to education is a very high American value. It is probably one of the most important things that a society can offer an individual.” - *Boise focus group participant*

Idahoans are committed to the societal value of providing a free, high-quality education to all children. Where inequalities exist they want Idaho to do something about it, supporting specific policy measures to amend spending across districts.

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- The overwhelming majority (92%) of Idahoans think it's "our fundamental responsibility as a society to provide free, high-quality education to all children regardless of their families' background or economic status."
- Told that "school districts in wealthier communities can generally offer better academic programs and higher teacher salaries than districts in poorer communities," a broad majority (75%) say "it is Idaho's responsibility to make up the difference so that poorer districts can compete with wealthier ones." Only 20% take the position that "inequalities in school funding are an unavoidable part of life."

Idahoans rally strongly to measures that would help at-risk children and address inequalities across districts. All six proposals gain approval, though some are received with much greater enthusiasm:

- Fully 74% strongly approve "creating after-school programs to help struggling students catch up academically;" another 21% somewhat approve.
- 60% strongly approve "creating pre-school programs for at-risk children so that they enter school ready to learn;" another 28% somewhat approve. [note: 51% think Idaho should expand its pre-Kindergarten education]
- Pooling resources: 53% strongly approve a proposal to "encourage small districts to pool their resources and share costs so they can improve" their programs; another 38% somewhat approve.

- Nearly half (49%) strongly approve a measure to "offer financial incentives to encourage top-notch teachers to teach in schools that serve at-risk students;" another 37% somewhat approve.
- 40% strongly approve a measure that would "encourage successful charter schools to replicate in communities whose public schools are failing;" another 33% somewhat approve.
- 28% strongly approve a measure that would "create tax-funded vouchers that special-needs and low-income families can use to pay for private schools, religious schools, or learning programs;" another 30% somewhat approve.

The assumption that a community's wealth and income affects the quality of its public schools is buttressed by the research. This year's survey asked a new question: "If you had to generalize about the economic well-being of the families in your area, would you say the families TEND TO BE mostly affluent, mostly middle class, or mostly poor?" 22% of Idahoans say they live in areas where families are mostly poor.

- Those who live in areas whose families are mostly poor are likely to be unhappy with their public schools. For example, 55% of those living in mostly poor areas would advise a family seeking top-notch schools to look elsewhere, compared to 34% of other Idahoans. When there's a charter school nearby, respondents from lower income communities are more likely to feel it outperforms the regular public school – a 65% to 52% margin. Interestingly, Idahoans from lower income communities are less likely to report that there's a charter school in their area (58% to 71%).



# Rural residents are tougher critics

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Rural Idahoans are more likely to want to overhaul the public school system.

“My daughter graduated with a class of 27 kids, so the options they have are very limited. In that area you also have two school districts and there’s been multiple efforts to try to consolidate the school districts.

In these smaller rural areas a lot of times they want to try to preserve their identities. And they are very reluctant to try to combine their funds, that is usually the biggest motivator.

[In one district] the building itself should be condemned. But then you’ll talk to people and they won’t consider consolidation.”

- **Pocatello** focus group participant

- 29% of rural residents say there is so much wrong with Idaho’s public school system that a complete overhaul is necessary, compared with 16% of both urban and suburban residents.
- Rural residents (48%) are less likely than suburban ones (60%) to recommend their school district to families looking for top-notch schools.
- 53% of rural residents say that if Idaho spent more on its public schools the money would get lost along the way, compared with 42% of urban residents.

(70%) say critical thinking is absolutely essential to teach, fewer than suburban residents (84%); and rural parents are more interested in expanding online learning (52% to 41%).

Rural Idahoans are less educated, poorer, and have fewer charter schools in their area than their suburban counterparts.

- Rural respondents (34%) are more likely than suburban (12%) or urban (16%) respondents to say that the families in their area tend to be mostly



Not surprisingly, rural residents’ agenda for their public schools differs from suburban ones in some respects.

- Rural parents (52%) are far less likely than suburban parents (77%) to prefer a 4-year college for their children; they are more likely than suburban parents (24% to 8%) to prefer trade school for their kids. They are also more likely to believe that it is absolutely essential for schools to teach farming and agriculture – 44% to 23%. The vast majority
- Only 54% of rural Idahoans say there’s a charter school in their area compared with 86% of suburban residents. But rural residents (58%) are more likely than suburbanites (47%) to say the charter schools are better than the regular public schools.

