

Local voices Local PERSPECTIVES

The Public School System in Phillips County, Arkansas

On the basis of countywide surveys conducted with a sample of adults in 2007 and 2009 in Phillips County, Arkansas, the Southern Rural Development Center has captured the public's view about the local public school system. While the study is not comprehensive, it does offer a glimpse of local opinions concerning public education in the area.

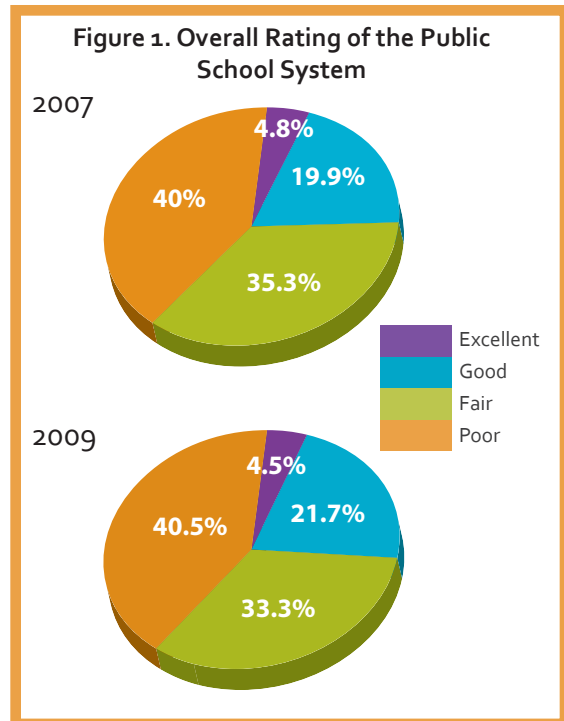
Overall Rating of the Public School System

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

The initial question to which survey participants were asked to respond 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 great concern with the quality of the public school system; about 40 percent stated that it was "poor," while another 35 percent noted that it was only "fair." Nearly one-quarter or 24.7 percent of residents gave it a "good" or "excellent" rating. See Figure 1.

By 2009, the situation in Phillips County had not improved. As Figure 1 displays, the percentage of respondents who rated the public schools high ("good" or "excellent") or low ("poor" or "fair") remained relatively the same in the 2009 study. Residents who rated the public school system as "poor" in 2009 increased by 0.5 percent compared to 2007. Those who perceived the public school system as "fair" declined by

two percent between 2007 and 2009, while those who stated it was "good" increased by less than two percent (19.9 percent in 2007 versus 21.7 percent in 2009). Finally those who felt public schools were "excellent" decreased slightly -- from 4.8 percent in 2007 to 4.5 percent in 2009. Overall, local citizens presented negative views concerning the quality of public schools in Phillips County.



Demographics of Respondents

The background characteristics of the respondents played an important role in determining how residents responded to survey questions. Perspectives varied depending on the level of education, gender, and race of the respondents.

- The higher the educational level of the respondent, the more likely they were to rate the public school system as “poor.” For instance, in 2007, about 35 percent of survey participants with less than a high school education rated the public schools as “poor.” This number increased to 44 percent among those with some college and 55 percent among those with a bachelor’s degree or more.
- In both surveys men were more likely than women to rate the public school system as “poor.” In 2009, 45

percent of men and 37 percent of women rated the system as such.

- Those who were 65 years age or older were somewhat more likely to perceive the public school system in the county as “poor” compared to younger residents ages 18 to 44 years old (45 percent versus 40 percent).
- Consistently, African Americans tended to perceive the system more positively than white respondents. In 2009, nearly 36.3 percent of African American participants believed the public schools were “good” or “excellent”, an increase from the 28.2 percent in 2007. The figure for white residents continued to remain low with only 11.3 percent saying the public schools were “good” or “excellent” in 2009.

Changes in the Public School System

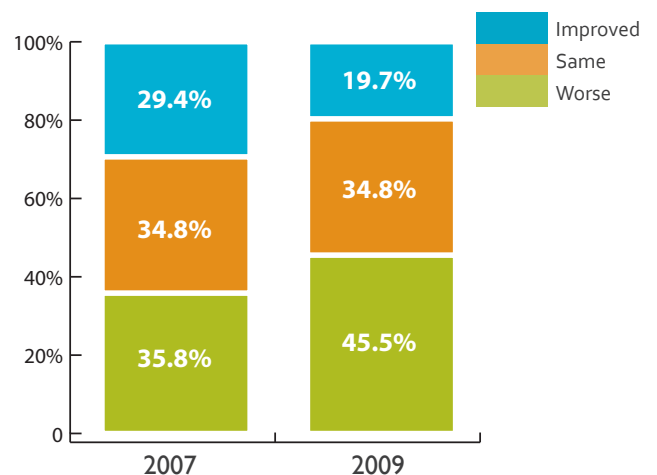
For further insight into residents’ views of the improvement of the public school system, local residents were asked to respond to the following: “Over the past two years, would you say the public school system in Phillips County has gotten worse, is about the same, or has improved?”

