

2002
Wake Public Education
Community Assessment

A Study of Citizens' Perceptions
of Wake County Public Schools

An Initiative of
Wake Education Partnership

Supported by the A.J. Fletcher Foundation and the
Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce

Table of Contents

<u>Section</u>	<u>Page</u>
I. Introduction	3
Overview of Survey.....	4
Graph: Demographic Characteristics of Sample	
Overview of Focus Group and Survey Findings.....	7
II. Perceptions of Quality	8
Grading of School Quality.....	8
Graph: Quality of Wake Schools – Grading	
Graph: Satisfaction with Wake County Direction and Relationship with School Quality Grade	
Consistent Quality?.....	10
Graph: Evaluation of Local Wake County Public Schools vs. Others	
School System Goals.....	11
Graph: Rating of School System for Meeting Goals	
Graph: Perception of “Schools Improving” vs. Reality of Test Scores	
“Gap Analysis”.....	12
Graph: Importance Rating of Characteristics of a Very Successful School	
Graph: Gap Analysis – Likelihood of “Very Successful School” Characteristics to Occur in Wake County Public School System vs. Importance Rating	
III. Perceptions of Issues	22
School Finances and New Revenue.....	22
Graph: Evaluation of How Well Wake County Public School System Manages Money	
Graph: Evaluation of Fiscal Condition of Wake County Public School System	
Graph: Support for Various Revenue Raising Options	
Graph: Persuasiveness of Pro-Revenue Statements	

Evaluations of Positive Accomplishments.....	26
Graph: Most Positive Accomplishment	
School Size.....	27
Graph: Preference for School Size by Age	
Vouchers.....	28
Graph: Opinion on School Vouchers	
Diversity.....	29
Graph: Opinions on School Diversity	
Evaluations of Wake Education Partnership.....	31
Graph: Awareness and Opinions of Wake Education Partnership	
Focus Group Findings.....	32
IV. Background Information.....	32
Frederick Polls.....	32
Question Path.....	33

I. Introduction

The 2002 Wake Public Education Community Assessment offers a snapshot of community attitudes and beliefs about the Wake County Public School System. The biennial poll is one in a series of strategies initiated by the community and the Wake County Public Schools to involve citizens in shaping the future of their public school system. The results of the Assessment will:

- Assist elected officials in adopting policies to strengthen the public schools;
- Provide key stakeholders with useful information about the characteristics of effective schools;
- Validate findings from parent surveys conducted by the Wake County Public Schools;
- Empower citizens with the knowledge needed to become effective partners with the public schools in efforts to address issues such as funding, academic standards and school quality; and
- Assess the effectiveness of existing priorities and partnerships in the public schools.

Wake County community representatives served on a committee to guide the process for conducting the poll, from focus groups to final results. These volunteers selected the polling company, revised the survey instrument and discussed methods for presenting the results. The Community Assessment Advisory Committee included the following participants:

Marty Clayton	CP&L - A Progress Energy Company
Phyllis Eller-Moffet	Quality Staffing Specialist
Mark B. Fleming	Wake Forest Chamber of Commerce
Lynne G. Garrison	Blue Cross & Blue Shield of NC
Kim Gazella	Wake County Government
M. Anthony Habit, Ed.D.	Wake Education Partnership
Sheila Hale-Ogle	Media Research Planning and Placement, Inc.
Howard Johnson	Cary Chamber of Commerce
Jeff Merritt	Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce
Janice D. Shearin	Wake County Public Schools
Cyndi Soter O'Neil	Wake Education Partnership

Charlotte Turpin
Lynn B. Womble

Wake/North Carolina Association of Educators
Wake County PTA Council

The A.J. Fletcher Foundation and the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce supported the Public Education Community Assessment as sponsors of the poll.

Wake Education Partnership is a community-based public school advocacy and support organization that links human and material resources to strengthen student achievement. In addition to fostering action-oriented community involvement in Wake County Public Schools, the Partnership seeks to leverage the investment of private contributions to ensure the greatest possible impact on every school.

Overview of Survey

This 2002 study is the third in a series of citizen perception studies conducted by the Wake Education Partnership. Both the initial 1998 study and the follow-up 2000 study assessed attitudes, preferences, and priorities among Wake County citizens on key issues related to Wake County public schools.

Both the 1998 and 2000 telephone surveys interviewed citizens aged 18 and over. This 2002 survey is based on registered voters.

This 2002 sample reflects a random cross-section of registered voters in Wake County. The poll sample was generated using random digit dialing procedures from a comprehensive list of telephone exchanges active in Wake County. Poll participants were screened for Wake residency and as registered to vote. The 2002 poll sample demographics match closely with the 2000 cross-section poll sample of Wake residents in gender, race and age.

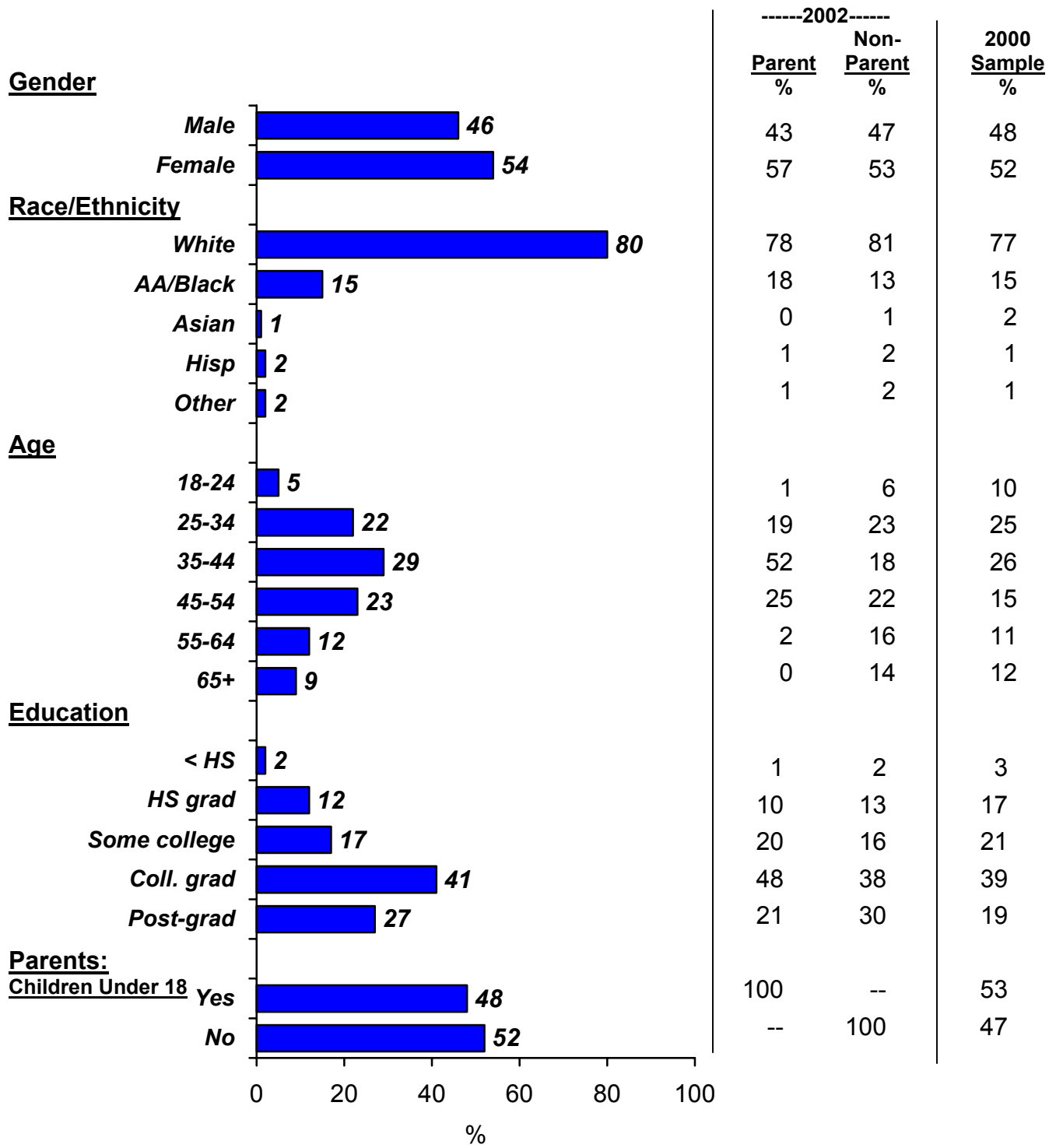
As in 2000, the 2002 survey was preceded by a qualitative focus group phase. Two group discussions were held in June – one with a cross-section of Wake County citizens and the second with high-level community opinion leaders recruited by Wake Education Partnership.

This community assessment meets five objectives:

- Clarify perceptions: *We want to reframe our view from political/partisan to an objective assessment of the issues.*
- Guide partnerships: *We want to move from a stampede of good intentions to a more focused effort with volunteerism and private investment.*
- Engage community: *We want to strengthen community ownership for public education or, as one of our focus group participants observed, put the public back in public education.*
- Validate parent surveys: *Wake schools stand out as a leader in seeking customer feedback. We want to confirm these findings through an objective source.*
- Assist elected officials: *We want to move from partisan consideration of schools issues to a more objective assessment and provide data – such as gap analysis – to focus resources.*

The following chart details the demographic traits of the 2002 survey sample and trends from the 2000 and 1998 surveys (see next page).

Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n=650 Registered Voters)



Overview of Focus Group and Survey Findings

Two focus group sessions helped to inform the survey instrument, in addition to offering insight into the responses to the poll. Several themes became apparent during the focus group discussions and after comparison between the discussions and the poll results.

- Wake voters hold vague positive views of the school system, but are largely uninformed about the specific accomplishments of Wake County's schools. The information vacuum is filled with cynical views colored by national press, "government inefficiency" and isolated/anecdotal experience.
- The challenge is to bridge the knowledge gap: Wake County Public School System performs well on factors the public believes are most important – test scores, financial efficiency, community/parental involvement, innovation and choice – yet community perception does not reflect these facts.
- Focus groups suggest that with knowledge of Wake County Public School System's performance comes:
 - Support for new revenue initiatives;
 - Justification for initial general positive feelings; and
 - More positive feelings about the overall community.
- Survey trends show an increase in performance gaps on a number of highly rated "importance" factors, including mastery of basics, students being challenged, high standards and physical facility. In most cases, "gaps" represent a return to 1998 levels. This trend mirrors the drop in positive perceptions of Wake schools "improving over time," again suggesting that public awareness of real school system accomplishment is not being communicated.
- Still, Wake voters show a strong level of potential support for a \$400 million capital bond. Direct tax increases for Wake schools are less popular.

