



Local voices Local PERSPECTIVES

The Public School System in Leflore County, Mississippi

Due to countywide surveys conducted in 2007 and 2009 with a sample of adults in Leflore County, Mississippi, the Southern Rural Development Center has been able to capture the local opinions on the area's public school system. While the study is not comprehensive, it does provide sufficient insight to the residents' views concerning the public education system in the county.

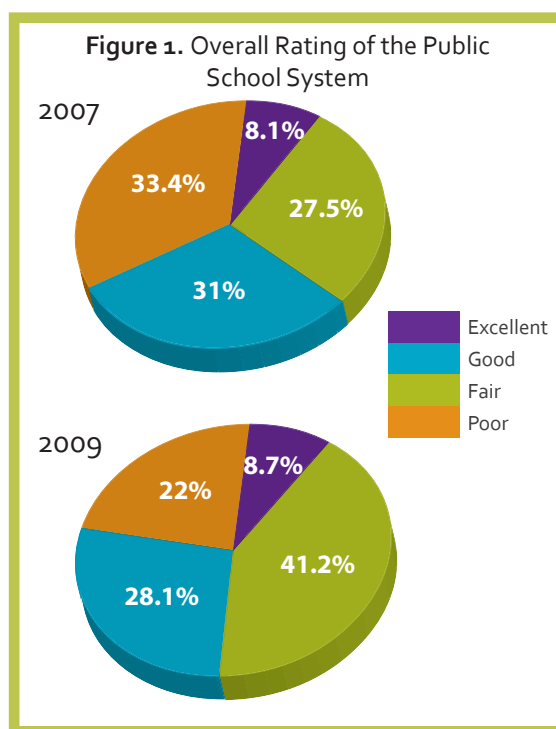
Overall Rating of the Public School System

Obtaining a quality education influences one's chances of getting a well-paying job with decent benefits. Especially during the distressed economic times that have affected the United States and the state of Mississippi, those with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed in higher income jobs. Thus, it is crucial to have quality public education systems that prepare young people for technical school programs, community colleges, and/or four-year universities. Because post-secondary education shapes long-term financial security, a quality education helps provide students with adequate opportunities to succeed.

The key question in the study that survey participants were asked was the following: "Overall, how would you rate the public school system in the county?" In 2007, people taking part in the countywide survey expressed notable concern with the quality of the public school system. One third stated that it was "poor," while another third stated that it was only "fair." The other third gave the system a "good" or "excellent" rating. See Figure 1.

By 2009, the situation seemed to have improved based on the respondents' answers. As Figure 1 reveals, the percentage of respondents who indicated that public schools were "good/excellent" or "poor/fair" was evenly divided at nearly 50 percent. While the percent of people who gave the schools an "excellent" rating did not significantly change between 2007 and

2009, those who claimed that the schools were "good" increased from 27.5 percent to 41.2 percent. Consequently, those who felt the schools were "poor" dropped from 33.4 percent to 22 percent. In general, the public believed that positive changes in the quality of the public school system had taken place in Leflore County in recent years.



Demographics of Respondents

The characteristics of the respondents were influential in how they responded to the survey questions.

Perspectives varied depending on the level of education, gender, and race of the participants.

- In 2007, the higher the educational level of the respondent, the more likely they were to rate the public school system as “poor.” Less than 22 percent of survey participants with less than a high school education rated it as “poor.” This number increased to 26.2 percent among high school graduates, 45.2 percent among those with some college education, and 47.5 percent among individuals with a bachelor’s degree or more. By 2009, those with a college education or more were still more likely to be critical of the school system, but the percent of these respondents who rated it as “fair” or “poor” dropped from 80 percent to 65 percent.

- In 2007, men were more likely than women to rate the public school system in the county as “poor” (40.1 percent versus 27.5 percent). 2009 brought improvement; nearly 24 percent of men and 20 percent of women rated the system as “poor.”
- Nearly three out of five white respondents taking part in the survey claimed the local public school system was “poor,” but only one in five African American residents labeled the schools as “poor.” White residents did have an improved outlook by 2009, increasing from 9.6 percent to 18.2 percent among those rating the system as “good” or “excellent.” 60 percent of African Americans rated it as such.

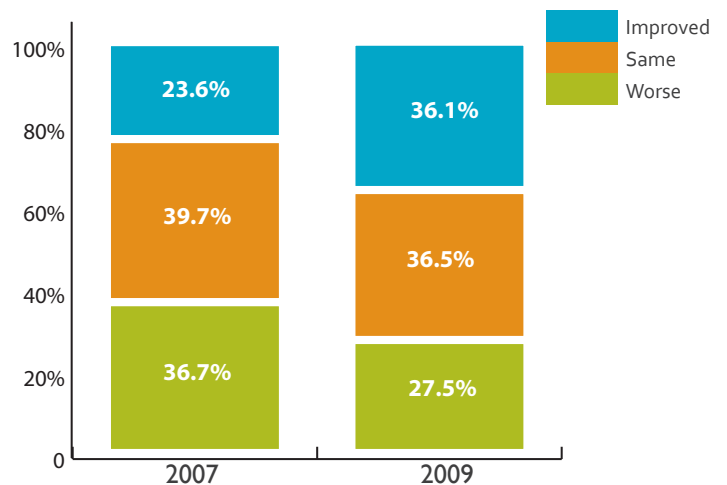
Changes in the Public School System

For further insight into residents’ views of the improvement of the Leflore County school system, individuals were asked to respond to the following: “Over the past two years, would you say the public school system in Leflore County has gotten worse, is about the same, or has improved?” Most taking part in the 2007 survey felt it was either worse (37 percent) or about the same (39.7 percent). Less than 24 percent stated it had improved over the past two years.

