

# The Public's Take on Education Accountability: Results from a Survey of Massachusetts Voters

STEVE KOCZELA, RICH PARR AND BEN FORMAN

Understanding public opinion on education accountability is crucial as policymakers work to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the 2015 federal law that replaces No Child Left Behind (NCLB). MassINC partnered with The MassINC Polling Group to learn more about how voters throughout the Commonwealth feel about efforts to assess student learning, measure school quality, and help educators improve school performance. Conducted in November and December 2016, our research included a telephone poll with more than 1,000 Massachusetts voters (including an oversample of 485 respondents from the Commonwealth's 26 Gateway Cities) and a focus group with a representative sample of registered voters.

While voters are not familiar with ESSA by name, our public opinion research suggests many are dissatisfied with current measures of school and student performance, and are open to the changes to school accountability central to the law's main provisions. A general

discussion of findings from the survey and focus group follows below; full topline results from the survey are provided in an Appendix.

## ESSA is not well-known

President Obama signed ESSA into law in December 2015, and education officials in Massachusetts are moving toward full implementation of the new law. Our poll suggests the law has yet to make much of an impression on the public (Figure 1). A majority (56 percent) of Massachusetts voters have heard or read "nothing at all about it," and another 29 percent have heard or read "not too much." There is no demographic group where even a quarter have heard a "great deal" or "fair amount" about the law. This suggests ESSA is a blank slate for voters, waiting to be filled in by their direct experience, word-of-mouth from friends and neighbors, and communications from leaders and the media. In this sense, there is considerable uncertainty in terms of the eventual direction of public opinion.

### ABOUT THIS POLL

These results are based on a telephone poll of 1,006 Massachusetts registered voters, including 485 in the Gateway Cities. Interviews were conducted between November 28 and December 2, 2016, via both landline and cell phone using conventional registration-based sampling procedures. The margin of sampling error is +/- 3.6 percentage points with a 95 percent level of confidence.

ESSA *does* offer education leaders a fresh start with the public. Focus group participants from across the political spectrum had negative associations with NCLB. Schools are “pushing kids through to have better numbers,” wrote one participant. Others saw the law as an unfunded mandate: “Good concept, but lacks funding.”

These opinions may or may not be based on a solid understanding of the law and its effect on teaching and learning, but they point toward a way forward on ESSA; the perceived failures of NCLB offer an opening for ESSA to be seen as an improvement.

### Voters want more information about the public schools, beyond standardized tests

One of the notable changes under ESSA is the law’s challenge to states to utilize multiple ways of measuring and evaluating how well schools are educating their students. This development is consistent with what voters tell us they want (Figure 2). The survey shows that the public is ready for more and varied pieces of information; 83 percent would rather have multiple measures of school performance than

a single score per school (15 percent).

When asked what they would want to see in a state-prepared scorecard or dashboard, focus group participants cited: statistics like college enrollment rates, suspensions and expulsions; details about how the local curriculum differed from state standards; and how local spending is allocated.

Focus group participants noted the specific needs of different students, and how data currently available does not

#### KEY FINDINGS

- Only 42 percent of voters believe the information available to them is sufficient to offer a clear sense of school quality; 52 percent say the information they have is inadequate.
- The vast majority of voters (82 percent) want multiple measures of school performance rather than a single score (15 percent).
- From developing standards to assessing school quality and supporting innovation, voters across the board want more local involvement in education accountability.
- Gateway City, non-white, and low-income voters are more supportive of standardized testing and interventions in struggling schools.

Figure 1:

#### Very few voters have heard of ESSA

Q: How much have you heard or read about the 2015 federal law called the Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA?