According to Figure 2, most taking part in the 2007 survey felt it was either worse (35.8 percent) or about the same (34.8 percent). Less than 30 percent stated it had improved over the past two years. By the time the second survey was completed in late 2009, those claiming the school system had improved declined by nearly 10 percent. At the same time, the percent of people of who stated schools had worsened over the past two years increased from 35.6 percent in 2007 to 45.5 percent by 2009. In 2007, 2 of 10 residents with a college education felt the schools had improved over the prior two years. By 2009, the number had remained nearly the same at about 19 percent.

The most significant gap in residents’ perceptions of the schools was evident by race. About 30 percent of white and African American residents felt the school system had improved over the past two years at the time of our 2007 study. In 2009, only 11 percent of white residents felt it had improved compared to the 26 percent of African American residents who felt this way.



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



Public School Teachers and Leaders

Within the survey, a series of statements were designed to portray local residents' perceptions of 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.**

The largest share of residents in 2007 (40.3 percent) agreed with this statement, while 25.6 percent disagreed. By 2009, those agreeing with this statement increased to almost 50 percent, while those disagreeing increased to 36.2 percent in 2009.

- **Statement: County public school teachers are not effective in educating students.**

Approximately one-third of county residents rejected the notion that teachers do a poor job educating local students, while almost 35 percent indicated they agreed with this statement. In the 2009 survey, those who disagreed with this statement rose to 44 percent, while those disagreeing increased by a modest three percent to 38 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 make it quite clear that the majority of respondents agreed with this statement. By 2009, the percent of residents endorsing this statement increased to nearly 73 percent. On the other hand, approximately 1 in 5 persons disagreed 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.**

Nearly 75 percent of respondents in the 2007 survey agreed that school leaders should do so. By 2009, those supporting this statement increased to nearly 85 percent. Only 1 in 10 persons in 2009 stated they disagreed with this view, which was slightly lower than the 11.4 percent of respondents who felt this way in 2007.

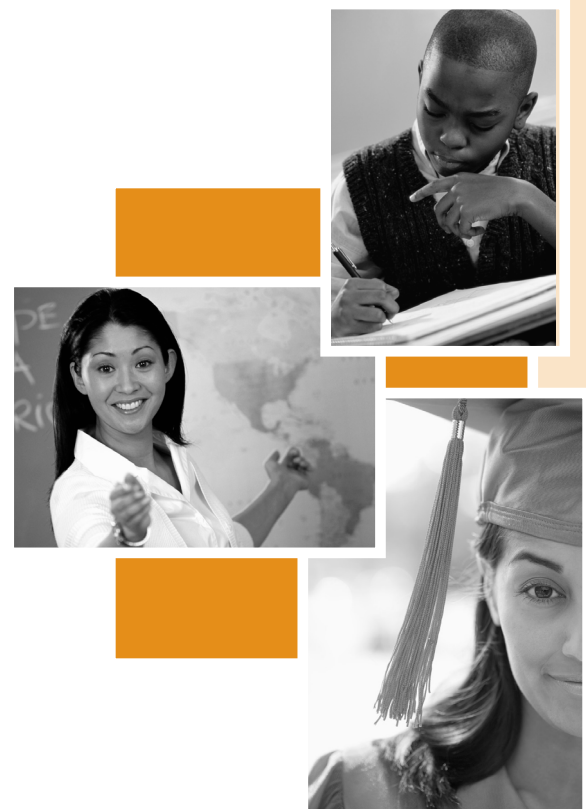


Figure 3. Views Regarding Public School Teachers and Leaders

Statement	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neither	Strongly Agree/ Agree
Teachers are highly qualified.	25.6%	34.1%	40.3%
	36.2%	14.8%	49%
Teachers do a poor job educating students.	32.5%	32.8%	34.8%
	44%	18.2%	37.8%
School leaders are afraid to make hard decisions.	22.2%	25%	52.8%
	21.5%	5.9%	72.5%
School leaders should try to strengthen racial diversity.	11.4%	12.9%	75.6%
	10.4%	5.1%	84.5%

2007
 2009



Concluding Comments

Providing a quality education is necessary to maintaining stable and efficient communities. In general, the individuals taking part in the countywide surveys had some very serious concerns with the public education system in Phillips County. Since the countywide surveys were conducted in both 2007 and 2009, the Center was able to assess whether the situation was improving or getting worse in the eyes of the public. Overall, the results revealed that:

- The majority of Phillips County residents (about 74 percent) believed local public schools were “fair” to “poor” in quality and that the situation had gotten worse over the 2007 to 2009 time period.
- Despite the poor ratings of the schools, nearly half agreed that the schools have highly qualified teachers in the classroom, though 36 percent disagreed.
- There was no unanimous opinion regarding whether teachers were doing a good job educating local students. Notably, 44 percent stated they were

doing a poor job, while 38 percent believed they were sufficiently educating students.

There were two issues that captured the support of an increasing number of Phillips County residents between 2007 and 2009. First was the assertion that school officials were failing to make the difficult decisions necessary to improve the public education system in the county. Secondly, residents expressed that school leaders should do more to encourage racial diversity in the school system. Though these are very complex, difficult issues, the surveys revealed that residents would like school officials to take action to improve these areas.

Above all, 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
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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).

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