II. Perceptions of Quality

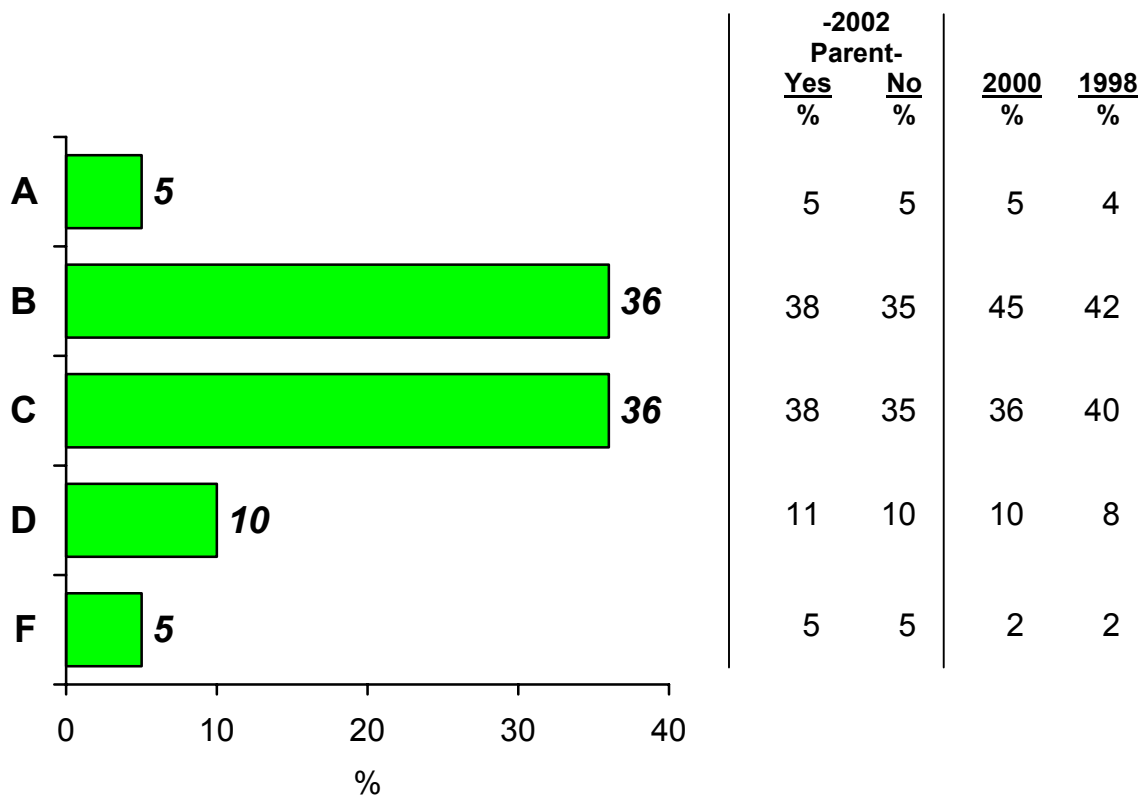
Grading of School Quality

As with previous surveys, the vast majority (77%) of Wake voters give the school system grades of “C” or better. The level of top grades – “A” or “B” – is down to 41% today from 50% in 2000 and 46% in 1998. Parents in 2002 (43% “A” or “B”) are only slightly above non-parents (40% “A” or “B”) in providing top-level grades.

These Wake County grades are in line with national polls showing “A” or “B” grades of 47% for local schools nationally and 44% in the South.

Quality of Wake Schools – Grading

Students are often given grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to evaluate the quality of their work. Which grade would you give Wake County Public Schools – A, B, C, D, or Fail?

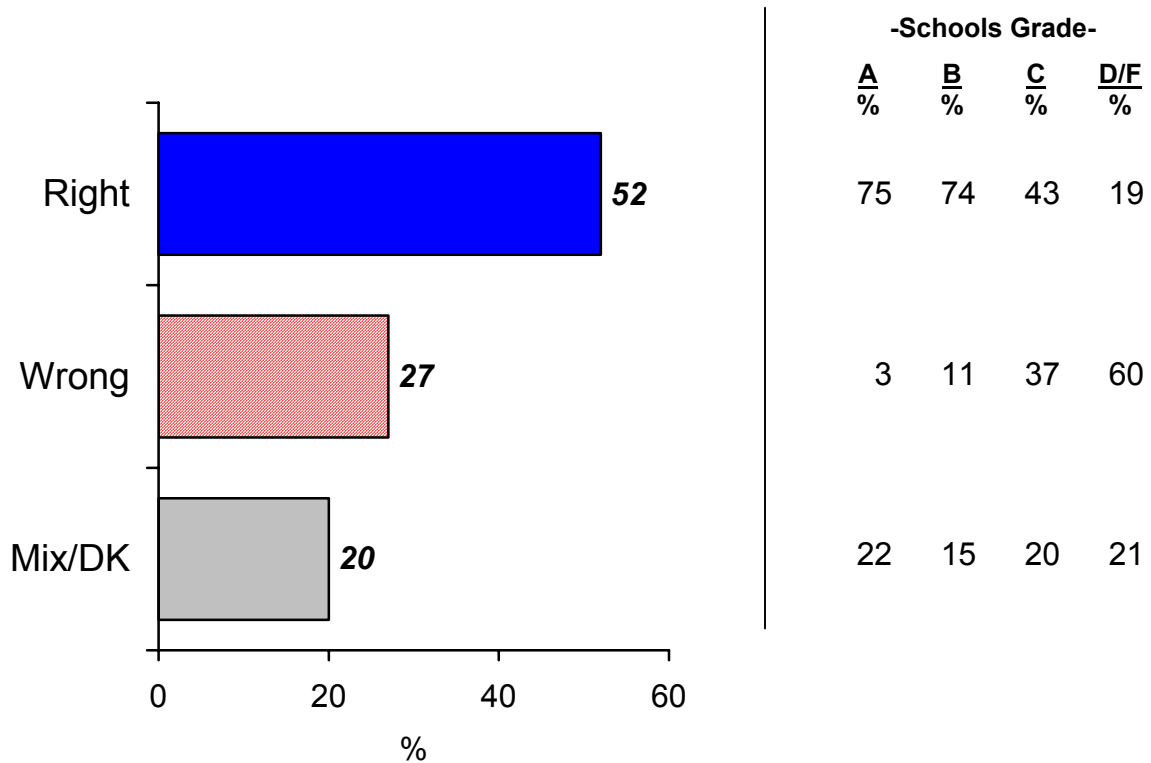


Feelings about the quality of Wake schools strongly influence how voters feel about their county in general. Of the 41% who rate public schools “A” or “B,” three-fourths are positive about the county’s direction, while 60% of those rating schools “D” or “F” rate the county’s direction as “wrong.” Overall, Wake voters are two-to-one positive about the county’s direction.

Public schools are an important barometer of general community satisfaction.

Satisfaction with Wake County Direction and Relationship with School Quality Grade

Do you think things in Wake County are generally heading in the right or wrong direction?

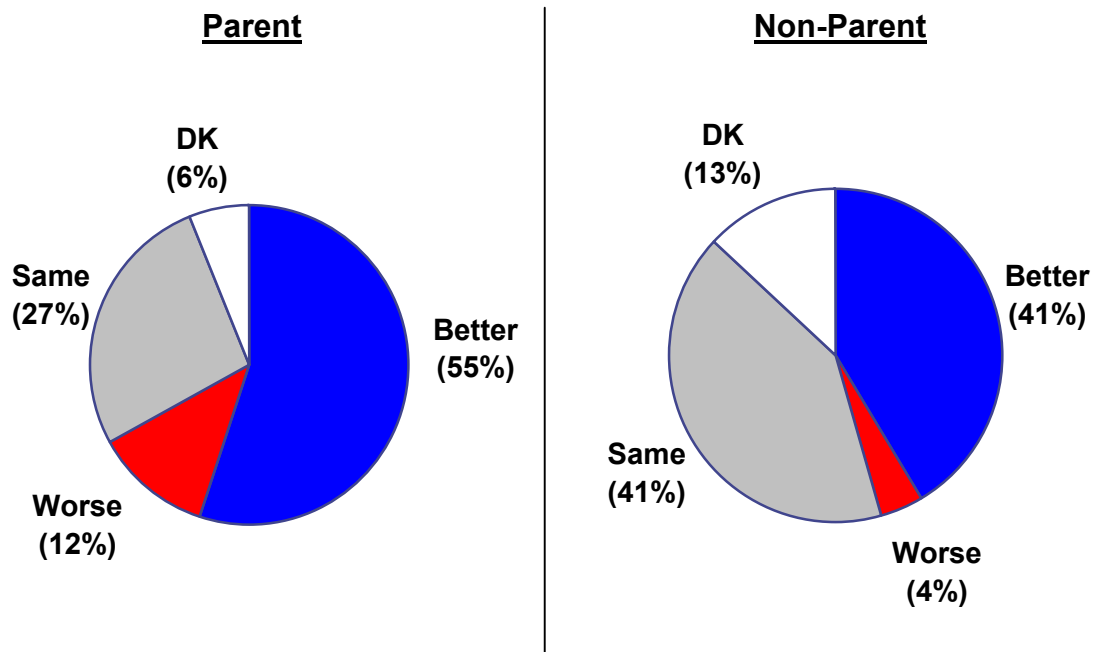


Wake County Public School System: Consistent Quality?

Eighty-two percent (82%) of both parents and non-parents say their local area Wake school is the “same” or “better” than those in other parts of the county [*new item*]. This response suggests that the concerns expressed in focus groups are isolated.