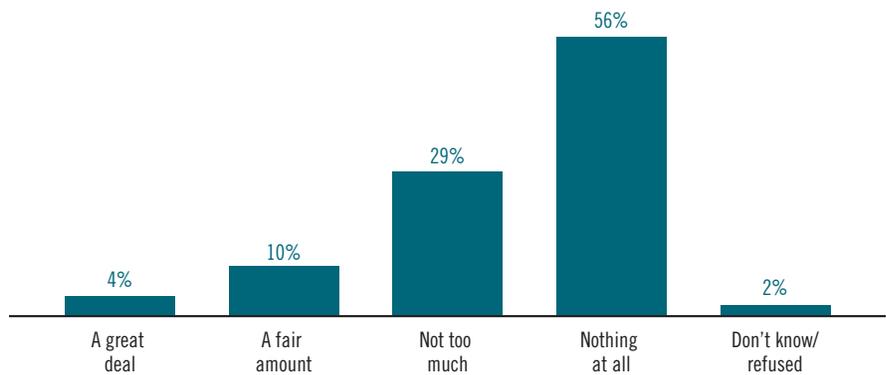
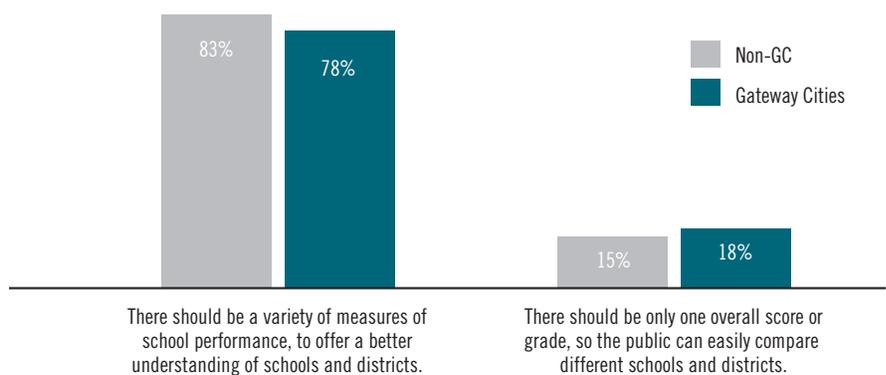


Figure 2:

#### Voters see a need for more metrics to measure school performance

Q: Which of the following statements do you most agree with?



allow parents to make informed choices. It's not surprising then that only 42 percent of voters believe the amount of information available now is sufficient, while 52 percent say it is inadequate. This desire for more information comes despite the fact that 71 percent of voters say they are following news about their local public schools "very closely" or "somewhat closely."

In the absence of additional official information, 88 percent rely on their own experience for information about the schools, and 80 percent rely on friends and neighbors (Figure 3). Third-party sources of information about the schools, like rankings by Boston Magazine (46 percent important) or GreatSchools.org (48 percent), were viewed as less important than direct experience. Focus group participants also cited official school websites, parent social-media groups and list serves, and direct conversations with school principals and teachers. One participant mentioned the Boston Magazine rankings, although another questioned the statistics on which such rankings were based.

Three-quarters of voters consider standardized test scores either a "very important" (32 percent) or "somewhat important" (44 percent) source of information. Although voters will look at these figures, other factors are clearly seen as more important when gathering information or assessing school quality. Most (58 percent) think that schools spend too much time on testing, and 65 percent say too much importance is placed on tests when rating schools.

In this poll, just 24 percent called high scores on tests "very important" in assessing school quality, far lower than the ratings for every other school feature included in the survey (Figure 4). Gateway City voters were more likely to see high test scores as key to school quality (44 percent vs. 28 percent of voters living in other communities). This is echoed in the differences in opinion along lines of race and ethnicity (44 percent of non-white voters see high test scores as "very important" vs. 29 percent

of white voters) and income (38 percent of voters earning less than \$50,000 annually vs. 25 percent of those earning \$100,000 or more).