# Good teachers and schools matter

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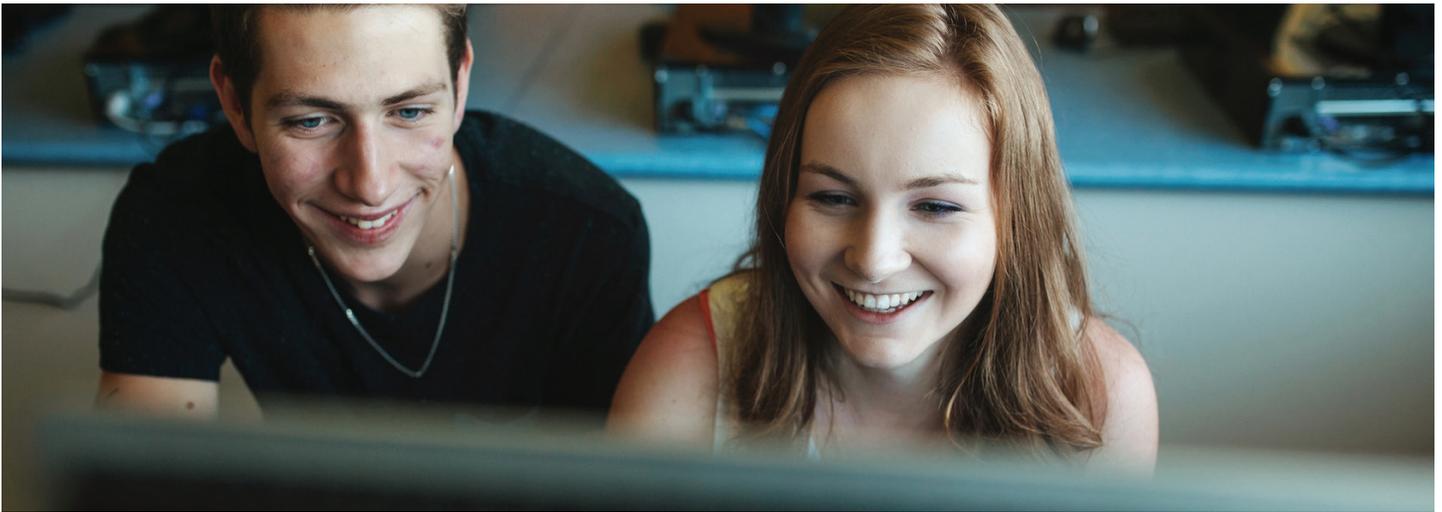
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Measure Idaho teachers by student growth on standardized tests.

“What about measuring, instead of just flat test scores, how about just student growth?

They do all these tests, instead of going ‘are all of your students at this level?’ how about from the beginning of the year until the end of the year your students grew 15% as far as their scores or something like that.

I feel you have to have an objective measure...if there was one, it should be on growth, not scores.” - **Boise** focus group participant



How should teachers and students be measured accurately and fairly? Educators and policymakers have been struggling over the issue for some time. The Idaho public has its own take.

Broad support for academic standards and for the I-SAT has mostly held:

- 70% support the I-SAT, consistent with the 67% who supported the test in the 2016 study.
- 2 in 3 Idahoans (66%) think the state's public schools should teach to the same academic standards as the rest of the country; only 31% think the schools should teach to the state's own standards. But note an 8 percentage-point difference from the 2016 study (74% and 23%, respectively).

Idahoans believe that good schools and good teachers matter but resist the simple use of standardized test results to measure their quality. The dramatic exception: they strongly support assessments that measure growth and the value-added impact of teachers.

- By an 82% to 14% margin, Idahoans believe that good teachers and good schools make a big difference when it comes to student achievement – mostly rejecting the view that virtually all is determined by student effort and what happens at home.
- Evaluating the performance of Idaho's public schools: the public splits 48% to 48% on whether using students' standardized test scores as one factor is generally a good or bad idea.
- Evaluating the performance of teachers: by 58% to 38% margin Idahoans are more likely to think it's generally a bad idea to use standardized test scores as a factor.
- Value-added assessments seem to be the sweet spot in terms of public support: by an overwhelming 83% to 15% margin, Idahoans believe that it is generally a good idea to measure teacher effectiveness by assessing students' skills and knowledge when they first come to a teacher and to measure them again when students leave to see what progress was made.



# Idahoans support charter schools

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They can specialize to specific interests and talents.

“I felt that the charter school opportunity gave my children a lot – there’s a lot more flexibility in the classroom, they can try new initiatives, try new things on the turn of a dime instead of going through a lot of bureaucracy and red tape and I just felt that the teachers were all collaborating.” - **Pocatello** focus group participant

Most Idahoans support charter schools when they are described in concept; most Idahoans who know there's one in their area believe it to be better than the regular public school. Still, support has slipped a bit since last year's study.

- There has been virtually no improvement in Idahoans' knowledge about charter schools – 34% now say they know a great deal or quite a bit about charter schools, compared with 36% in the 2016 study. Still, most Idahoans (68%) know enough to report that there is a charter school in their area (virtually the same as 67% in the previous study).
- Most Idahoans who report there's a charter school in their area think they outperform the regular public schools – a 2-1 margin (54% to 26%). This is slightly lower from last year's study (58% to 23% margin.)

- More than 7 in 10 (73%) say they favor charter schools when they are described as “public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are free from many existing regulations.” This is a decline from 80% in the previous study.
- Given three ways in which charter schools differ from regular public schools, Idahoans are most enthusiastic to hear that charters “can specialize in teaching students who have specific interests and talents” (61%). The managerial autonomy charters enjoy garners far less interest with budget at 17% and staff at 17%.





# Methodology

- The findings in **The People's Perspective** are based on 1,004 interviews conducted by landline/cell phone with a randomly selected representative sample of Idaho adults 18 years old and older in autumn 2016.
- The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points; the margin of error is larger for sub-groups.
- Questions were randomized and answer categories rotated in an effort to minimize non-sampling sources of error (order bias).
- The questionnaire was designed by the FDR Group, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by the FDR Group.
- The telephone interviews and data collection were provided by Wiese Research Associates located in Omaha, Nebraska.
- Prior to the survey, two focus groups with Idahoans from the greater Boise area and Pocatello were conducted to gauge understanding of the issues.
- The focus group participants were recruited to represent the socioeconomic demographics of the respective communities, and they included both men and women, mothers and fathers, people of different races/ethnicities, older and younger, college educated and not.

## For More Information

To view the complete list of survey questions and full methodology behind the reported survey, go to [idahoednews.org/peoples-perspective](http://idahoednews.org/peoples-perspective).

