

MOST NH RESIDENTS UNAWARE OF PERFORMANCE OF LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Despite intense public and legislative debate over education funding in New Hampshire, most New Hampshire residents are uninformed about educational outcomes and spending at their local public schools. While about half of state residents rate their schools as good to excellent, only a small number have an accurate understanding of how well their schools performed on state-wide standardized tests. The findings point to a need to examine the processes by which residents learn about their local schools.

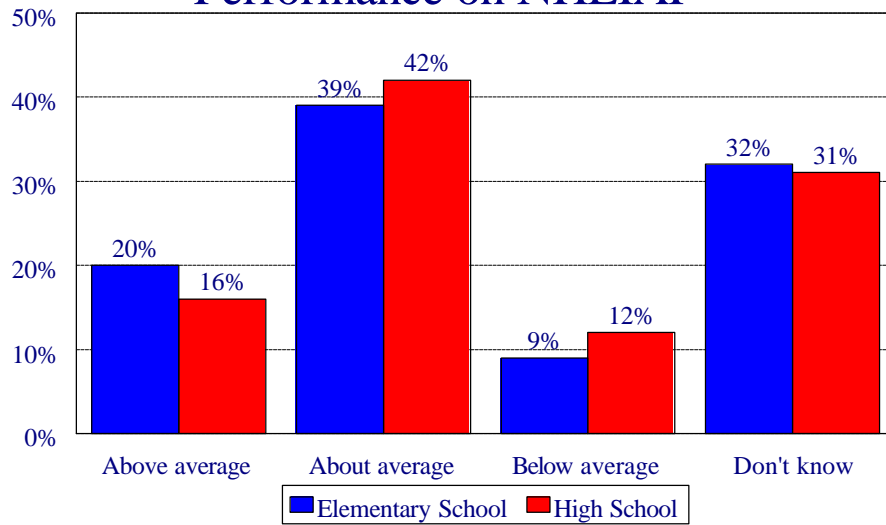
These findings are based on the results of a survey of New Hampshire residents conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center on behalf of a partnership of organizations that includes the Survey Center, New Hampshire Public Radio, New Hampshire Public Television, the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies, the New Hampshire Historical Society, the New England Center for Civic Engagement, Leadership New Hampshire, and the New Hampshire Humanities Council.

Knowledge of School Performance

Education funding and how to provide quality public education have been at the forefront of policy debate in Concord, especially since the 1997 Claremont decision. The focus on spending comes hand in hand with an emphasis on testing and other measures to foster school accountability. While there is much debate over whether the New Hampshire Educational Improvement and Assessment Program (NHEIAP) test results are by themselves a good indicator of the quality of a school, they are considered a useful evaluation tool when placed in context. Performance on the NHEIAP is the most widely publicized measure of school quality. However, a significant percentage of New Hampshire residents are not aware of how well their local public schools do. In fact, a “Lake Wobegon” effect is apparent, with more respondents believing their schools are “above average” than believe their schools are “below average”, regardless of actual performance.

About a third of all New Hampshire residents say they do not know how well their elementary and high schools performed on state-wide tests. When asked about their local elementary schools, 20% say students performed above average on state wide tests, 39% believed they performed about average, only 9% think they performed below average, and 32% said they don’t know. When asked about their local high schools, 16% think that students performed above average, 42% think they performed about average, 12% think they performed below average, and 31% said they don’t know.

