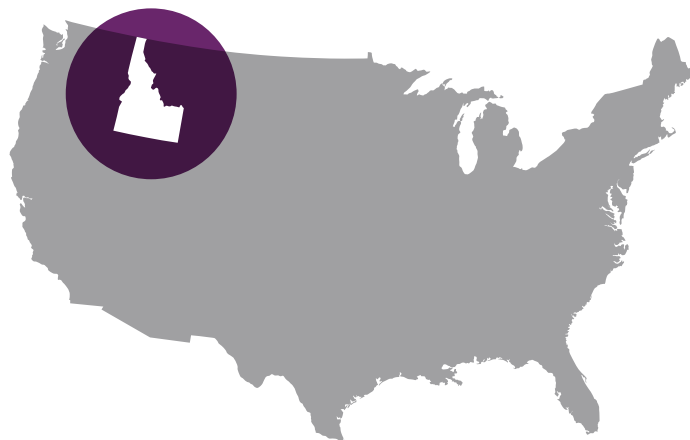


2019

the PEOPLE'S
PERSPECTIVE

Idahoans Continue to Want **QUALITY** and **ACCOUNTABILITY**

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



**Idahoans Continue to Want QUALITY and ACCOUNTABILITY
A Statewide Survey Reveals Opinions of Idahoans About
Their Public Education System**

January 2019

The nonpartisan public opinion research firm the Farkas Duffett
Research Group conducted the research for this study.
(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.



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 these stories through the lens of those who are affected by the news. People care about people, not concepts.

This analysis is the third in a series of surveys conducted to document Idahoans' attitudes about public education.

This year's survey is a continuation of the 2017 People's Perspective and the 2016 survey the People's Review of Education in Idaho. Most of the questions in the three surveys are similar, but there are some differences. This year's survey includes a new series of questions probing accountability as it relates to testing, results and growth.

Experts from the Farkas Duffett Research Group, a New York-based, nonpartisan opinion research company, conducted this survey and the two previous surveys.

The findings in the 2019 People's Perspective are based on 1,000 interviews conducted by telephone with a randomly selected representative sample of Idaho adults at least 18 years old in fall of 2018. The surveys were paid for by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation.

The results found the people's focus on education has only grown over the years, and there is an uptick in the public perception that schools have worsened. Parents, the adults who are closest to the school systems, are dissatisfied. They say schools must change their ways to improve.

The results also found Idahoans believe in setting standards and evaluating outcomes.

Many Idahoans are unaware that school budgets and teacher salaries have gone up in recent years. And they would question the rationale for greater spending if it did not lead to improvements in student performance.

Finally, Idahoans say they overwhelmingly support charter schools and think charter schools outperform traditional public schools.

— Jennifer Swindell, CEO and Managing Editor
of Idaho Education News



Highlights of Six Key Findings

Key Finding 1

Education is Idaho's top priority

- 60 percent say public education is the most important issue facing Idaho today, compared to the economy (31 percent) or the environment (8 percent).

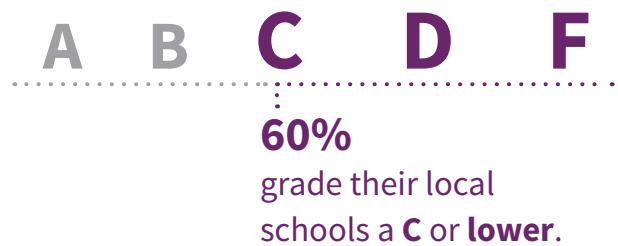
The focus on education has
only grown over the years.