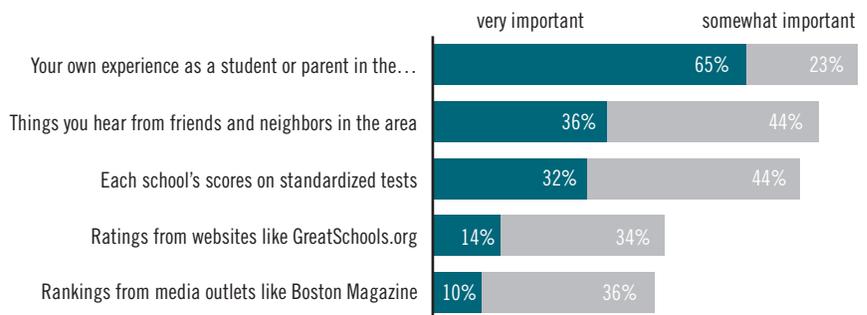
On the other end of the spectrum, preparation for college and career, as well as applied skills and vocational and technical programs, were all seen as key components of quality schools by majorities of voters.

Focus group comments and past sur-

**Figure 3:**

**Personal experience and word-of-mouth more important sources of information about schools than test scores**

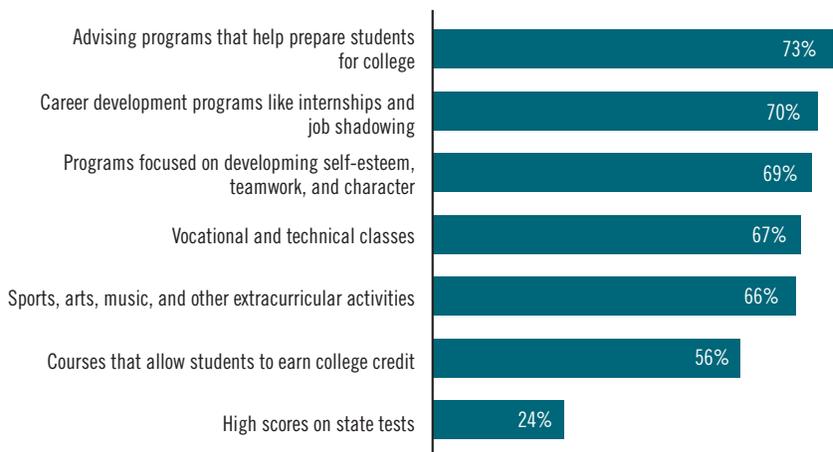
Q: In thinking about what you know about the quality of local schools, how important are each of the following sources of information?



**Figure 4:**

**Test scores less important to voters than other features of a high-quality school**

Q: When thinking about the ingredients of a high-quality school, how important are each of the following, in your view? 100% = the most important



veys highlight the tension between the need for testing and other school features that voters see as desirable, such as the arts, sports and other extracurriculars, and vocational and technical education. But when pressed on what to do instead of testing to measure students and schools, focus group participants fell back onto ideas that sounded a lot like standardized tests, despite their stated objections to them. There is clearly a distaste for perceived over-reliance on testing, but less of a vision for metrics going beyond or replacing testing. This suggests an opportunity for Massachusetts to experiment with innovative assessments that integrate necessary testing into teaching and learning, such as those being developed by the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment.

### Voters endorse a wide variety of policies to improve accountability

From setting statewide academic standards and rating schools, to targeting

resources to high poverty schools and intervening in those that are struggling, all of the accountability ideas tested in this poll found fairly broad support (Figure 5).

Demographic differences are most pronounced when looking at “very positive” responses to the accountability concepts. Gateway City voters rated each idea more highly, and were much more likely to rate each “very positive.” This was also true of non-white and low-income voters. Women (51 percent) were more likely than men (36 percent) to support targeting resources to high-poverty schools, as were non-white voters (58 percent) relative to white voters (41 percent). Women (42 percent) and non-white voters (47 percent) were also more likely than men (30 percent) and white voters (32 percent) to support interventions in struggling schools.