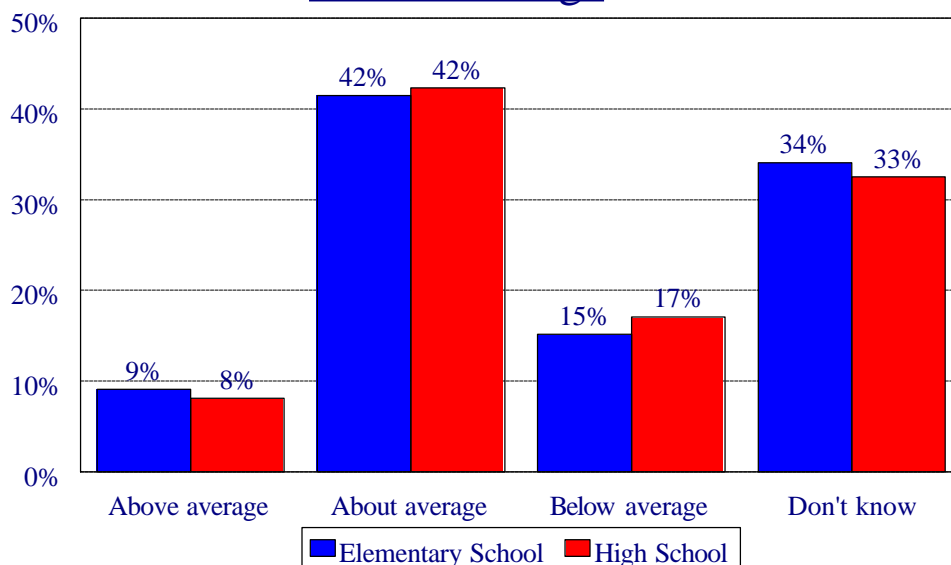
Beliefs About Local School Performance on NHEIAP



The lack of knowledge about school performance is not uniform across school districts. Residents of towns with lower performing schools are the least likely to be aware that their schools performed below average. At the elementary school level, only 14% of residents of towns with *below average* test results assessed their schools accurately, whereas in towns with *above average* test results, 35% of residents gave the correct answer.

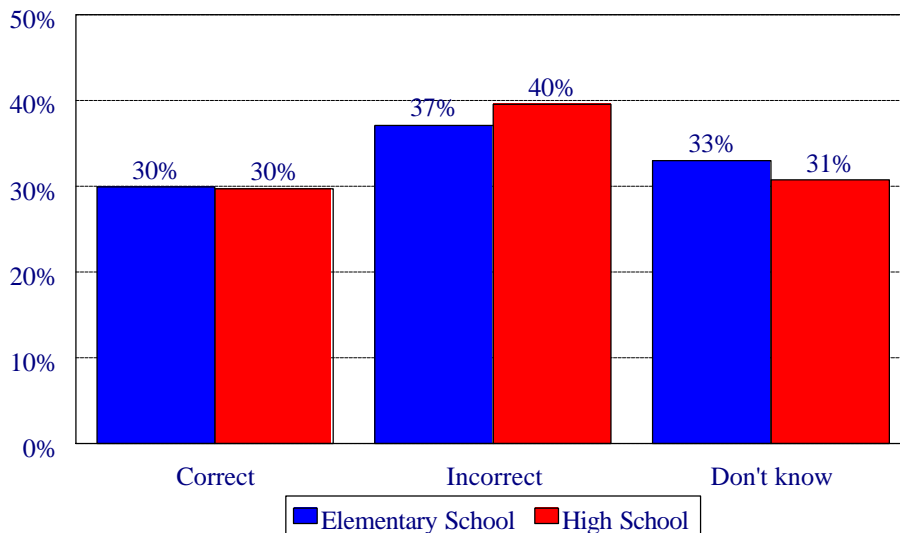
The difference at the high school level is less but still present with 16% and 24% respectively. In school districts where the need to focus on the quality of education is greatest, there is the lowest level of public awareness of the need to have that conversation.

Beliefs About Local School Performance on NHEIAP in Towns with Below Average NHEIAP Results



Overall, only 30% of New Hampshire residents could correctly identify the performance of either their local elementary or high schools on state-wide NHEIP tests.

Perceived NHEIAP Result vs. Actual Result



Overall Impressions of School Quality

Despite the lack of *specific* knowledge about how their schools perform on standardized tests, most New Hampshire residents believe their local public schools provide quality educations to students. Nineteen percent of state residents say the quality of education provided by their local public schools is “excellent”, 38% rate it as “good”, 22% say it is “fair”, 9% say “poor”, 4% say “very poor”, and 9% don’t know.