Key Finding 2

Idahoans think public schools could be better

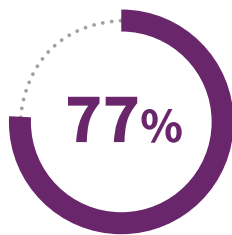
- 7 in 10 say schools could be a lot better with some changes.
- Idahoans give their own community's public schools relatively low grades:



Key Finding 3

Idahoans want standards and accountability for educators

- 72 percent think it's a good idea to rate and publicize all of Idaho's public schools based on scores and growth.
- 65 percent think it's a good idea to require Idaho students to pass a standardized test before getting a high school diploma.



think it's a good idea to measure teacher effectiveness by assessing students' skills, knowledge and progress.

Key Finding 4

Improvements are key to public school spending

- 85 percent would look for other strategies if several years of increases in teacher salaries and school budgets did not lead to improvements in student achievement.

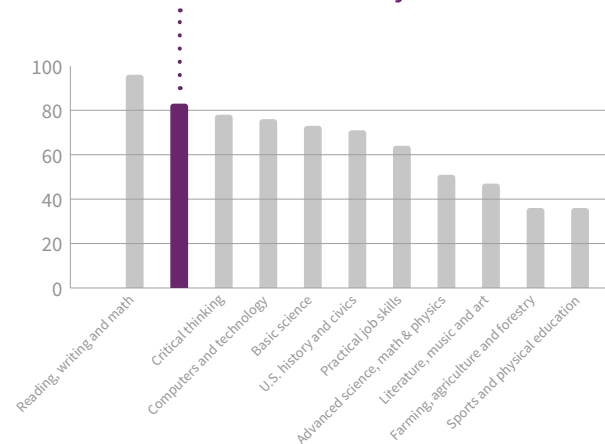


3 in 4 believe it is the state's responsibility to make up the difference in funding inequalities between wealthy and poor districts.

Key Finding 5

Hard work and grit are important lessons

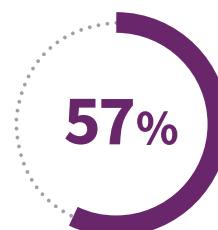
83% say it's just as important to teach the value of hard work, persistence and responsibility as it is to teach academic subjects.



Key Finding 6

Idahoans are increasingly comfortable with charter schools

- 3 out of 4 Idahoans favor charter schools described as “public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff and curriculum, and are free from many existing regulations.”
- A majority (56 percent) think it's a good idea to make it easier to pay for charter school buildings through state funding possibilities.



of Idahoans with a charter school in their area believe it offers better education than the traditional public school.



Six 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 improving Idaho's education system.



1.

Education is Idaho's top priority

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Public education is a more important issue to Idahoans than the economy.

“Regardless of your home situation, the education system still can elevate you to a whole new place and set you up in life.”

— Fruitland focus group participant

Given a choice among three pressing issues, 60 percent say public education is the most important issue facing Idaho, compared with 31 percent who say it is the economy and just 8 percent who point to the environment.

People's focus on public education has grown in recent years by 10 percentage points: 50 percent said it was the most important issue in 2016, rising to 55 percent in 2017 and now reaching 60 percent.

“I think education is at the root of all issues.”

— Boise focus group participant





2. Idahoans think public schools could be better

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According to a majority of Idaho adults — and a majority of Idaho's parents — the public schools in the state are falling short. Given a choice, most parents would choose a private or charter school over their own community's traditional public school.

Almost 68 percent say, "Idaho's public school system is OK, but could be a lot better with some changes." Another 23 percent go so far as to say, "there's so much wrong with it that a complete overhaul is necessary." Only 7 percent believe "it's in very good shape and needs little change."

Idahoans give their own community's public schools relatively low grades: 60 percent give them a C, D or F; only 37 percent give them an A or B. What is more, these grades have worsened since 2017, when 53 percent gave their public schools unsatisfactory grades, and 44 percent gave them an A or B.

"I don't think they challenge the kids enough here."

— Idaho Falls focus group participant

“They’re not teaching them to think. I think they’re teaching them how to read and write and arithmetic, but I think it’s pretty basic.”