Evaluation of Local Wake County Public Schools vs. Others

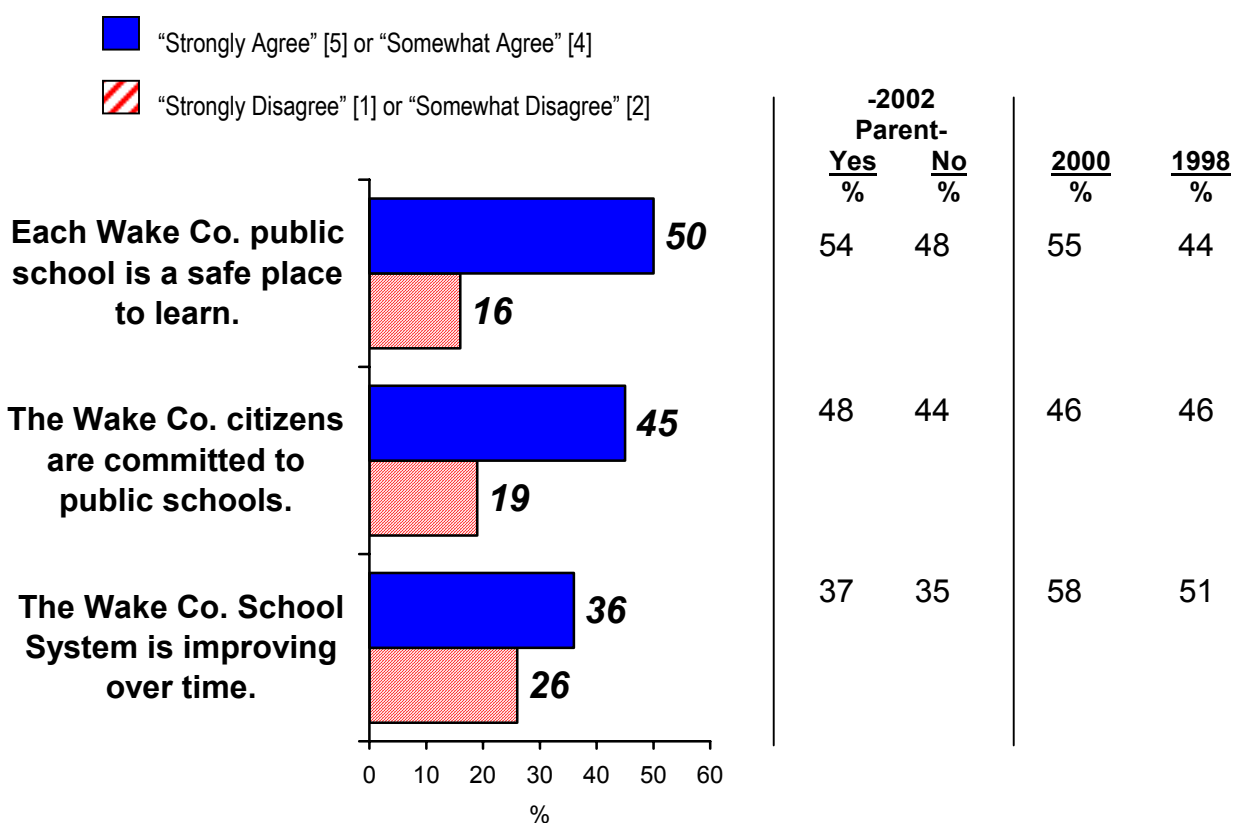
Overall, would you say that the quality of local schools that either your child attends or are near your home are better, worse, or about the same as those in other parts of the Wake County Public School System?



School System Goals

The overall trend in evaluations of Wake County schools as a safe place to learn or as having committed citizen support is fairly consistent with 2000 and 1998 findings. Half of voters agree (50%) schools are safe (up from 1998, but down slightly – especially among non-parents – from 2000) and just under half (45%) say local citizens are committed to the public schools (no change in trends).

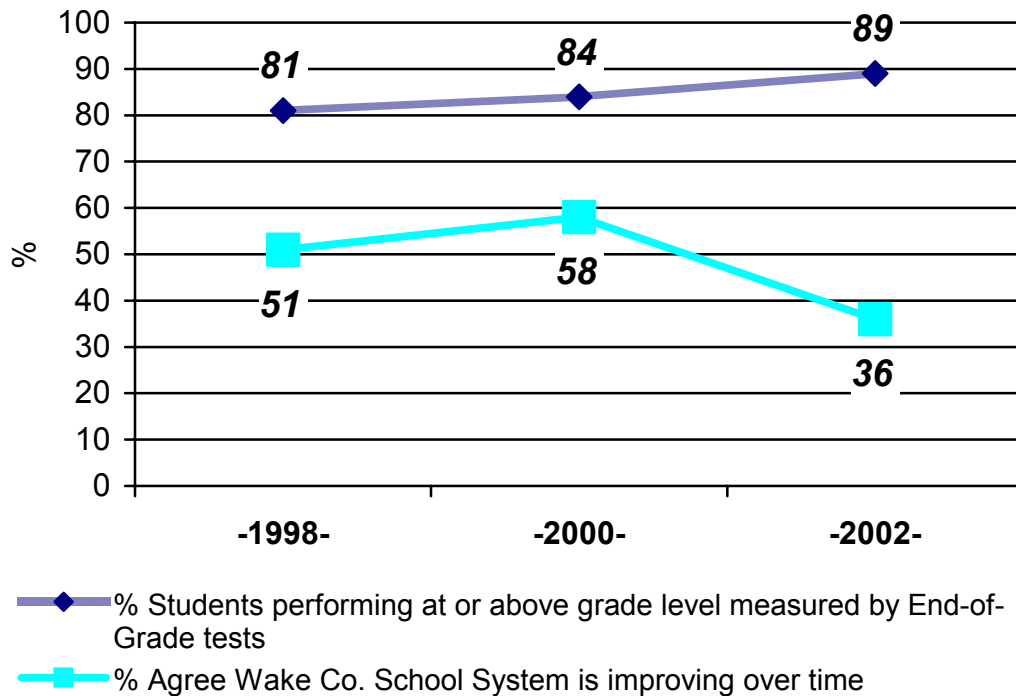
Rating of School System for Meeting Goals



However, a significant change comes for “improving over time.” Now, just 36% “agree” that the Wake County Public School System is improving over time – down nearly 20 points from 2000 and 15 points from 1998. Parents and non-parents continue to rate Wake schools the same for “improving.”

Perceptions of “improving” (which are going down) are at odds with the reality of improving test scores. This disconnect again shows how the public is not hearing news of Wake schools’ accomplishments.

Perception of “Schools Improving” vs. Reality of Test Scores



“Gap Analysis”: School Characteristics and Incidence of Happening

School Characteristics

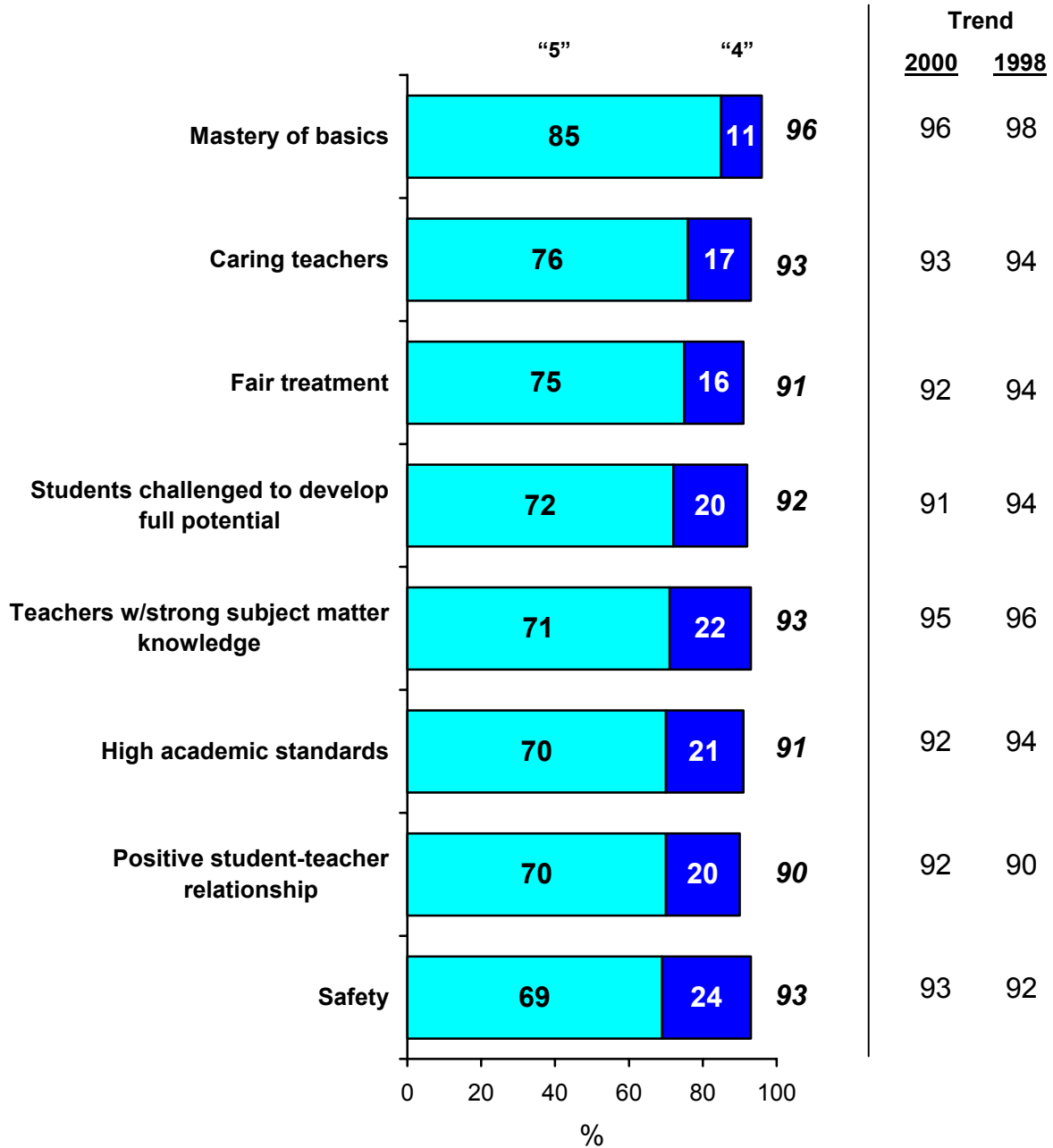
Ninety percent (90%) or more of Wake County voters still consider nine school characteristics to have “great” or “much” importance in defining a very successful school. The trends from 2000 or 1998 vary little.

In fact, “great importance” (a “5” rating) is ascribed at 75% or more to three items – “mastery of basics,” “caring teachers” and “fair treatment of all students.”