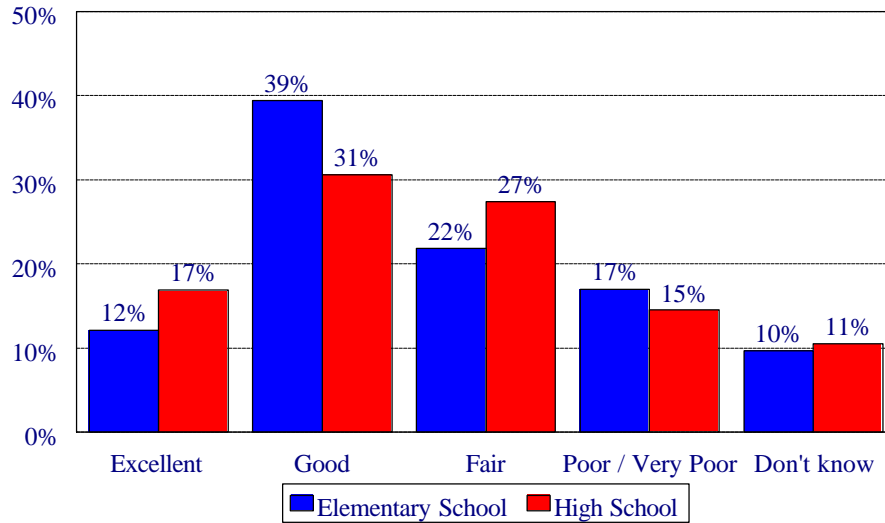
Perceived Quality of Education Provided by Local Public Schools



But in contrast to knowledge of specific test results, there is a slight correlation between test results and ratings of local schools among respondents asked to assess their local schools more generally. About 2/3 (65%) of residents of towns sending students to high schools with above average test results rated their local public schools as “excellent” or “good”. In towns where schools perform “about average”, 55% of residents rate them as “excellent” or “good”. A similar relationship can be seen when elementary schools’ test results are used to categorize towns.

However, while casual assessments track more closely with actual test results, they are still far from accurate. About half (49%) of residents of towns with *below average* high school test results mistakenly believe that their schools provide an “excellent” or “good” education. The disconnect is even greater in towns with below average elementary school NHEIAP results.

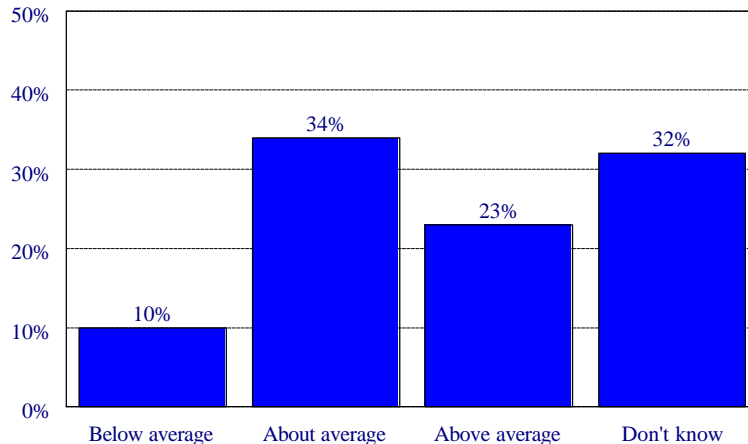
Perceived Quality of Education in Towns with Below Average NHEIAP Results



Knowledge of School Spending

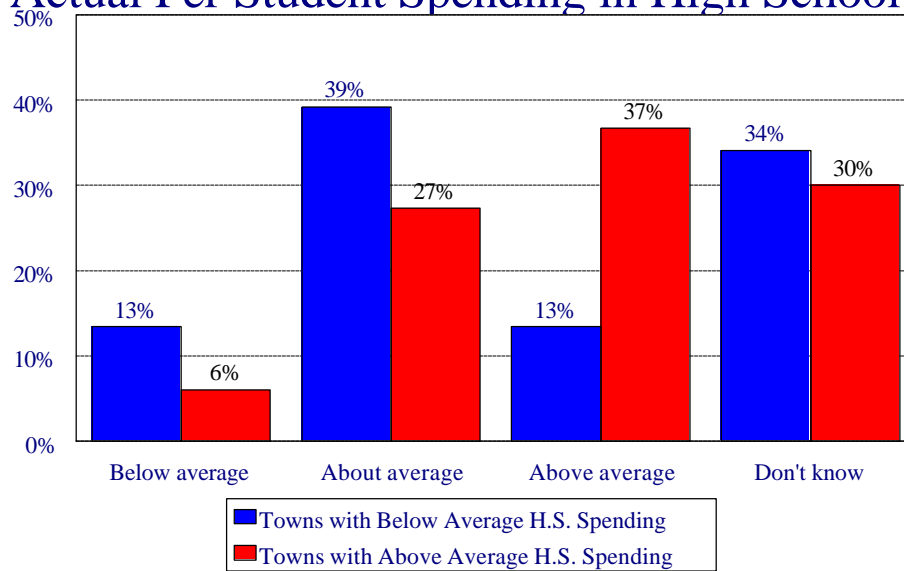
Survey respondents were also asked how much their school district spends per student, compared with the state average. Twenty-three percent think they spend more than the state average, 34% believe they spend about average, 10% think they spend below average, and 32% said they don't know. Again, a “Lake Wobegon” effect is apparent -- more than twice as many Granite Staters believe their schools spend more than average per pupil than believe their schools spend less than average.