— *Fruitland focus group participant*

Parents in Idaho — who are arguably more knowledgeable about the public schools and more invested in their success — also give the schools lackluster marks. More than 6 in 10 say the public schools in their own community only deserve C, D or F grades.

Disaffection is strong enough among parents that a similarly large majority of parents (64 percent) would spurn the regular public schools and send their children to charter schools or private schools if money were not an issue.

“I was so glad to be moving to Boise because they were supposed to have better schools than Seattle, but it is just such a mixed bag. It is not great. It is not good. It just feels dated and antiquated.”

— *Boise focus group participant*

“I really think it has a lot to do with your teachers and your administrators. There are some who are fabulous, and there are some who just don’t care.”

— *Idaho Falls focus group participant*

Given their dissatisfaction, it makes sense that Idahoans are open to reforms in the public education system. Note reactions to two proposals:

- Approximately 2 in 3 say it is generally a good idea to “allow public schools to hire experienced leaders from other fields such as the military, law, or business to become school administrators through an alternative track that would be faster and simpler than traditional certification.”
- In reacting to a proposal for a “tax-funded voucher for up to \$6,000 that families can use for any school — public, religious, or private”, where “families would pick the schools and the schools would get the money,” 41 percent of Idahoans think the state should “make this available to all families,” while 22 percent would “make it available only to low-income families.” One in three would not make it available at all.

“I’m a big proponent of school choice and school vouchers. Bring in your private schools. Competition is going to improve school districts and the competitiveness of education. Make it a market and improve the school system that way.”

— *Fruitland focus group participant*

It is important to note that the public has probably only started to think through each of these reforms and that views are unsettled. The key takeaway is that persistent dissatisfaction opens a door to doing things differently.



3.

Idahoans want standards and accountability for educators

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Idahoans consistently believe in the virtue of setting standards in public education, evaluating outcomes, and holding stakeholders accountable — schools, teachers, and students alike.

More than 7 in 10 think it's generally a good idea to rate and publicize all of Idaho's public schools based on multiple indicators such as test scores, graduation rates, and student growth; only 26 percent say it's a bad idea.

“At least if we make it plainly obvious that we have a problem here whether it be our administrators need to step up, teachers need to step up, parents need to step up. If nothing else, it draws the line in the sand as far as accountability.”

— Boise focus group participant

More than 3 in 4 think it's 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; only 20 percent say it's a bad idea.

Approximately 65 percent believe it's generally a good idea to require Idaho's students to pass a standardized test to show they have learned what they were supposed to before getting a high school diploma; only 32 percent say this is a bad idea.

More than 7 in 10 want Idaho's public schools to teach to the same academic standards as the rest of the country "because students need the same basic knowledge

wherever they are"; only 25 percent would instead want the schools to teach to the state's own standards "because what Idaho's students need to learn is different." Idahoans are committed to the virtue of standards and accountability in education — and having standards that are consistent across the country makes sense to them.

"There should be a universal standard, and there does need to be a way to test to that. There's a lot to be said about assessing the kid's progress and acknowledging that success where it's deserved. Because every kid starts at a different level."

— Fruitland focus group participant



A photograph of three students walking outdoors, overlaid with a purple tint. Two girls and one boy are walking towards the right, smiling and talking. The girl on the left is carrying a stack of books. The boy on the right is wearing a striped shirt and has a bag slung over his shoulder.

4.

Improvements are key to public school spending

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Idahoans believe that there is a connection between money and the quality of public education. But if student achievement fails to improve, support for greater spending plunges.

“If it is not showing results, then I definitely don’t want to pay more taxes.”

— Boise focus group participant

If additional funds were to be allotted to the public school system, Idahoans would expect results. Asked what they would want to happen if Idaho increased spending through higher teacher salaries and bigger school budgets but saw no improvement in student achievement after several years, few — just 13 percent — would stay the course and continue to increase spending. Eighty-five percent would look for other strategies.