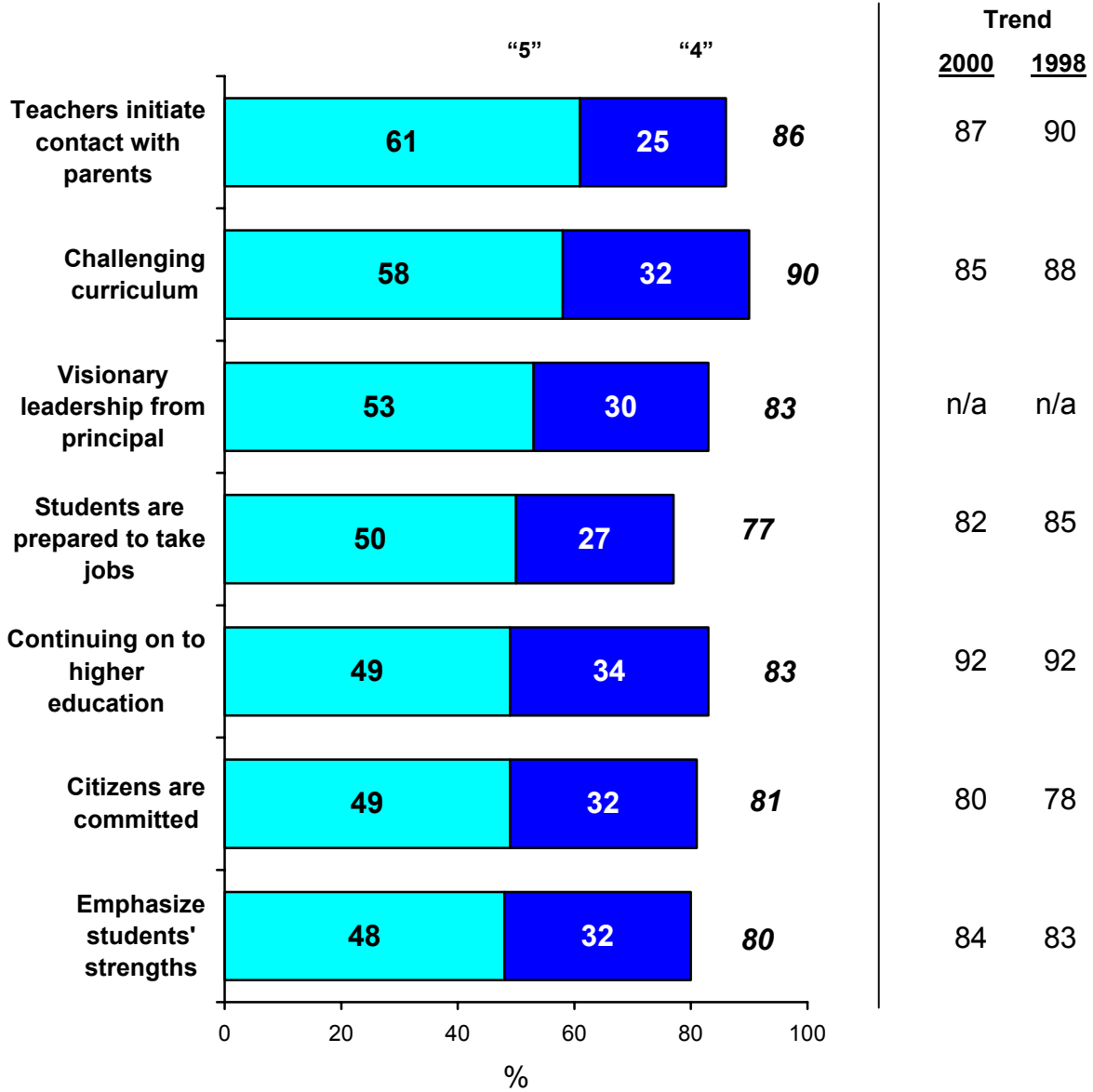
Five other characteristics are rated of “great importance” by about 70% or more – “students challenged,” “teacher knowledge,” “academic standards,” “teacher-student relationships” and safety.

Parents and non-parents offer virtually identical ratings of these top tier items. See the next page for graphs detailing responses.

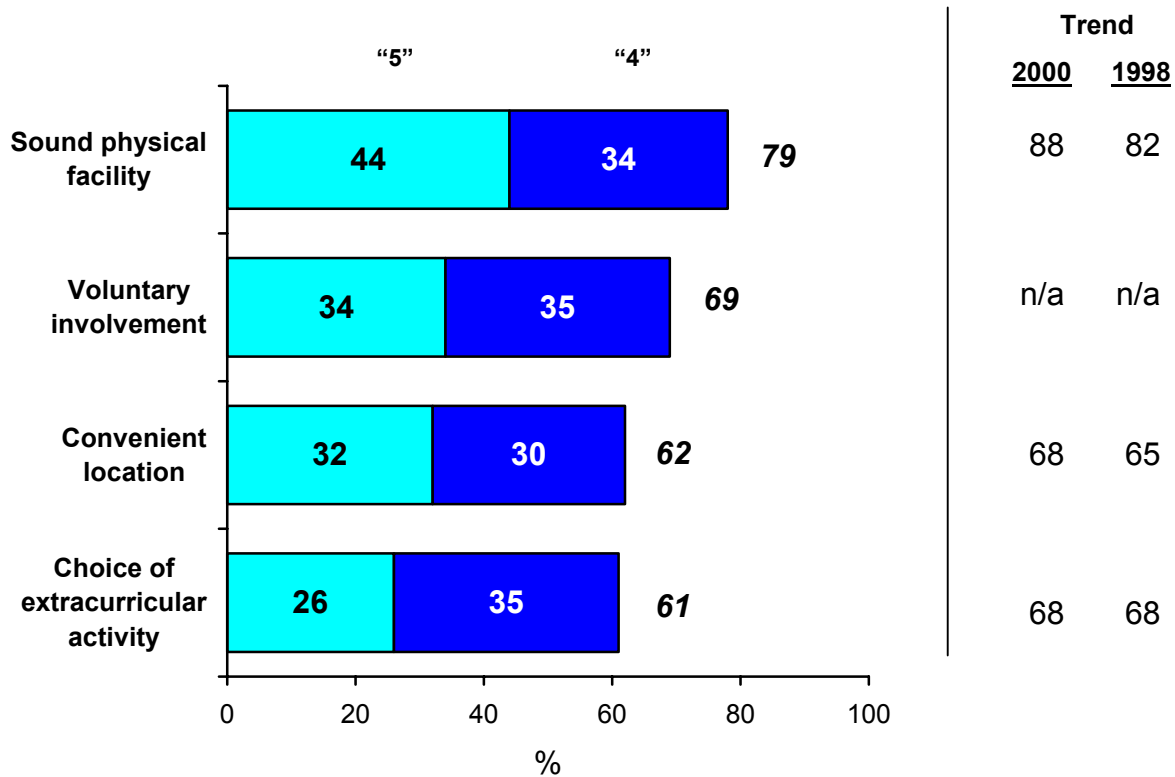
Importance Rating of Characteristics of a Very Successful School



Importance Rating of Characteristics of a Very Successful School



Importance Rating of Characteristics of a Very Successful School



Overall “importance” ratings (combined “5” plus “4”) dip into the low 80s and high 70s for the next tier of six items. Of these, only one – “students prepared for the workforce” – is rated differently for non-parents (higher) than parents. Only on “continuing on to higher education” does there appear to be a dip in trend ratings; and then only among parents. Nearly all of these second tier items are rated “5” (“great importance”) by half.

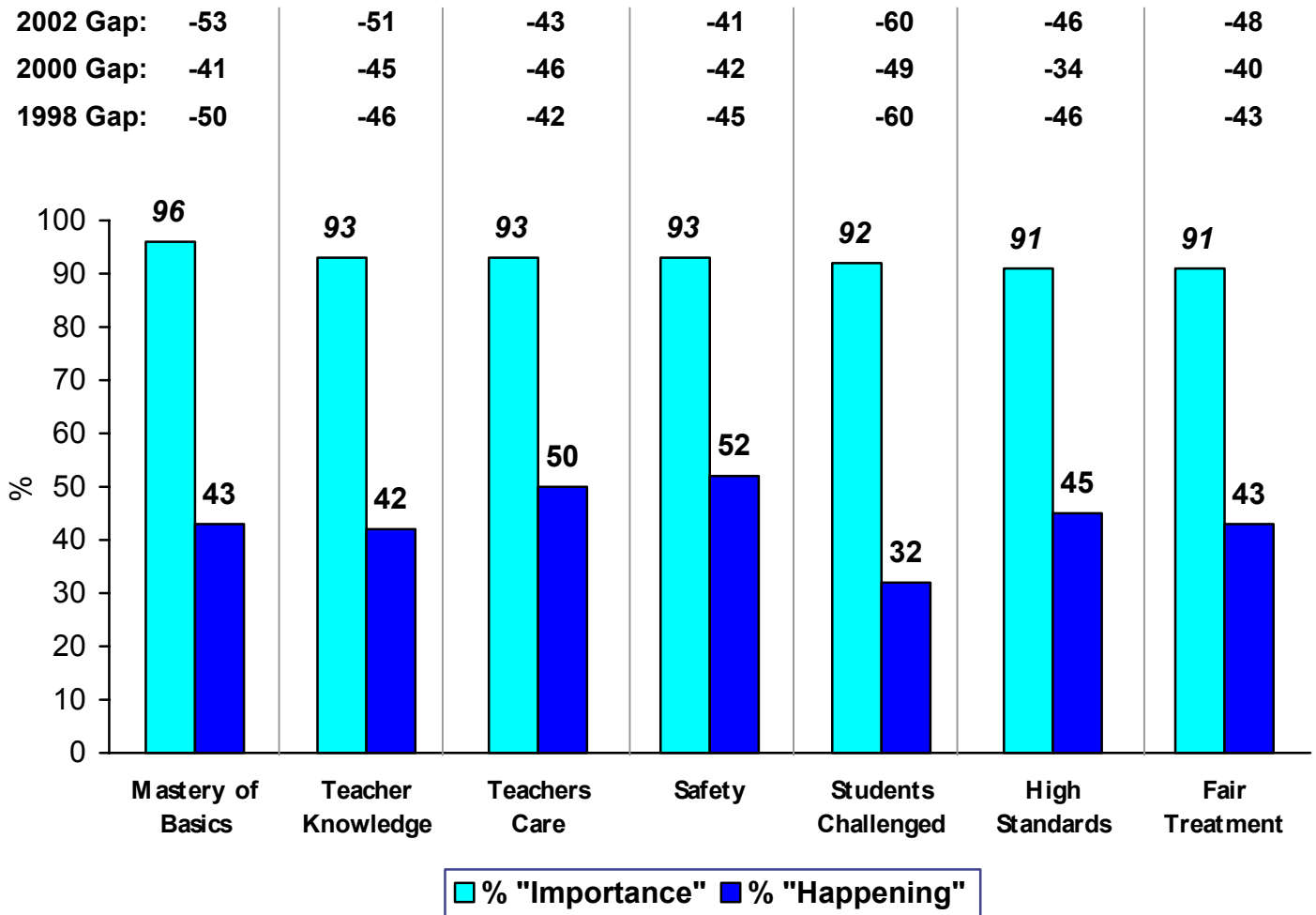
At the third tier of importance are three characteristics considered of “great importance” to about one-third and rated “4” or “5” by just over 60% with trends down slightly. Items are “choice of extracurricular activity,” “convenient location” and “business and community voluntary involvement.”