Perceived Per Student Spending



New Hampshire residents living in towns with above average school spending are three times as likely to accurately identify their school’s spending as “above average” than those living in towns with below average school spending. Regarding their elementary schools, 35% of residents of towns with above average per pupil spending correctly recognize that fact while only 11% of the residents of towns with below average spending schools recognize that their schools spend less than average. Regarding their high schools, 37% of the residents of towns with above average spending recognize that fact while only 13% of residents of towns below average spending recognize that fact.

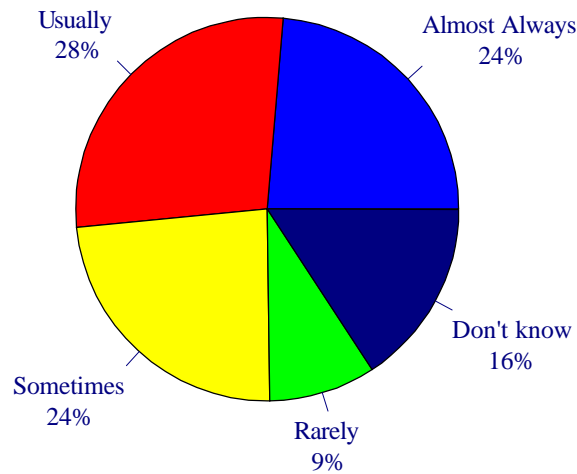
Perceived Per Student Spending vs. Actual Per Student Spending in High School



School districts in New Hampshire frequently argue that they are under-funded and that they could provide better educations if they had more funding. But school administrators often have a difficult time convincing voters of this problem because a majority of New Hampshire residents (57%) believe their local schools are funded at average or above average levels.

New Hampshire residents believe that money for public schools is being spent properly. When asked if local schools spend money wisely, more than half of New Hampshire residents (52%) say their schools almost always or usually spend money wisely, 31% say they feel that schools spend money wisely only sometimes or rarely, and 16% are not sure. Actual school spending levels and student performance have no significant effect on these attitudes.

School Operating Funds Are Spent Wisely ...

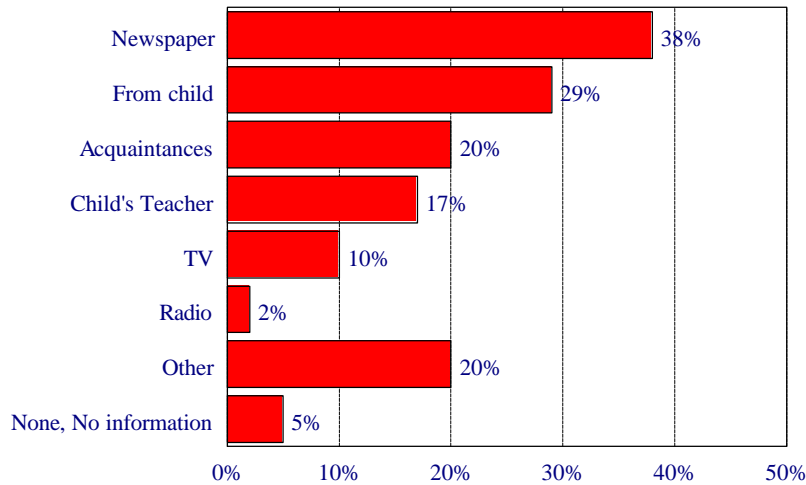


Information Sources

Most New Hampshire residents (38%), report getting most of their information about their local public schools from a newspaper, from a child (29%), from friends or family members (20%), or from a teacher (17%). However, the source of information seems to make little difference in how accurately residents are informed about the quality of education provided by their local public schools. The group most likely to rate their local public schools as poor or very poor are those with direct contact. Among these, of those who report their child(ren) as their primary source of information, 19% rate their local public schools poorly.