Voter support for new accountability concepts, as offered by ESSA, should

not be seen as an openness to weaker or inconsistent state standards. The focus group discussion of standards was consistent with this finding: participants considered strong academic standards necessary, and actually complained they had been watered down by developments like Common Core and No Child Left Behind.

As with opinion on any education policy in today’s environment, however, these views are subject to change. Key to maintaining support is engaging local communities, and communicating the reasons for the changes that are envisioned.

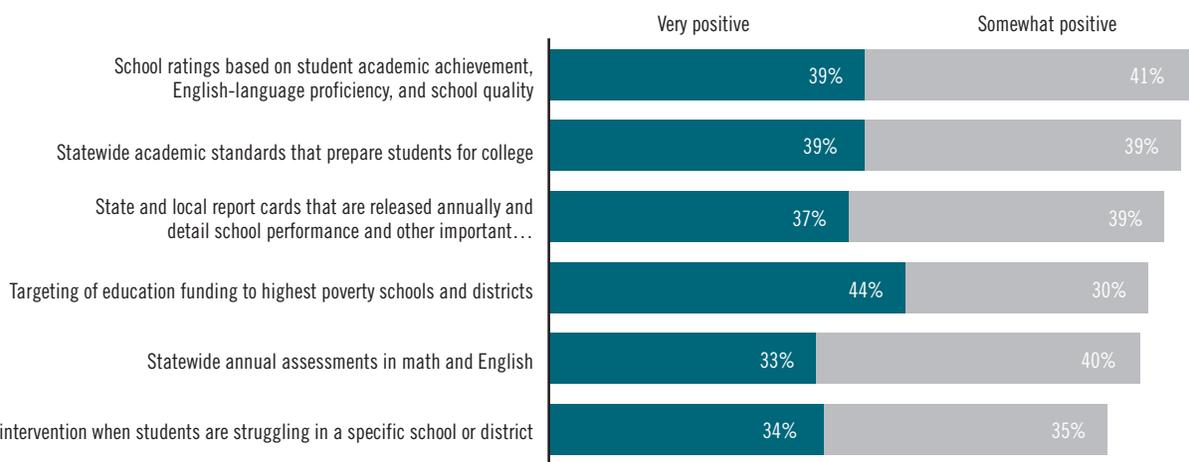
### Voters see various local actors leading on accountability, with state oversight

Voters assign responsibility for improving aspects of education accountability to a variety of local leaders (Figure 6). While state leaders receive a plurality on several aspects, more voters gave responsibility to one of the local actors, such as principals, teachers, parents, or

Figure 5:

#### Majorities think ESSA accountability measures would have a positive impact

Q: Would \_\_\_\_ have a positive or negative impact on education in Massachusetts, or would it make no difference?



**Figure 6:**

**Voters see the state as the most responsible on many, but not all, aspects of education policy**

Q: Who would you say is most responsible for each of the following aspects of public education in Massachusetts?

	STATE LEADERS	CITY OR TOWN LEADERS	PRINCIPALS	TEACHERS	PARENTS	DON'TKNOW/ REFUSED
Setting the standards each school must meet	45%	22%	13%	9%	8%	3%
Measuring the performance of each school	40%	27%	12%	8%	10%	3%
Deciding what is taught in schools	36%	21%	11%	16%	13%	4%
Turning around a failing school	30%	31%	17%	10%	9%	4%
Developing new approaches to education	27%	19%	12%	30%	7%	5%
Choosing areas of special focus for each school	15%	34%	20%	13%	11%	6%

civic leaders. For example, 36 percent think state leaders should take the lead in deciding what is taught in schools. But adding up town leaders (21 percent), principals (11 percent), teachers (16 percent) and parents (13 percent) shows more voters prefer local leadership than state-level decisionmaking.

Gateway City voters appear to be particularly supportive of local action on measuring school performance (only 34 percent say the state is most responsible vs. 42 percent of voters elsewhere) and setting standards (only 38 percent say

the state is most responsible vs. 48 elsewhere). This echoes a very large variation by income, with only 31 percent of voters earning less than \$50,000 annually saying the state is most responsible for standards, compared to 60 percent of voters with annual income over \$100,000.