Idahoans are troubled by disparities in budgets across school districts. By a margin of 75 percent to 21 percent, Idahoans believe it is the state's responsibility to make up the difference in funding inequalities between wealthier and poorer districts, a rejection of the view that such inequalities are unavoidable.

“In rural parts of Idaho, those small economies, it's hard for them to pay high wages for these teachers, so they end up hiring not fully qualified teachers to fill the void.”

— Boise focus group participant

Many Idaho adults generally doubt the effectiveness of allotting more money to the schools, because many suspect it won't get to the classroom. In fact, the Idaho public is essentially split on this issue: 49 percent say that if Idaho spent more money on its public schools it would get lost along the way, and 47 percent say it would reach classrooms and improve education.

“Education is important to a lot of Idahoans. The problem is I think there is misappropriation of funds. The money's not going to the right place.”

— Fruitland focus group participant

There is support for identifying a problem, developing a solution, and providing resources. But for most Idahoans, all of that also comes with accountability. The survey asked three questions about Idaho's new plan to identify its lowest-performing schools in order to help improve them:

- Have you heard about the plan? About 1 in 8 Idahoans say they have (12 percent); the vast majority (88 percent) have not.
- Told that the plan “identifies public schools with ratings in the bottom 5 percent, helps them develop a turnaround plan, provides expert guidance, and allows three years to improve” with extra funding for schools that serve low-income families — almost 64 percent — consider the plan in a positive light (about one-third in a negative light).
- What should happen to a low-performing school if three years pass without improvement, despite the extra help? At that point, half (50 percent) would replace the school's leadership or staff, and another 5 percent would gradually close the school. Forty-two percent would give the school more time and resources.

“What do you do at that point? You change administration. You shake it up. That is what happens when you are in charge. If the school fails, you fail.”

— Boise focus group participant



5.

Hard work and grit are important lessons

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PERSPECTIVE

Idahoans believe public schools play a critically important role in teaching and developing character. This is, of course, in addition to the wide range of academic subjects that they expect their public schools to teach in order to prepare Idaho's youngsters for college and the work world.

The vast majority of Idahoans — 83 percent — say it's just as important to teach the value of such things as hard work, persistence, and responsibility as it is to mostly focus on academics (16 percent).

“You’re teaching them the ability to be responsible members of society, to work in teams, to have good character, to be able to critically think, and invent, and innovate and invest in the next generation.”

— Fruitland focus group participant

Idaho's general public has an expansive and robust definition of what it means to be educated — from the basics to in-depth math and science to computers and technology to critical thinking. In 7 out of 10 subjects or skills asked about, the majority of Idahoans say each is “absolutely essential” for the schools to teach students.

Also imperative to the mission of Idaho's public schools is preparing students for the work world. At least 64 percent of Idahoans believe it is “absolutely essential” for the schools in their community to teach students practical job skills. Moreover, vast majorities would like to see Idaho expand high school internships and work experiences (84 percent) and vocational education classes (78 percent).

Idahoans who participated in our focus groups talked about critical thinking, STEM, and a need to emphasize the trades as well as college.

“They need to learn how to write, to think critically, how to solve problems. They're not going to be able to figure everything out in school, but they can learn how to critically think.”

— Boise focus group participant

“Not everybody needs to go to college. And I think that schools can be very successful and give kids opportunities to shadow trades. Workshops or auto shop or something like that... Just giving kids the opportunity to learn about what's out there so that one day in their regular classes they can see more how that applies.”

— Fruitland focus group participant





6.

Idahoans are increasingly comfortable with charter schools

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Idahoans are very supportive of charter schools and believe they outperform the traditional public schools in their communities. Most favor a measure to help construct and improve charter school buildings. A growing proportion of Idaho's parents report that they have chosen a charter school for their own child.

Charter schools receive resounding support from the public — 75 percent favor charter schools, described as “public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are free from many existing regulations.” Only 1 in 5 oppose them.