Where Get Information About Local Public Schools?

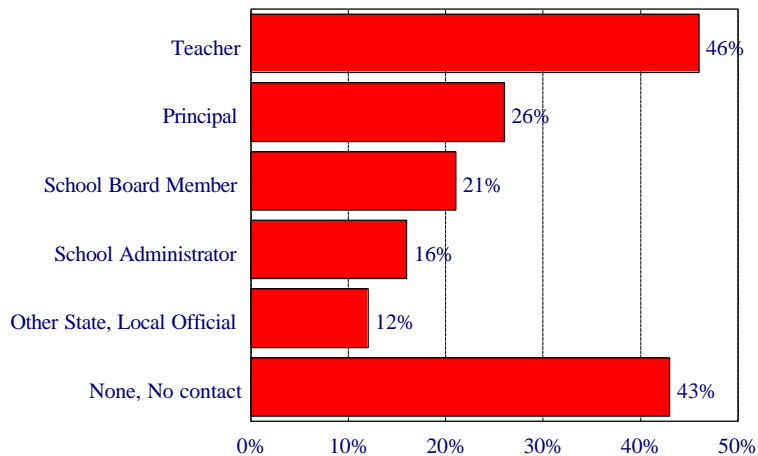
(Multiple responses possible. Percentages sum to more than 100%.)



New Hampshire residents lack of information about schools is heightened by the fact that almost half say they have had no direct contact with teachers, administrators, school board members, or other state and local officials. Forty-three percent say they have had no direct contact with *any* of these people, 46% have had contact with a teacher, 26% with a principal, 21% with a school board member, 16% with a school administrator, and 12% with some other state or local official.

Contact with Educators & Officials in Past 6 Months

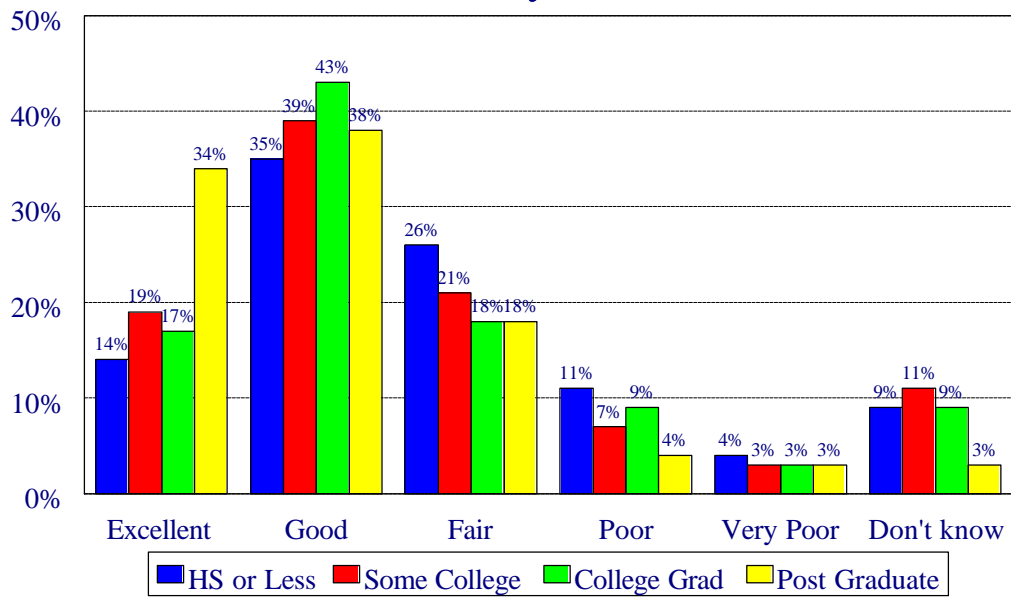
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Respondent’s Education Level and the Overall Assessment of Schools