Gap Analysis: Incidence of “Happening” vs. Importance

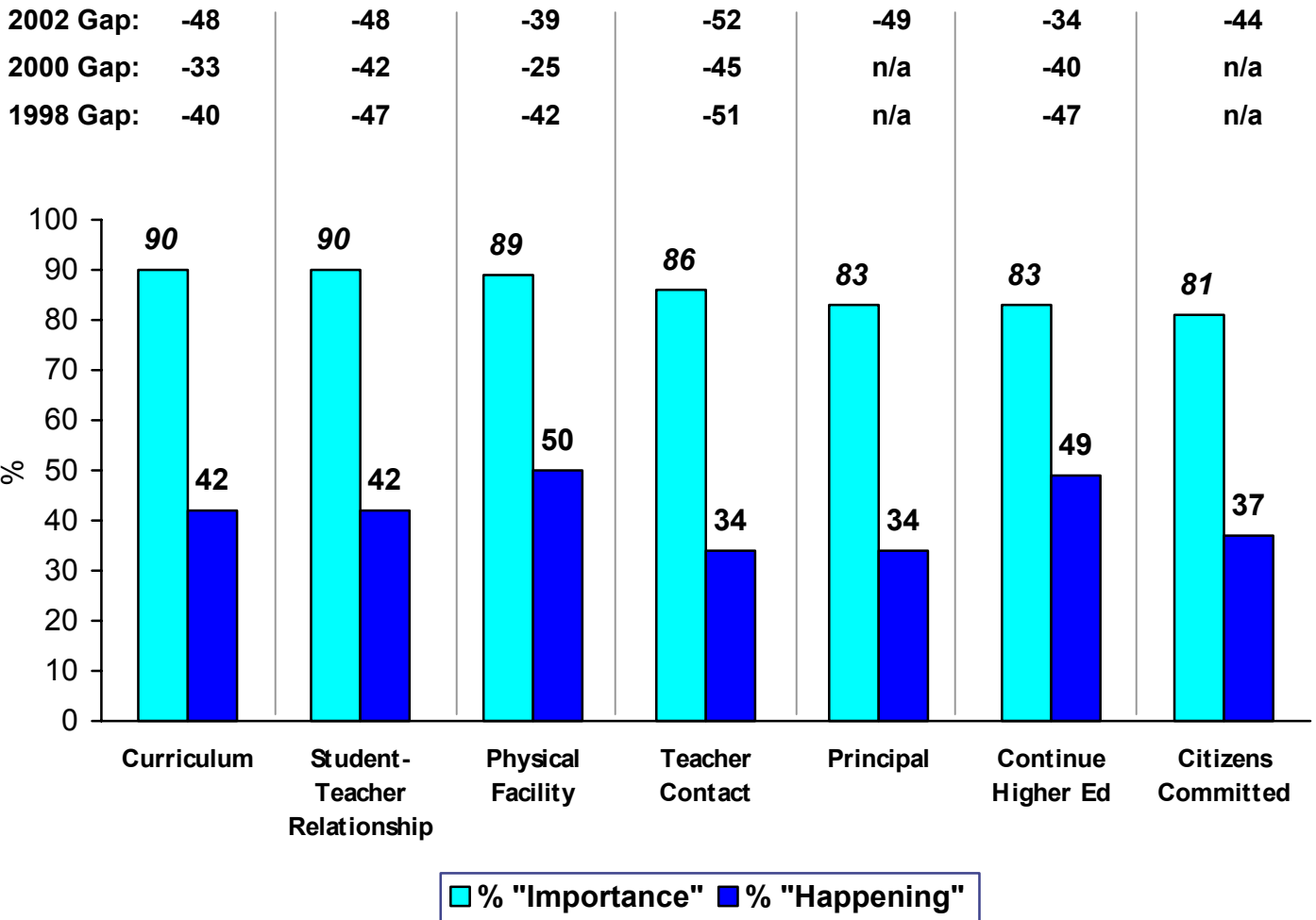
The gap analysis comparing importance of characteristics to a very successful school (“5” or “4” ratings) and incidence of that characteristic happening (“5” or “4” ratings) is tabled on the next page.

Bars to the left on each rating dimension show importance ratings (“5” or “4” on 5-point importance scale) while the companion bar just to the right on each dimension shows “happening” rating (“5” or “4” on a 5-point scale). Gaps between importance and happening are shown for all three years.

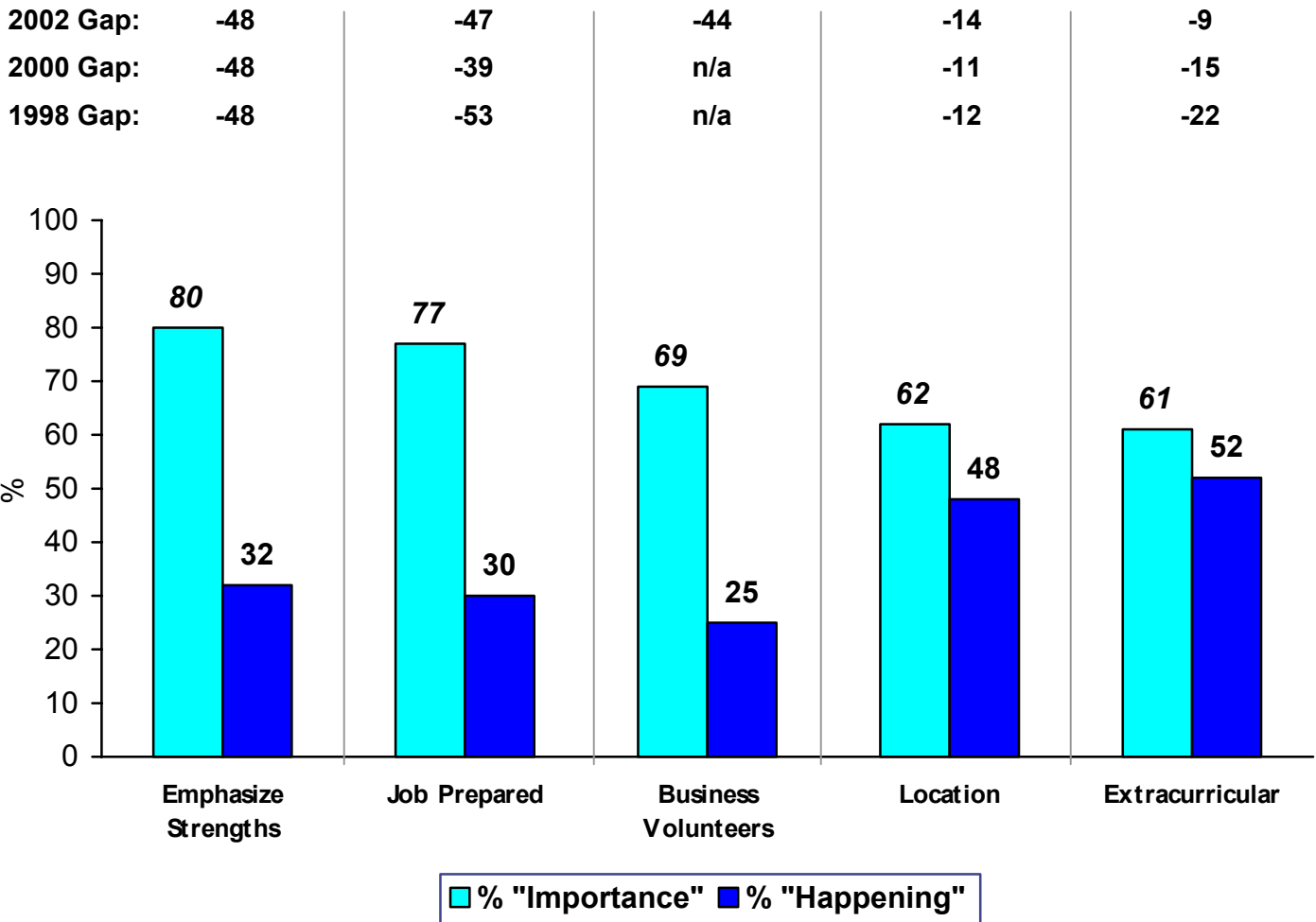
Gap Analysis: Likelihood of "Very Successful School" Characteristics to Occur in Wake County Public School System vs. Importance Rating



**Gap Analysis:
Likelihood of "Very Successful School" Characteristics to Occur in
Wake County Public School System vs. Importance Rating**



**Gap Analysis:
Likelihood of "Very Successful School" Characteristics to Occur in
Wake County Public School System vs. Importance Rating**



The smallest performance gaps (as true in previous surveys) continue to be for “extracurricular activities” and “convenient location.” The gap for “extracurricular activities” is down, while for “convenient location,” the gap with parents continues to be lower than with non-parents.

The gap on “physical facility” remains in the modest range, continuing the trend from 2000, which showed a declining gap from 1998.

The largest gap (-60) is on “students being challenged.” This is a trend up in gap from 2000 but reestablishes this item as the top gap from the 1998 study.

Characteristics where the gap is DOWN from 2000 to 2002 are:

- *Safety*: among parents; and
- *Continuing to Higher Ed*: among parents.

The gap trend from 2000 to 2002 is UP for the following items:

- *Safety* (but, non-parents only);
- *High Standard* (but only back to 1998 levels);
- *Fair Treatment* (now slightly above 1998 levels);
- *Mastery of Basics* (now slightly above 1998 levels);
- *Challenging Curriculum* (now slightly above 1998 levels);
- *Positive Teacher-Student Relationships* (but only back to 1998 levels); and
- *Prepared for Jobs* (but still slightly lower than 1998 levels).

III. Perceptions of Issues

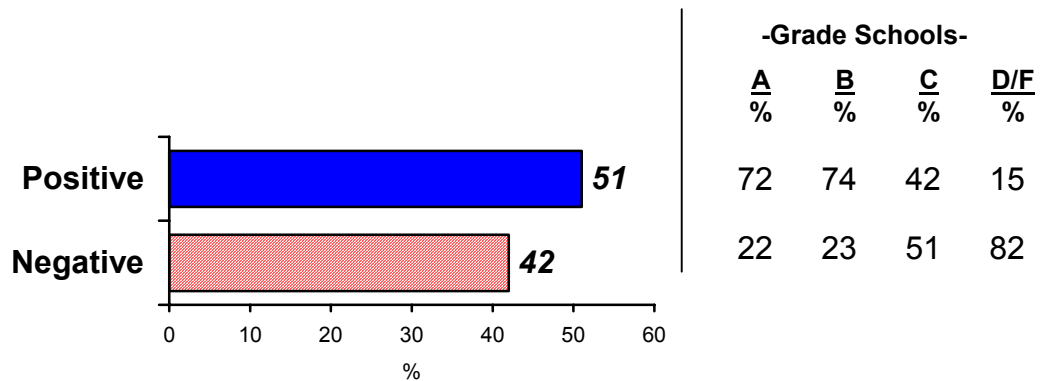
School Finances and New Revenue

Fiscal Management of Schools

One of the key indicators of the public’s willingness to support future new revenue sources for Wake County public schools, according to the focus groups, is evaluations of how well the system efficiently manages the revenues it receives today. A thin 51-42 majority rate Wake County Public School System positively on fiscal management.

Evaluation of How Well Wake County Public School System Manages Money

In general, how would you rate the job the Wake County public school district does efficiently managing the tax money it receives and spends -- excellent, good, not so good, or poor?



