

This report summarizes the findings drawn from 800 telephone interviews with likely voters in Prince George's County, June 17-24, 2003. This poll is the latest in a series of surveys conducted by Potomac Incorporated in communities across Maryland to measure and track public opinion on a variety of topical issues.

The focus of this survey is education, particularly impressions of the public school system. What we find is an electorate that is deeply concerned, if not almost preoccupied, with improving public-school education in the county. For example, when asked in an open-ended way to name the top issue facing the county, almost one-half the voters volunteer "education" or "schools." No other issue comes close. Crime or public safety are mentioned by only one-fifth of voters. Jobs, taxes, and the region's crushing traffic each rate only a five percent mention.

Voters in Prince George's County rate their school system the lowest of any major jurisdiction in Maryland outside of Baltimore City. The highest grade voters give for any of nine specific public school attributes is only a C-plus. When asked for their policy prescription to fix this, voters seem to be looking for smaller class sizes, better-paid and more qualified teachers, and a closer involvement by parents in the affairs of the public schools. The sexy 1990s solution of putting computers in all the classrooms seems to have run its course, with only two percent of voters thinking that is the way to improve public schools. Standardized tests have both their proponents and certainly their opponents. In fact, the very mention of testing is polarizing; equal numbers see such tests as either "extremely important" or having "serious drawbacks," with more than nine voters in ten having an opinion on the issue.

In terms of perceptions, the new appointed school board has made absolutely no headway with voters. Only one voter in seven believes the new board is doing a better job than its predecessors, about the same number who believe the old elected board actually did a better job. Three-quarters of voters see the two boards performing at the same level or have no view.

Adequate funding for schools is of course the perennial question. In different ways throughout the survey, voters indicate that they would like to see more funding for public schools. A majority even indicates that it would be willing to have a new tax imposed if it were dedicated to education. Prince George's Community College is seen as under-funded by most voters, and when voters discover that the county provides less funding to the community college than do neighboring jurisdictions, three-quarters want more local funding.

Of course, TRIM always looms in the background. Fewer than six voters in ten say they have actually heard of the tax cap measure, even when specifically prompted with its name. Of course, recognition rises dramatically among longer-term residents of the county. But despite its less-than-universal name recognition, the concept of a TRIM-style tax cap receives support from two-thirds of voters. Four voters in ten say they "strongly favor" such a tax. Support for TRIM is mitigated if the idea of repealing or modifying TRIM is tied to addressing "the many critical

needs of our schools." Now, a bare plurality of five percent think TRIM should be repealed or modified. Though this is a modest result, it represents a huge swing away from initial support for TRIM and demonstrates the power of the education issue in Prince George's County.

The other fact that must be taken into account is the deep voter cynicism regarding the handling of public funds by elected officials. Although a majority would support a special tax dedicated to schools, an astonishing two-thirds of all voters believe such a dedicated revenue stream would never make its way to schools, but would be diverted for other pressing priorities. Despite their initial willingness to support school funding, voters are much less likely to actually vote for such a funding measure in light of this tremendous skepticism.

As for Thornton, it does not have wide name recognition in the county, with only one-fourth of voters even having heard of it. Nonetheless, a 12-point plurality would like to see full funding of Thornton, "even if other state programs have to be cut."

Finally, off the topic of public schools, on a series of quality of life ratings county residents place their jurisdiction significantly lower than its neighbors as a place to live. Public schools are rated the lowest of the five ideas tested, with shopping next. All of this just points to a serious image problem – not just for the schools, but for the county as a whole.