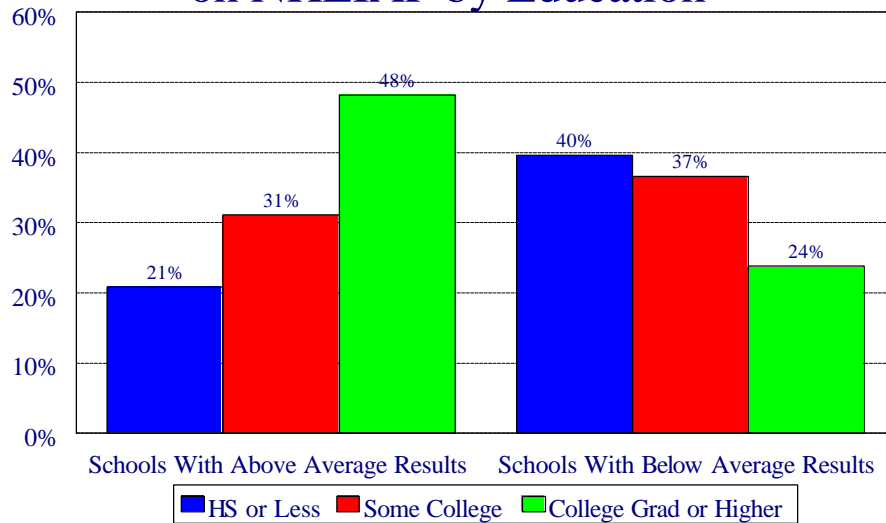
Education levels and assessment of schools correlates strongly with the towns where people live. Granite Staters with higher levels of education tend to be highly concentrated in towns where schools both spend more per pupil and have better than average test results. Less educated residents tend to be more highly concentrated in towns where school spending and test results are below average. Consequently, people with at least a college degree are most likely to rate their schools excellent or good, while people with a high school diploma or less are most likely to rate their schools poor or very poor.

Perceived Quality of Education Provided by Local Public Schools by Level of Education



When survey data are analyzed on the basis of how well elementary school performed on the NHEIAP by the level of education of the respondent, the results were striking. In towns where elementary school standardized test results are *below* the state average, only 24% of residents have a college degree or higher and 40% have a high school education. In towns where elementary schools have performed *above* the state average, 48% of residents have completed college and only 21% have high school educations. Towns where elementary schools are “about average” are intermediate.

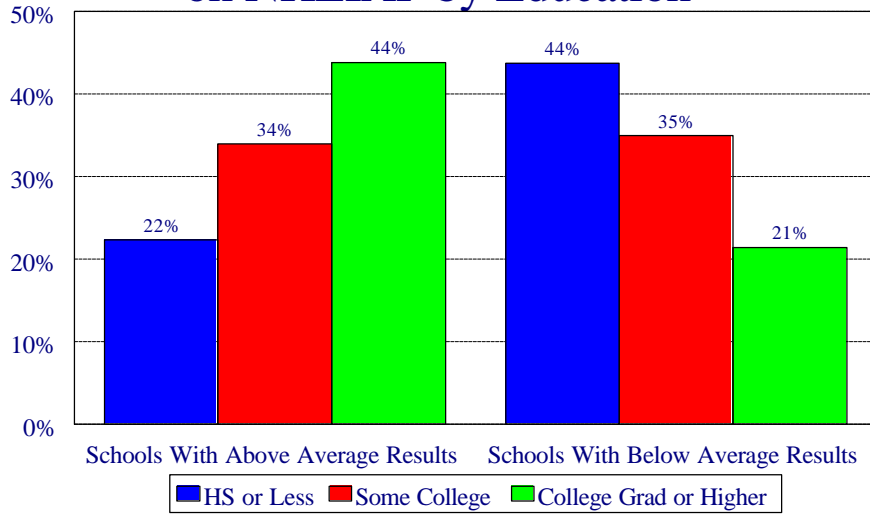
Actual Elementary School Results on NHEIAP by Education



Respondents Level of Education	NHEIAP Results - Local Elementary Schools			
	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Total
High School or Less	21%	34%	40%	33%
Some College	31%	27%	37%	32%
College Graduate	27%	22%	18%	22%
Post-Graduate	21%	17%	6%	14%
(N)	(106)	(116)	(164)	(386)

At the high school level, results are similar. Where high school tests results are above average, college graduates make up 44% of residents and 22% have a high school education. The opposite is true among the towns with poorly performing high schools: only 21% of residents have a college degree, while 44% completed high school or less.