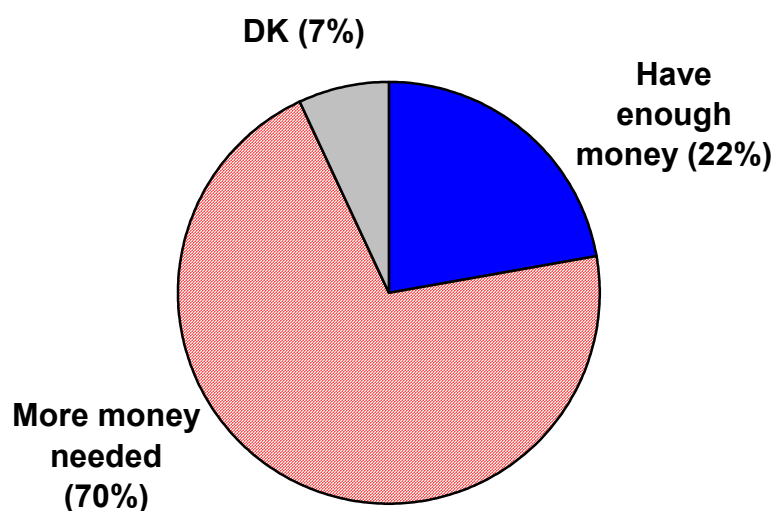
As expected, school quality grades are highly correlated with evaluations of district fiscal management. “A” or “B” graders are over 70% supportive, “C” graders are slightly negative, while “D” and “F” graders are highly critical (82% negative).

Perceived Need for “More Money”

Despite these generally mixed ratings of district fiscal stewardship, Wake voters are overwhelmingly convinced the Wake County Public School System will need more money in the next three to five years to meet its needs; 71% say “more,” while 22% say the schools “have enough.” Parents and non-parents are likeminded in perceiving a need for “more money” for the school system.

Evaluation of Fiscal Condition of Wake County Public School System

In your opinion, do Wake County Public Schools have enough money to meet their needs over the next 3 to 5 years or is more money needed?



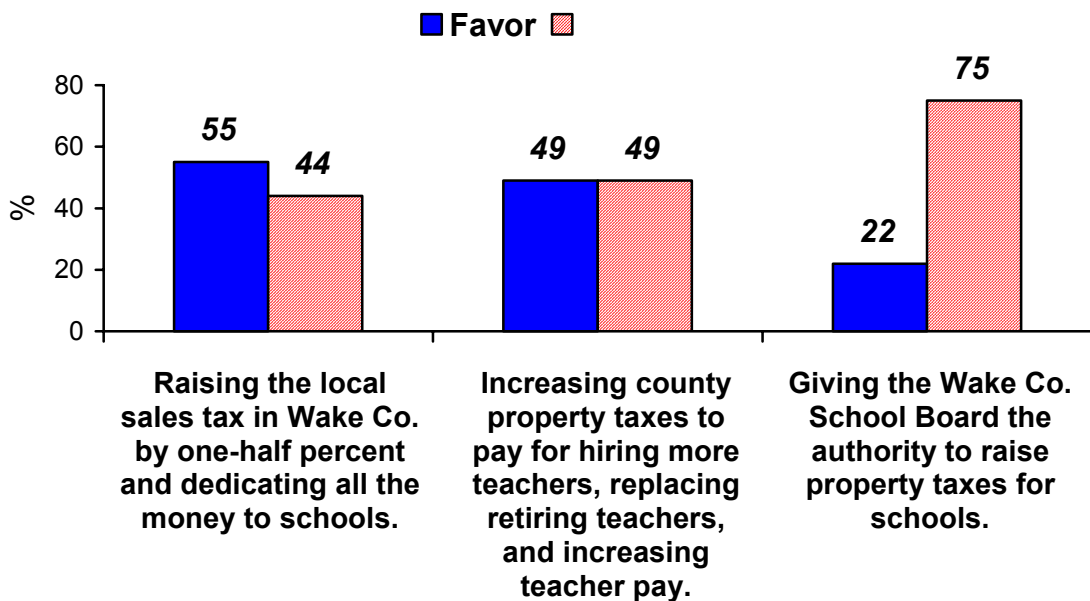
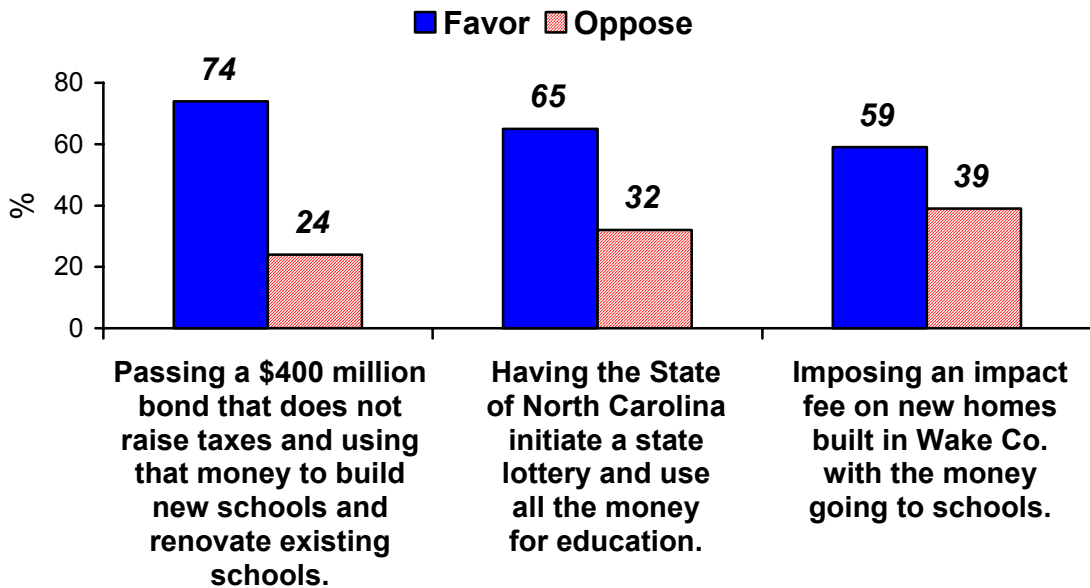
Revenue Options

Of six different possible revenue enhancing mechanisms for Wake County Public Schools, only one – a \$400 million bond that does not raise taxes – gets the electorate’s support at a level (74% favor) equal to the general opinion that Wake schools need more money. Parents (74%) and non-parents (73%) equally support the bond.

Also supported by a majority of all Wake County voters are a state lottery (65% favor), new home impact fees (59%), and a half cent sales tax increase (55%).

Meanwhile, two property tax proposals fail to gain majority support.

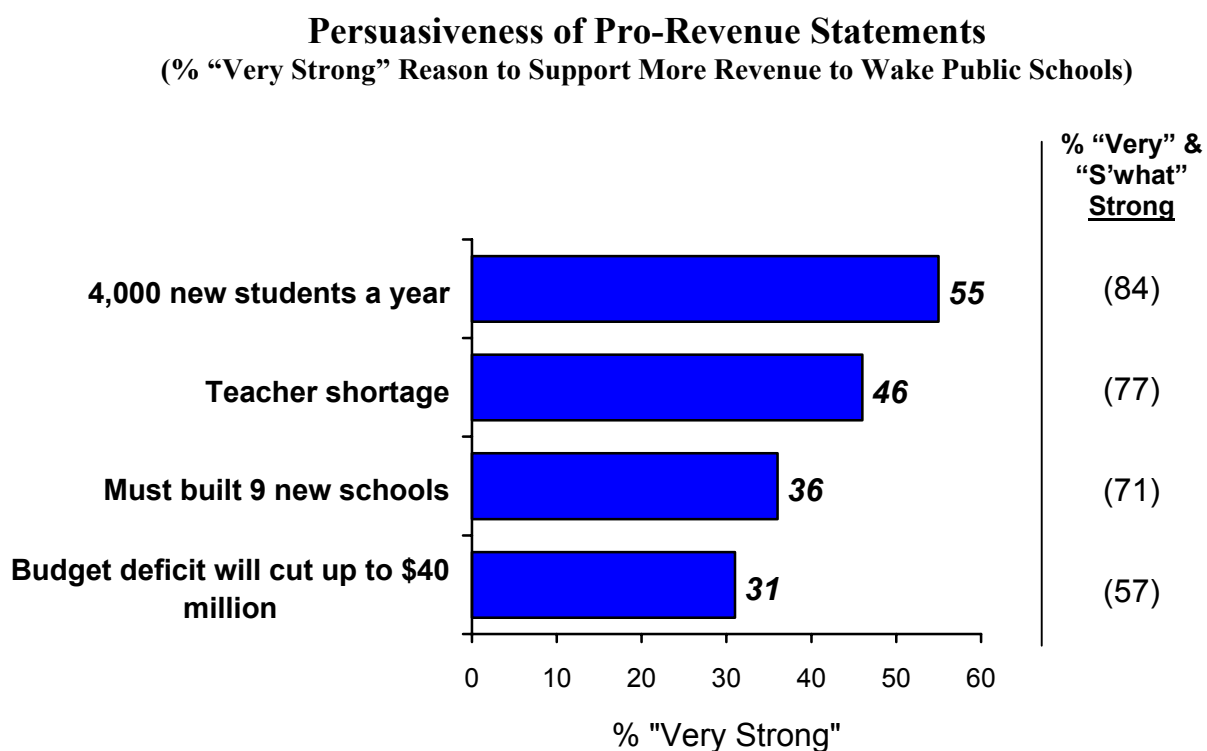
Support for Various Revenue Raising Option



Pro-Revenue Statements

Of four statements designed to support the need for new public school revenues for Wake County, only one is considered a “very strong” reason to a majority (55%) of voters – the large projected student population growth rate. The pending “teacher shortage” is a close second in potency (46% “very strong” reason).

The state’s pending budget deficit and its impact on Wake’s school budget appears to be the weakest rationale for new revenues.