A key driver of Idaho's support for charter schools is that people believe charters outperform traditional public schools. Almost 3 out of 4 Idahoans say there is a charter school in their area, and among these, 57 percent believe the charter school offers a better education than the traditional public school; just 1 in 4 give the edge to the traditional public school.

Even parents who oppose charter schools on principle would seriously consider one if it matched what they were looking for in terms of an education for their own child (62 percent versus 36 percent).

In fact, over the past few years, parents are more likely to say that at least one of their children has attended a charter school, up from 16 percent three years ago to 23 percent today.

Their sense that charter schools are succeeding leads Idahoans to support measures that will make growth and expansion for charter schools easier. A majority (56 percent) think it's a good idea to make it easier to

build and expand charter schools by providing other types of funding opportunities; 38 percent say it's a bad idea.

What resonates for Idahoans about charter schools? Individualized learning, variety of teaching philosophies, and autonomy.

“I like the idea that each school is individualized. They are not all the same. The school has to adapt to its community demographics to teach the children.”

— Boise focus group participant

“I do like that charter schools have more freedoms. I think it is important to be able to make quick decisions.”

— Boise focus group participant



Methodology

Survey of Idaho General Public

- The findings in **The People's Perspective** are based on 1,000 interviews conducted by telephone with a randomly selected representative sample of Idaho adults 18 years old and older in the fall of 2018. The survey was preceded by two focus groups with Idahoans. The analysis is the third in a series of surveys conducted to document the Idaho public's attitudes about public education.
- Telephone interviews with a randomly selected cross-section of Idaho adults (n=1,000) took place between October 23 and November 20, 2018. The average length of an interview was 16.7 minutes.
- The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. The margin of error increases for sub-groups within the sample; for example, the statewide random sample generated 391 completed interviews with parents of children under 18 years old. When the study reports the views of parents — a sub-group of the total sample — the margin of error to take into account is plus or minus 5 percentage points.
- To ensure that a random sample of households was interviewed, the study employed a dual-frame landline/cell phone sampling design. Theoretically, this gave every household in Idaho an equal chance of being selected, including those with unlisted landline numbers and no landline (cell phone-only households). According to a December 2017 National Health Statistics Report*, 64.4 percent of Idaho adults live in wireless-only households.

- For the landline interviews, a standard-random-digit-dialing technology was used, along with age-targeted landline sample. For the cell phone interviews, dialing began with active, random wireless numbers (no age target). Toward the middle of the field period, both landline and cell samples were targeted by age in order to reach a sufficient number of 18-34 year olds. A total of 298 interviews (30 percent) were completed on landlines, and 702 (70 percent) on cell phones. The final survey data are weighted to population parameters for age to account for overrepresentation of older adults in the sampling frame.
- To minimize nonresponse bias, interviews were conducted on each day of the week and at different times of the day. If a respondent indicated a better time for the interview, callbacks were made accordingly. Typically, between three and six attempts were made for each unique telephone number in the sample.
- As in all surveys, non-sampling sources of error could also have an impact on survey results. The survey instrument used in this study was extensively pretested to ensure that the language was accessible and appropriate to members of the general public, including those who may not be familiar with the topic of public schools. 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.
- Sample was obtained from Marketing Systems Group. The telephone interviews and data collection were provided by Wiese Research Associates.

The Focus Groups

- In September 2018, two focus groups were conducted with members of the general public, one each in Boise and Fruitland. The focus group participants were carefully 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. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to gauge understanding of the issues at hand and the energy these issues tap. The groups were also useful in testing and developing the survey instrument. Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying people's attitudes toward complex issues. Quotes from the focus groups are used in the report to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews. Also included in this report are relevant quotes from a focus group with Idaho Falls residents conducted by FDR Group earlier in 2018.

For More Information

To view the complete list of survey questions and full methodology behind the reported survey, go to idahoednews.org/peoples-perspective.



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