Actual High School Results on NHEIAP by Education



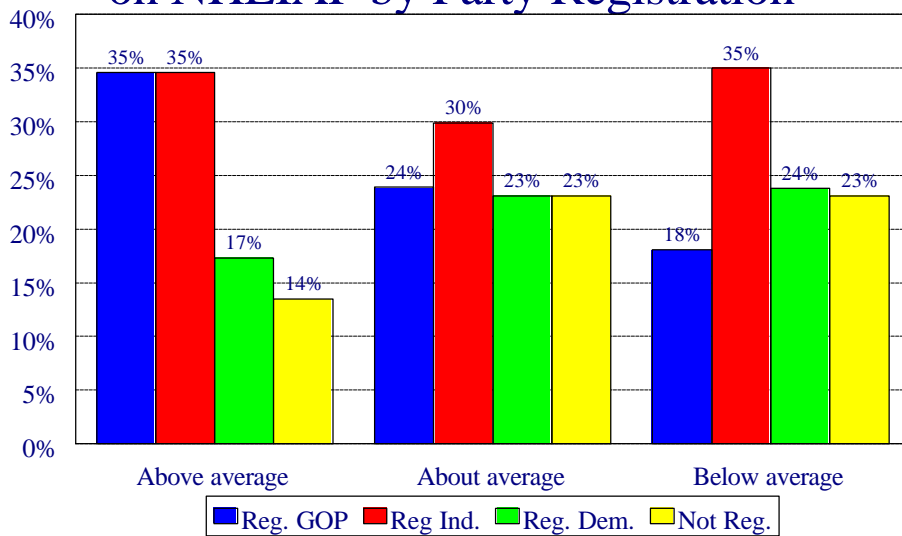
Respondents Level of Education	NHEIAP Results - Local High Schools			
	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Total
High School or Less	22%	32%	44%	33%
Some College	34%	28%	35%	32%
College Graduate	23%	29%	12%	22%
Post-Graduate	21%	11%	10%	13%
(N)	(121)	(148)	(126)	(395)

The Role of Political Party Affiliation

Registered Republicans are most likely to rate their local schools excellent or good. The greater propensity of Republicans to be more positive about the quality of their local schools can be explained by the fact that they are more likely to live in communities where schools perform above average on the state’s NHEIAP tests. In other words, their ratings of their school’s performance may reflect an understanding that their schools perform better, rather than a difference in how they judge their schools.

Of those respondents who live in towns with high scoring elementary schools, 35% are registered Republicans, while less than half that, 17%, are Democrats. In the towns with below average schools, 35% are Independents, 24% are Democrats and only 18% were Republicans. The partisan difference in ratings of public schools, and the actual differences in those schools’ performances, illustrates the political difficulty that policy makers face in their efforts to improve schools for all New Hampshireans. The pattern is less pronounced for high schools.

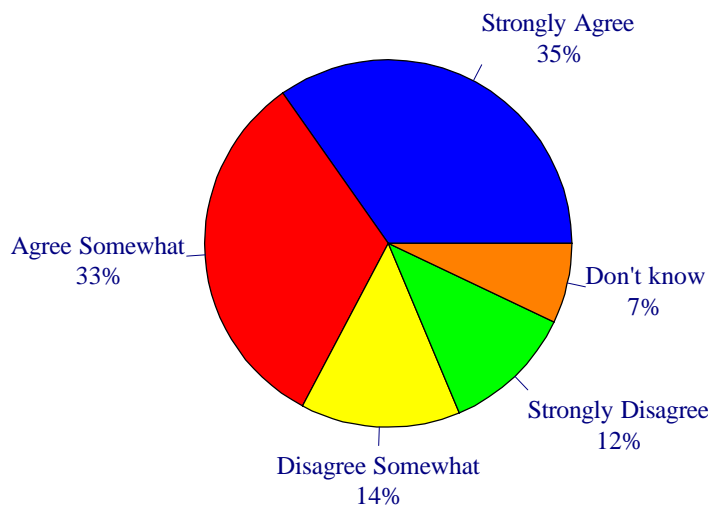
Local Elementary School Performance on NHEIAP by Party Registration