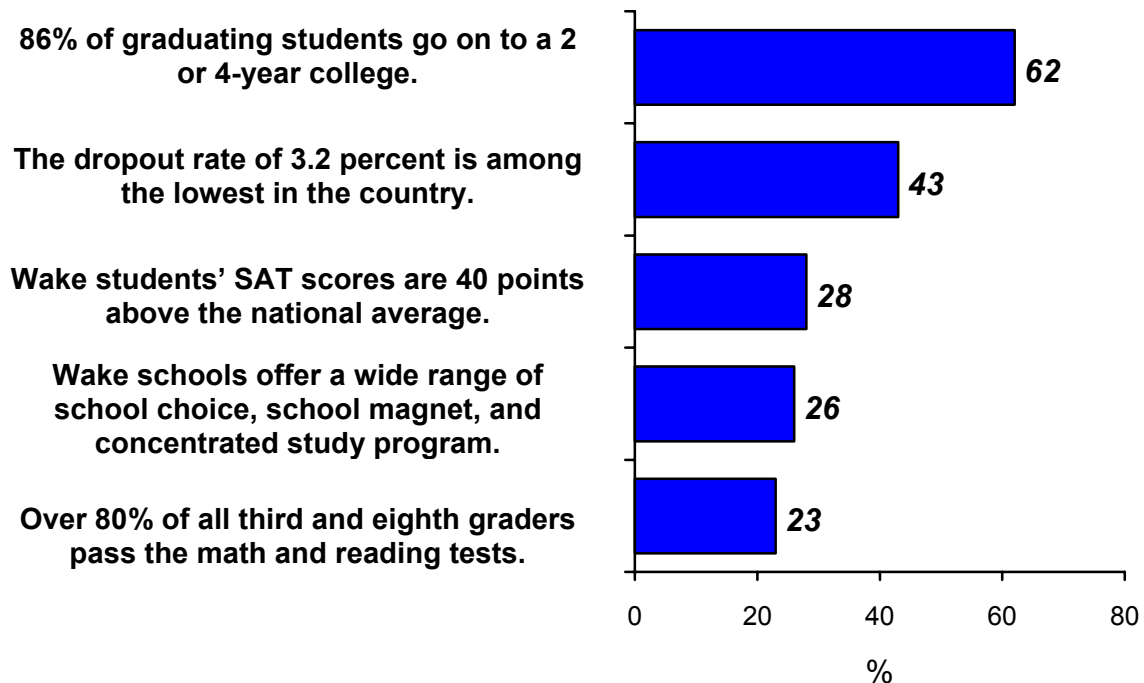


Evaluations of Positive Accomplishments

The focus groups showed that exposure to a series of accomplishments by the Wake County Public Schools created both a more positive view of the school district and strengthened support for new revenues to meet the district's needs, especially among the "citizen" group.

When five system accomplishments are tested in the poll, the high percentage of students who go on to continue their education at a higher education institution scores best. Just over three-fifths of both parents and non-parents choose this as the most positive accomplishment. Second is the Wake County School System's low dropout rate, which is slightly higher scoring among non-parents than parents. In comparison, parents (33%) are slightly more impressed than non-parents (23%) with the school system's above average SAT scores.

Most Positive Accomplishment (1st and 2nd Choice Combined)

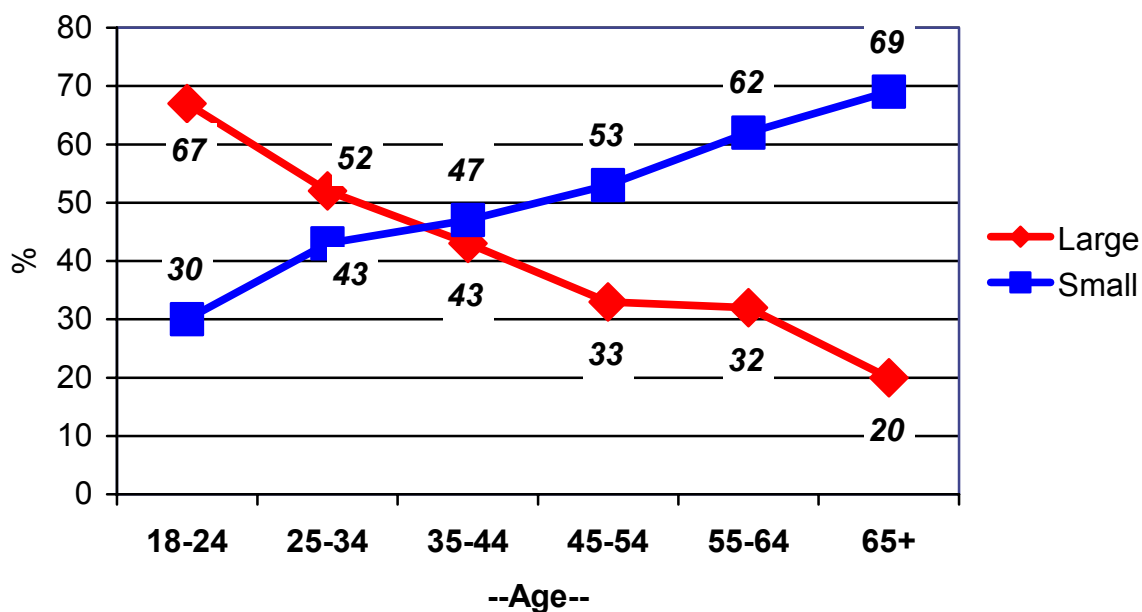


School Size

Wake County voters express a modest 50% to 41% preference for new school construction to be smaller schools rather than larger “cost-efficient schools.”

The strongest correlation of opinion on school size comes by age. Younger voters support larger schools, while older voters smaller schools. Opinion in favor of smaller schools trends up directly as age increases.

Preference for School Size: By Age

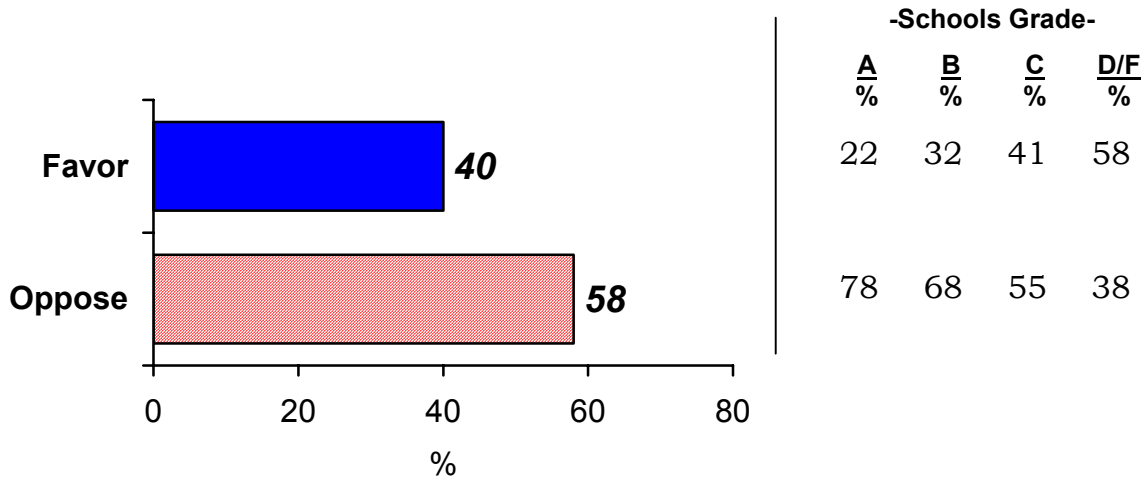


Vouchers

County voters oppose vouchers by 58% to 40%. Those rating Wake Schools at “A” or “B” oppose vouchers by more than 70%.

Opinion on School Vouchers

Do you favor or oppose using public tax dollars to give parents educational voucher money or tax credits to send their children to private or religious schools?



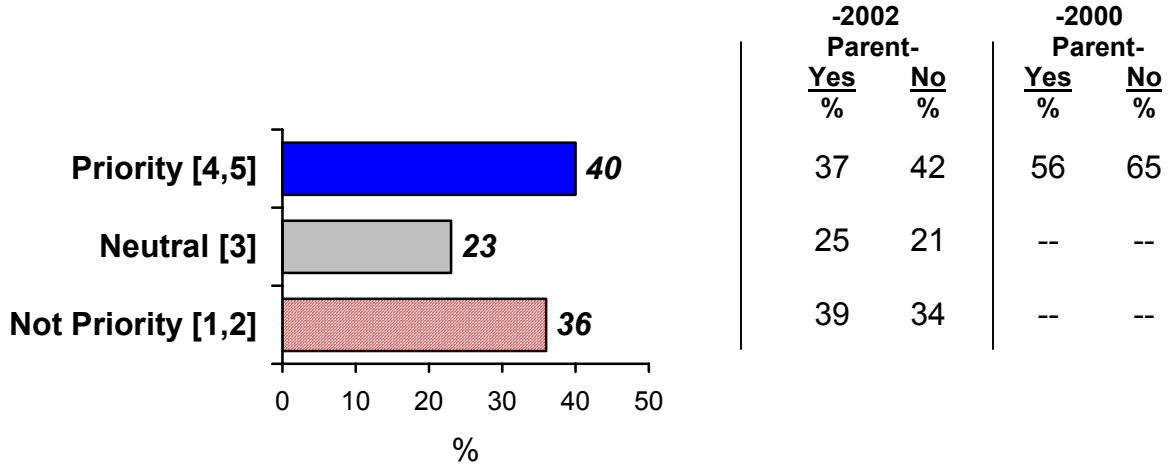
Diversity

Opinions on diversity in the Wake County Public Schools appear to have softened since 2000. Today, 40% of Wake voters say “maintaining racial and economic diversity in the schools” is a high priority (rated “4” or “5” on a 5-point priority scale). This is a drop of about 20 points among both parents and non-parents since 2000. Now, the percent saying “diversity” is a low priority (rated “1” or “2”) is nearly equal (36%) to those rating it a high priority.

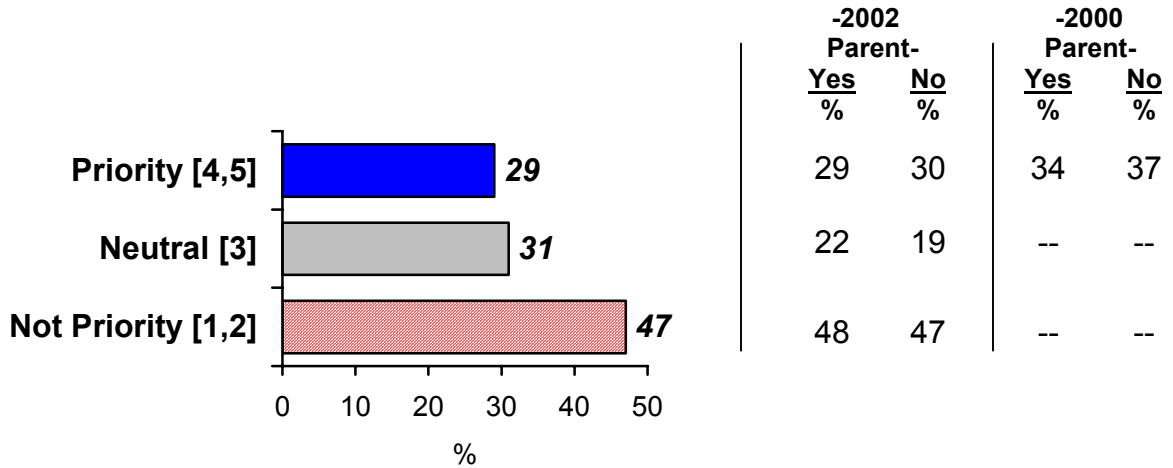
The trend in “limit the number of low-performing students” per school is only down a few points from 2000 – 29% now, 35% then. Today, nearly half (47%) say this is “not a priority.” Opinions are the same among parents and non-parents.

Opinions on School Diversity

a. To maintain racial and economic diversity in the schools.



b. To limit the number of low-performing students at each school in order to protect the quality of schools.