There are other issues, such as developing new educational approaches and choosing the focus for different schools, where state leaders do not even receive a plurality of support. That is not to say that state leaders bear

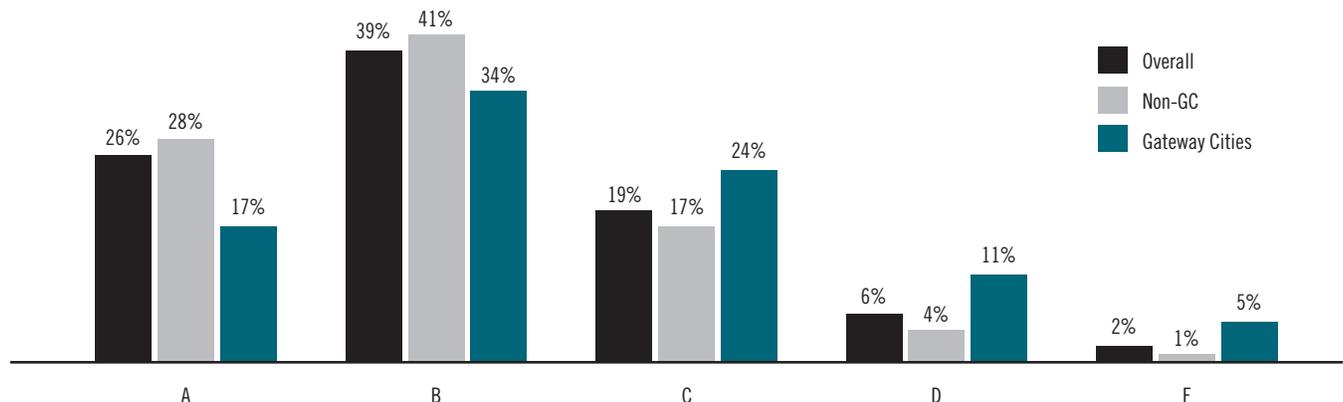
no responsibility, or that voters do not want them involved, but state leaders are but one of the groups that voters want to see participating in these decisions. For most of these aspects, the state is seen as an important, if not the only actor. This suggests that there is plenty of room for the state to play an active role in setting policy, but reaching out to other stakeholders, especially in the Gateway Cities, will be key.

Across an array of different areas of education policy, Gateway City voters were less likely to consider the state most

**Figure 7:**

**Voters give their local schools good grades, but Gateway Cities lag behind**

Q: Students are often graded on the quality of their work using the letters A, B, C, D, and F. Suppose the public schools themselves were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools in your community?



responsible, instead favoring local and school-level leaders, and even parents. In these communities, responsibility for school improvement is seen as more distributed across all stakeholders than is the case in other areas of the state. In response to the scope of the problems they see, it may be that Gateway City voters are looking for everyone to work together toward improvement.

One of the ideas most favored in the focus groups was to engage teachers in creating new assessments and accountability policies. Their experience teaching material to students was seen as especially valuable. Engaging principals will also be key, especially in the eyes of parents. Parents of school-aged children in the poll rated principals more responsible on most policy areas than non-parents.

### **Voters give schools moderate marks overall, but lower marks for career preparation**

Voters are open to change and improvements, despite the fact that they actually give the schools decent grades right now (Figure 7). Nearly two-thirds of voters statewide give their local public schools an A (26 percent) or B (39 percent) for overall performance. Focus group participants were similarly posi-

tive about the schools, awarding mostly As and Bs. But there is a gap between the Commonwealth's Gateway Cities and other communities in the state. Just over half (51 percent) of Gateway Cities residents give the schools an A or B; in the original 11 Gateway Cities, that figure dips to 48 percent. One in five voters in the original Gateway Cities give the schools a D (14 percent) or F (7 percent). This pattern of lower grades suggests there may be more urgency in implementing ESSA in the Gateways Cities than in other communities where the schools are seen as doing better.