The Value of a High School Diploma

About 2/3 of New Hampshire residents (68%) agree somewhat or agree strongly that a diploma from their local high school indicates mastery of basic skills, such as “being able to read a novel, write a clear essay, and using math to solve a real life problem,” 26% disagree either somewhat or strongly, and 7% admit they don’t know or are unsure. There is little difference in this measure based on how well the local high school students perform on state tests.

Diploma from Local High School Means *At Least a Mastery of Basic Skills*



Methodology

These findings are based on the most recent Granite State Poll conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center between August 10 and August 15, 2001. A random sample of 400 adults from throughout New Hampshire was interviewed by telephone. In 95 of 100 cases, statewide estimates will be accurate to +/-4.9%. Results reported for subgroups have potential for somewhat larger variation than those for the entire population. In addition to sampling error, all surveys have other potential sources of non-sampling error including question order effects, question wording effects, and non-response.

Respondents were asked:

- "How would you rate the quality of education provided by your local public schools ... excellent ... good ... fair ... poor ... or very poor?"
- "Where do you get MOST of your information about your local public schools?" "Where else?"
- "Based on what you have seen or heard, are the results of the most recent statewide tests of students at your local ELEMENTARY school above the state average ... below the state average ... or about average?"
- "Based on what you have seen or heard, are the results of the most recent statewide tests of students at your local PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL above the state average ... below the state average ... or about average?"
- "Based on what you have seen or heard, does your local public school district spend more than the state average per student ... less than the state average per student ... or about average?"
- "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement ... a high school diploma from my local public school means that a graduate has at least mastered basic skills, such as being able to read a novel, write a clear essay, and using math to solve a real life problem?" IF AGREE OR DISAGREE: "Do you feel that strongly or just somewhat?"
- "This next question is about the cost of operating schools, NOT the cost to build school buildings. When it comes to the cost of operating schools, that is, salaries, books, supplies, and other items, do you think your local school spends money wisely almost always ... usually ... sometimes ... or rarely?"
- "In the past six months, have you had ANY contact ... such as having a conversation, attending a meeting, writing a letter ... with any of the following people about any public school matter ... a teacher, a principal or assistant principal, a school district administrator, a school board member, or some other state or local official?"

Categorizing Towns based on BHEIAP Scores

After survey data were collected, respondents were coded based on their town's results on the NHEIAP. The process of determining which towns would be in which category was as follows.

For each district with a high school: The 12 numbers representing the 10th grade NHEIAP scaled scores in language arts, mathematics, social studies and science for 1998, 1999, and 2000, were added. The districts were then ordered by the result and divided into three groups of approximately the same number of students. Twenty-eight districts with scores from 2966 to 3106 made up the "above average" group, 16 districts with scores in the 2934-2965 range made up the "about average" group, and 32 districts with scores from 2840 to 2933 made up in the "below average" group. The town of each respondent was then categorized based on the district to which it sends its high school students.

For each elementary school: The 6 numbers representing the 3rd grade NHEIAP scaled scores in language arts and mathematics for 1998, 1999, and 2000 were added and the result doubled. The 12 numbers representing the 6th grade scaled scores in language arts, mathematics, social studies and science for 1998, 1999, and 2000, were added. These two numbers were then added, thus giving equal weight to 3rd and 6th grades. The schools were then ordered by the result and divided into three groups of approximately the same number of students. Forty-seven districts with scores from 6040 to 6277 made up the "above average" group, 31 districts with scores in the 5962-6039 range made up the "about average" group and 47 districts with scores from 5672 to 5961 made up in the "below average" group. The town of each respondent was then categorized based on the district to which it sends its elementary school students.