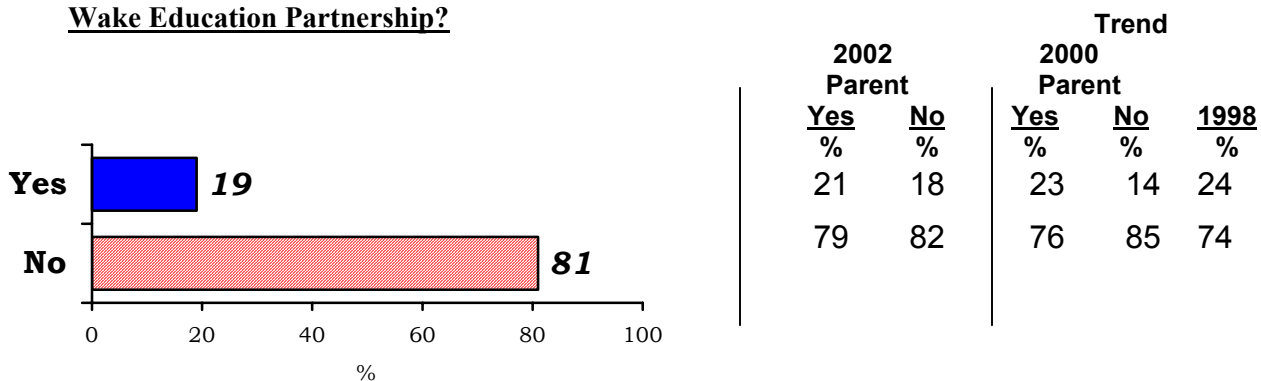
Evaluations of Wake Education Partnership

Familiarity with Wake Education Partnership appears fairly static. Today 19% of voters say they are familiar (21% of parents) with the organization’s mission, which is the same as the average familiarity in 2000. In 1998, the 24% familiarity with Wake Education Partnership was slightly higher.

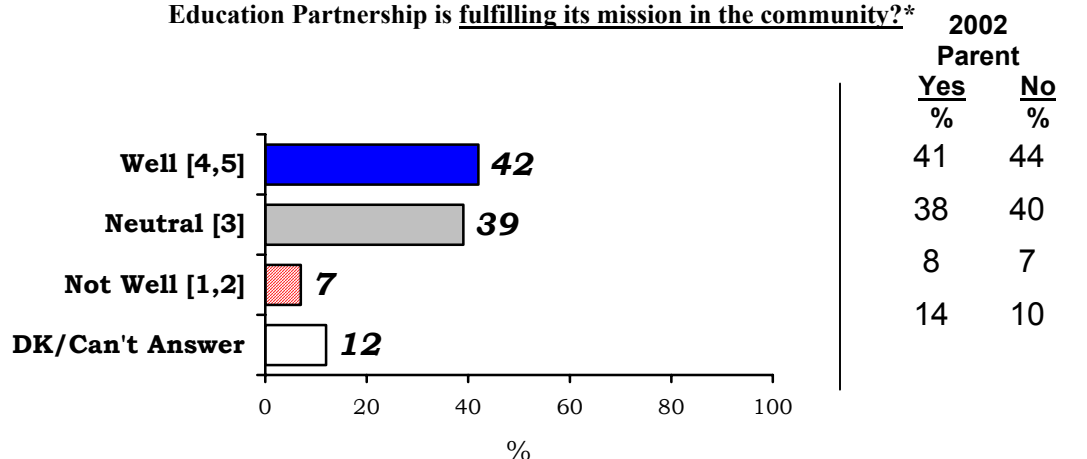
Of those familiar, more believe the Partnership is doing “well” at meeting its mission than not well by a six-to-one ratio.

Awareness and Opinions of Wake Education Partnership

Are you familiar with the mission of Wake Education Partnership?



Using a scale of one to five, with “5” being extremely well, and “1” being not well at all, please tell me how well you feel Wake Education Partnership is fulfilling its mission in the community?*



* Asked of the 19% “familiar” with Wake Education Partnership.

Focus Group Findings: What Community Opinion Leaders Say

- **Biggest Challenges:**

- Enrollment growth;
- Budget cuts;
- Teacher shortage;
- Reaching lofty achievement goals; and
- Closing achievement gaps for minorities.

- **Needs:**

- Utilize available community resources;
- Retain teachers;
- Create student stability; and
- Tell the positive story about Wake County Public School System.

IV. Background

FrederickPolls

Keith Frederick is the owner of the nationally active opinion research firm of FrederickPolls, LLC, based in Arlington, Va. Prior to establishing FrederickPolls in January 2000, Keith Frederick was partner in the firm Frederick Schneiders Research, the opinion research arm for the Cassidy Companies, Washington, D.C.'s largest lobbying and public affairs company. FrederickPolls practices the art of unlocking the underlying opinion structure that causes Americans to make a judgment in favor of one political candidate over another, one side on a ballot measure over another, or one corporate interest over its rivals. In his 23 years of polling experience, Keith Frederick has conducted projects for political campaigns, public policy and education policy, public financing and state and local referendums, including community assessments in several states.

Question Path

1. First of all, do you think things in Wake County are generally heading in the right or wrong direction?
2. Students are often given grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to evaluate the quality of their work. Which grade would you give Wake County Public Schools – A, B, C, D, or Fail?
- 2a. [**IF “D” OR “FAIL”**] What is the reason you give the grade of [D/FAIL]?
3. Using a scale of five to one, where “5” means you strongly agree and “1” means you strongly disagree, how strongly do you agree or disagree that...?
 - a. The Wake County School System is improving over time.
 - b. Each Wake County public school is a safe place to learn.
 - c. The Wake County citizens are committed to public schools.
4. Schools can be successful for a number of reasons. I would like you to tell me how important each of the following characteristics is in having a very successful school. On a one to five scale, where “5” is having great importance, “4” is having much importance, “3” is of some importance, “2” is of little importance, and “1” is not at all important, how important is each of the following reasons for a school to be successful.
 - a. Sense of safety/order.
 - b. Mastery of basics – such as reading, writing and math.
 - c. Challenging curriculum.
 - d. Caring teachers.
 - e. Teachers with strong subject matter knowledge.
 - f. Fair treatment of all children.
 - g. High academic standards.
 - h. Students challenged to develop their full potential.
 - i. Sound physical facility.
 - j. Convenient location.
 - k. Enough choices of extracurricular activities.
 - l. Positive teacher-student relationships.
 - m. Emphasize students’ strengths.
 - n. Students who continue on to higher education.
 - o. Students are prepared to take jobs.
 - p. Teachers initiating contact with parents about their child’s progress.
 - q. Citizens are committed to the public schools.
 - r. Visionary leadership from the principal.
 - s. Volunteer involvement from local business and the community.
5. Please rate how likely these characteristics are to be happening in Wake County Public Schools. On a one to five scale, please rate “1” if the characteristic is not happening at all, “2” if it seldom happens, “3” if it sometimes happens, “4” if it happens frequently, or “5” if the characteristic happens all the time.
 - a. Sense of safety/order.
 - b. Mastery of basics – such as reading, writing and math.
 - c. Challenging curriculum.
 - d. Caring teachers.
 - e. Teachers with strong subject matter knowledge.
 - f. Fair treatment of all children.
 - g. High academic standards.
 - h. Students challenged to develop their full potential.

- i. Sound physical facility.
 - j. Convenient location.
 - k. Enough choices of extracurricular activities.
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 - m. Emphasize students' strengths.
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 - o. Students are prepared to take jobs.
 - p. Teachers initiating contact with parents about their child's progress.
 - q. Citizens are committed to the public schools.
 - r. Visionary leadership from the principal.
 - s. Volunteer involvement from local business and the community.
6. Overall, would you say that the quality of local schools that either your child attends or are near your home are better, worse, or about the same as those in other parts of the Wake County public school system?
7. In your opinion, do Wake County public schools have enough money to meet their needs over the next three to five years or is more money needed?
8. In general, how would you rate the job the Wake County public school district does efficiently managing the tax money it receives and spends – excellent, good, not so good, or poor?
9. Next tell me if you would strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose each of the following ways to generate more money for Wake County public schools.
- a. Passing a 400 million-dollar bond measure that does not raise taxes and using that money to build new schools and renovate existing schools.
 - b. Increasing county property taxes to pay for hiring more teachers, replacing retiring teachers and increasing teacher pay.
 - c. Giving the Wake County School Board the authority to raise property taxes for schools.
 - d. Raising the local sales tax in Wake County by one-half percent and dedicating all the money to schools.
 - e. Having the State of North Carolina initiate a state lottery and use all the money for education.
 - f. Imposing an impact fee on new homes built in Wake County with the money going to schools.
10. Next I will read you some reasons that supporters of more revenue for Wake County public schools might give. Tell me if you think each is a VERY STRONG reason, a SOMEWHAT STRONG reason, or NOT A STRONG REASON for supporting either a tax increase or a school bond for Wake County Schools.
- a. The Wake County school system is growing at a rate of 4,000 new students a year and will be overcrowded if new schools aren't built.
 - b. The Wake County school system faces a teacher shortage of about one thousand teachers due to retirement and student population growth.
 - c. The State of North Carolina faces a severe budget deficit, which means they must cut between 20 million dollars to 40 million dollars out of its Wake County school budget.
 - d. To handle student growth, the Wake school system must build six new elementary schools, two new middle schools, and one new high school every two years.

11. Next, tell me how big a priority these two actions should be for the Wake County public schools. Use a scale from one to five, where “1” means “not a priority” and “5” means “top priority.”
- To maintain racial and economic diversity in the schools.
 - To limit the number of low-performing students at each school in order to protect the quality of schools.
12. As the Wake County school system continues to grow, which policy on school building size do you think would be best?
- Continue to build large cost-efficient schools that have a wide range of facilities and amenities.
- OR--
- Build smaller schools so students can have a stronger sense of community even if the schools don't have the wide range of sports, arts, and cultural amenities of larger schools.
13. Do you favor or oppose using public tax dollars to give parents educational voucher money or tax credits to send their children to private or religious schools? And do you strongly or only somewhat [FAVOR/OPPOSE]?
14. Next, I will read you five different statistical facts about the performance of Wake County public school students. Tell me which of the six you find to be most positive. And what is the next most positive?
- The dropout rate of 3.2 percent is among the lowest in the country.
 - Eighty-six percent (86%) of graduating students go on to a 2- or 4-year college.
 - Over 80 percent of all third and eighth graders pass the math and reading tests.
 - Wake students' S.A.T. scores are 40 points above the national average.
 - Wake schools offer a wide range of school choice, school magnet, and concentrated study programs that are among the best in the county.
15. Are you familiar with the mission of Wake Education Partnership?
16. Using a scale of one to five, with “5” being extremely well, and “1” being not well at all, please tell me how well you feel Wake Education Partnership is fulfilling its mission in the community.