In terms of specific tasks, voters think the schools are doing well in preparing students for college (62 percent give an A or B) and in teaching citizenship (58 percent), but less well in preparing them for jobs (49 percent). The same gap between Gateway Cities and other schools persists, but to a lesser extent on job preparation. When asked to rate which of these three tasks was most important, nearly half (48 percent) cited citizenship. Focus group participants also ranked citizenship the most important goal for schools, and their discussion revealed what they were reading into that term. For them citizenship was more about structure, discipline, work ethic, and respect for authority,

rather than learning civics. They also felt parents were primarily responsible for imparting these values, but that it is important for schools to reinforce them.

### **Conclusion**

Both the poll and the focus group revealed that voters support new mechanisms of school accountability. They have concerns about the emphasis on high-stakes testing, both in terms of crowding out other learning and its impact on students who do not test well. However, they see the need for assessments of some kind, even if they are not sure what that would look like. This stems from the desire for more information about how schools are performing.

Encouragingly for ESSA, voters see local voices playing a much larger role in what comes next. State-level officials will still play a prominent role, but in collaboration with a myriad of local influencers. Given the moderate marks for schools right now, there may not be an overwhelming urge for change, yet voters do not want schools resting on their laurels, either.

## Appendix

### Topline Results

Statewide survey of 1,006 Massachusetts registered voters, including 485 in the Gateway Cities

Field Dates: November 28-December 2, 2016

Students are often graded on the quality of their work using the letters A, B, C, D, and F. Suppose the public schools themselves were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools in your city?

A	26%
B	39%
C	19%
D	6%
F	2%
Don't Know/Refused	8%

How would you grade the K-12 education system here in your city in terms of \_\_\_\_\_? How about in terms of \_\_\_\_\_?

<i>Order rotated</i>	A	B	C	D	F	Don't Know /Refused
Preparing students for their eventual entry into the job market	17%	32%	29%	8%	4%	11%
Preparing students for college	27%	35%	18%	6%	4%	10%
Preparing students to be good citizens	23%	35%	19%	8%	4%	10%

Which would you say is most important, preparing students \_\_\_\_\_?

For the job market	23%
For college	24%
To be good citizens	48%
Don't Know/Refused	5%

Do you think there is enough information and data available to the public to offer a clear sense of how well your local public schools are doing, or not?

Yes, there is	42%
No, there is not	52%
Don't Know/Refused	6%

How closely do you follow news about the public schools in your area?

Very closely	25%
Somewhat closely	46%
Not too closely	21%
Not at all	8%
Don't Know/Refused	<1%

In thinking about what you know about the quality of local schools, how important are each of the following sources of information?

<i>Order rotated.</i>	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too important	Not at all important	Don't Know /Refused
Rankings from media outlets like Boston Magazine	10%	36%	27%	21%	6%
Ratings from websites like GreatSchools.org	14%	34%	18%	19%	16%
Things you hear from friends and neighbors in the area	36%	44%	11%	6%	3%
Each school's scores on standardized tests	32%	44%	14%	8%	3%
Your own experience as a student or parent in a school	65%	23%	2%	4%	6%

Who would you say is most responsible for each of the following aspects of public education in Massachusetts?

<i>Order rotated</i>	State education leaders	City or town education leaders	Principals	Teachers	Parents	Don't Know /Refused
Turning around a failing school	30%	31%	17%	10%	9%	4%
Deciding what is taught in schools	36%	21%	11%	16%	13%	4%
Choosing areas of special focus for each school	15%	34%	20%	13%	11%	6%
Setting the standards each school must meet	45%	22%	13%	9%	8%	3%
Developing new approaches to education	27%	19%	12%	30%	7%	5%
Measuring the performance of each school	40%	27%	12%	8%	10%	3%

When thinking about the ingredients of a high-quality school, how important are each of the following, in your view?