By the time the next survey was completed in late 2009, those claiming the school system had improved had increased by 12.5 percent. At the same time, the percent of people of who stated the quality of the schools had deteriorated over the past two years dropped to 27.5 percent. In 2007, only one in ten persons with a college education felt the schools had improved over the previous two years. By 2009, nearly one in four felt schools had undergone improvement. The most significant gaps in perceptions of the schools were evident by race. Just over 11 percent of white residents in both 2007 and 2009 felt the public schools had improved over the course of the last two years. Among African Americans survey participants, those who stated the schools had improved increased from 28.8 percent in 2007 to 44.7 percent in 2009. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Public School System Changes over the Past Two Years



Public School Teachers and Leaders

A series of statements was designed to portray how local residents perceived the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders in the public school system. Overall responses to these statements are shown in Figure 3.

- Statement: County public school teachers are highly qualified.**
 44.4 percent of residents in 2007 agreed with this statement, while 27.1 percent disagreed. By 2009, those who agreed with this statement increased to 61.4 percent, while those disagreeing changed slightly.
- Statement: County public school teachers are not effective in educating students.**
 Nearly 45 percent disagreed with the statement, while three out of ten indicated they agreed. In the survey conducted in 2009, those who disagreed rose to 54 percent, while those agreeing declined by less than two percent.
- Statement: School leaders are afraid to make hard choices needed to improve public schools in the county.**
 The results of the 2007 countywide survey revealed that 57 percent agreed with this statement. By 2009, the percent of residents agreeing this statement increased to

nearly 64 percent. On the other hand, approximately one in four persons disagreed with this statement in both the 2007 and 2009 surveys.

- Statement: School leaders should do all they can to strengthen the racial diversity of students enrolled in the public school system.**
 The racial composition of the public schools system in Leflore County during the time of study was nearly 97 percent African American. However, according to the recent Census Bureau statistics at that time, the percent of African American school-aged children in the county was 80 percent. Because these racial profile percentages were not consistent, the Center sought to explore the issue. In particular, the Center wanted to know whether local residents felt that school leaders should take a more active role in advancing racial diversity in the public school system. 70 percent of survey respondents taking part in the 2007 survey agreed that this is something that school leaders should do. By 2009, the number who supported this statement increased to over 80 percent.

Figure 3. Views Regarding Public School Teachers and Leaders

Statement	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neither	Strongly Agree/ Agree
Teachers are highly qualified.	27.1%	28.6%	44.4%
	25.9%	12.7%	61.4%
Teachers do a poor job educating students.	44.6%	24.2%	31.3%
	53.9%	16.5%	29.7%
School leaders are afraid to make hard decisions.	25.9%	16.5%	57.5%
	25.9%	10.4%	63.7%
School leaders should try to strengthen racial diversity.	17.9%	11.2%	71%
	10.7%	8.8%	80.5%

2007
 2009





Concluding Comments

Providing quality education is necessary to maintaining stable and efficient communities. Leflore County residents expressed much concern when approached by the Southern Rural Development Center about their local public school system.

Because countywide surveys were conducted in both 2007 and 2009, the Center has been able to assess the problems and improvements that have affected the school system. Overall, the Center discovered:

- The percent of Leflore County residents who believed public schools were “good” or “excellent” increased.
- More people felt the schools had either improved or remained relatively the same from 2007 to 2009.
- Perceptions of the quality of teachers in the school system improved.
- Residents believed teachers in 2009 were more effective in educating their students.

The only issue that people continued to express concern about was the lack of racial diversity in the public school system. The majority of respondents felt that it is the school leaders’ responsibility to enhance the racial diversity of the student body in the public school system.

Regardless of diversity, however, the current generation of students contains the future leaders of Leflore County. Thus, the well-being of the students and quality of education they receive should be the main focus. Provided with the results the SRDC has acquired, school leaders, teachers, and parents should make united efforts to improve the school system in order to enhance the future of Leflore County.



For More Information:
Contact the
Southern Rural Development Center
at 662-325-3207
or visit srdc.msstate.edu.

About these surveys:

The surveys used for this brief were conducted in the fall of 2007 and 2009. Telephone interviews with adult respondents from households in the target counties were conducted using a random digital dialing sampling procedure for telephone numbers.

A total of 400 adult residents took part in the 2007 study and another 400 adults responded to the 2009 survey. The surveys were weighted based on gender, educational attainment, and age groups to ensure they were representative of the adult members of the county (18+ years of age).

Authors: Lionel J. (Bo) Beaulieu and Roberto Gallardo, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University