<i>Order rotated</i>	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too important	Not at all important	Don't Know /Refused
Sports, arts, music, and other extracurricular activities	66%	29%	4%	1%	<1%
Courses that allow students to earn college credit	56%	36%	6%	2%	<1%
Advising programs that help prepare students for college	73%	24%	2%	<1%	1%
Programs focused on developing self-esteem, teamwork, and character	69%	24%	4%	2%	1%
Career development programs like internships and job shadowing	70%	25%	3%	1%	1%
High scores on state tests	24%	50%	17%	8%	1%
Vocational and technical classes	67%	27%	4%	1%	1%

Do you think schools spend \_\_\_\_\_ on standardized tests?

Too much time	58%
Not enough time	13%
About the right amount of time	24%
Don't Know/Refused	6%

In terms of how schools are rated, do you think standardized tests are given \_\_\_\_\_ in determining their rating?

Too much importance	65%
Not enough importance	6%
About the right amount of importance	25%
Don't Know/Refused	4%

Would \_\_\_\_\_ have a positive or negative impact on education in Massachusetts, or would it make no difference?  
And is that very (positive/negative) or just somewhat?

<i>Order rotated</i>	Very positive	Somewhat positive	Make no difference	Somewhat negative	Very negative	Don't Know /Refused
Statewide academic standards that prepare students for college	39%	39%	14%	4%	1%	3%
Statewide annual assessments in math and English	33%	40%	16%	6%	3%	3%
School ratings based on student academic achievement, English-language proficiency, and school quality	39%	41%	12%	4%	1%	3%
State intervention when students are struggling in a specific school or district	34%	35%	11%	11%	4%	5%
State and local report cards that are released annually and detail school performance and other important issues like teacher experience and school funding	37%	39%	13%	6%	2%	4%
Targeting of education funding to highest poverty schools and districts	44%	30%	14%	7%	2%	4%

Which of the following statements do you most agree with?

There should be only one overall score or grade that is used to rate school performance, so that the public can easily compare different schools and districts	15%
There should be a variety of measures of school performance, to offer a better understanding of schools and districts	82%
Don't know/Refused	2%

How much have you heard or read about the 2015 federal law called the “Every Student Succeeds Act” or ESSA?

A great deal	4%
A fair amount	10%
Not too much	29%
Nothing at all	56%
Don’t Know / Refused	2%

**The last few questions are for statistical purposes only.**

Regarding children, which of the following applies to you?

I have one or more children under age 18	29%
I have one or more adult children age 18 or older	44%
I have no children but plan to in the next three years	7%
I have no children and don’t plan to have any in the next three years	25%
Don’t Know / Refused	1%

*The following asked of those with children under age 18. N=289.*

Which of the following best describes the school(s) the child(ren) living with you attend(s)? IF NECESSARY, READ: If your children are too young for school or if they do not attend school, please just say so. Multiple responses allowed. Percentages may add up to more than 100 percent.

A regular public school	75%
A public charter school	11%
A private school	13%
Other type of school (not read)	2%
Child(ren) are too young for school	5%
Do not attend school (not read)	2%
Refused	<1%

## Demographics

Party Registration	Democrat	36%
	Republican	11%
	Non-Partisan / Other	53%
Race	White / Caucasian	81%
	All others	16%
	Don't know / No response	3%
Age	18 to 29	18%
	30 to 44	24%
	45 to 59	30%
	60+	29%
Gender	Male	48%
	Female	52%
Education	High school or less	32%
	Some college, no degree	22%
	College graduate (BA/BS)	27%
	Advanced degree	19%
	Don't know/No response	1%
Regions	Western/Central MA	28%
	Southeast MA	14%
	Outer Boston Suburbs	32%
	Boston/Inner Suburbs	26%



11 Beacon Street, Suite 500  
Boston, MA 02108

[www.massinc.org](http://www.massinc.org)