

THE UNHEARD THIRD 2011

Our Tenth Annual Survey of Low-Income New Yorkers

NOT MANY A'S, BUT A LOT MORE B'S—AND STILL MOSTLY C'S: How New Yorkers Grade the Public Schools Before and After Mayoral Control

By Nancy Rankin
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The Community Service Society of New York (CSS) draws on a 168-year history of excellence in addressing the root causes of economic disparity through applied research, advocacy, litigation, and innovative service models that serve to strengthen and benefit all New Yorkers.

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Every New York City mayor hopes to leave a legacy. No doubt, Michael Bloomberg would like to be remembered as the mayor who fixed the failing public schools. He got that chance when he convinced the state legislature to hand him control of the nation's largest school system in July 2002 and then to renew that authority in 2009. As 1.1 million New York City children head back to the public schools this month, nearly a decade and many decisions, disputes, and dollars later, we went back to New Yorkers to see what marks they would give the schools now compared to when Bloomberg first took office.

Back in July 2002, reflecting on the school year prior to implementation of mayoral control and the reforms that followed, New Yorkers were asked to grade the city's public schools in a telephone survey conducted for the Community Service Society by the national polling firm, Lake Research Partners. This July we again asked New Yorkers the same question: What grade would you give public schools in New York City overall for the job they are doing in education? A for excellent, B, C, D, or F, for fail?

The 2011 poll was conducted through a telephone survey of 1,419 New York City residents from July 5 to July 31, 2011. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percentage points for the entire sample and plus or minus 3.2 percentage points for the low-income sample. The 2002 poll was conducted through a telephone survey of 800 New York City residents from August 21 through September 3, 2002. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.1 percent for the low-income sample and plus or minus 6.9 percentage points for the moderate and higher income sample. See box on page 10, "How the surveys were conducted."

Charts showing the data begin on page 5.

New Yorkers give city public schools higher grades now than ten years ago, with more people giving the schools A's and B's and fewer giving them D's and F's. In 2011, 37 percent of New Yorkers surveyed gave the schools good grades of A or B, compared to 22 percent in 2002, a jump of 15 percentage points; while 19 percent handed out D's and F's today, compared to 31 percent who gave the schools failing grades in 2002. The most frequent grade given—both now and in 2002—remains a C, with about a third of respondents rating the schools as just fair. In 2011, New Yorkers give the schools a grade point average (GPA) of

2.2, or barely a C+ overall, compared to a 1.8, or C-, when Bloomberg took office. Relatively few respondents said the schools were excellent, then or now. Just 9 percent think the schools deserve an A, a slight improvement over the 5 percent who handed out A's in 2002. The biggest change was an increase in B ratings, which went from 17 percent in 2002 to 28 percent in 2011, an 11 point gain. In short, what the public is saying is that the schools have gotten somewhat better, but still have a lot of room for improvement.

How do public perceptions stack up against changes in graduation rates and test scores during the Bloomberg years?

New York City high school graduation rates have climbed slowly but steadily over the decade. Less than half—46.5 percent—of freshman entering in 2001 graduated four years later, compared to 65.1 percent of those entering in 2006 and graduating in 2010.¹ While all groups have made gains and the achievement gap has narrowed, stark racial and ethnic disparities persist. Alarming numbers of Hispanic and black males still fail to bring home a diploma after four years compared to their white and Asian peers. In 2010, just over half, 52.4 percent of Hispanic males and 53.7 percent of black males graduated on time, compared to 77.7 percent of Asian males and 74.6 percent of white males. The gap between white and Hispanic males did narrow from 27.2 percentage points for the graduating class of 2005 to 22.2 percentage points for the class of 2010, and the gap between white and black males fell from 26.7 point to 20.9 points. Mayor Bloomberg cited the sobering school outcomes for black and Hispanic males as one of the reasons behind his recently announced Young Men's Initiative, which aims to increase funding and efforts to address these disparities.

Test scores, in contrast, show few gains, with supporters and critics drawing differing conclusions depending on which scores are looked at, and relative to what benchmarks. At first, city students appeared to be making remarkable progress on fourth and eighth grade state reading and math tests, showing large gains year after year during the Bloomberg administration. After the state concluded that the tests had become too easy, and recalibrated the scoring in 2010 and introduced new tests in 2011, the earlier

dramatic gains evaporated. Scores dropped sharply in 2010 and then edged up in 2011, except for eighth grade reading which continued to decline slightly.²

Performance on national tests has been mixed. From 2003 to 2009, results for New York City on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show the strongest gains in fourth grade math, slight improvement in fourth grade reading and eighth grade math, but have remained flat for eighth grade reading.³ The Bloomberg administration continues to claim progress, citing selected areas of improvement, while critics point out that after ten years, less than half the students in city public schools—43.9 percent—are considered proficient readers.⁴

Changes in the school system have been accompanied by a major infusion of resources. Total real spending per pupil has gone up 53 percent over the decade, rising from \$15,013 per pupil in 2001-02, the year Bloomberg took office, to \$22,996 for the current school year, 2011-12 (both figures in 2011 dollars).⁵

¹These figures are from the NYC Department of Education based on New York State's method of calculating graduation rates; figures for the '06 cohort graduating in 2010, but not the earlier cohort, include those getting diplomas after the summer session. Without these additional August graduates, the 2010 graduation rate would be a few percentage points lower.

²Test scores are from NYC Department of Education report, August 2011.

³James Kemple, *Children First and Student Outcomes: 2003-2010*, November 2010, p. 16.

⁴"Test Scores, Better than Buffalo," by Gail Robinson in *Gotham Gazette*, August 8, 2011.

⁵NYC Independent Budget Office figures.

Public perceptions of the schools have improved across income, race, borough, and parental status. Assessments of school quality in 2011 are strikingly similar across income levels, with the exception that fewer higher-income people (those earning over 400 percent of FPL) gave out A's—just 5 percent. But regardless of income, more New Yorkers give the schools A's and B's and fewer give out D's and F's now than in 2002. Public schools also now get higher marks particularly from Hispanics, but also from blacks and whites, compared to when Bloomberg took office. Opinions of Asians appear unchanged over the same period, but the sample size is small. New Yorkers in every borough gave the public schools higher grades now than in 2002, with Manhattan showing the most improvement. (The sample size for Staten Island was too small to make a comparison.) Parents give the public schools somewhat higher marks than those without children under age 19; but both groups give the schools better marks now than they did in 2002. Significantly, low-income parents—who are least able to afford to opt out of the public system—also give the schools better marks now, including more A's and B's than parents overall. Still, over half of low-income parents give the schools a C or worse, compared to 43 percent who give the schools A's or B's.

Overall, the survey findings suggest that the massive infusion of resources, sustained attention, and some well-publicized gains in high school graduation rates have paid off in improving public opinion. [See box].

New Yorkers want to keep up the effort (though not necessarily all the specific reforms.) When asked what were the two most important issues they would like candidates in the next mayoral election to focus on, not surprisingly, “creating more jobs” ranked highest, with 47 percent of respondents giving that response as one of their top two priorities. But “investing more in education” was the issue mentioned with second greatest frequency, by 35 percent of New Yorkers surveyed. Among higher income New Yorkers (with incomes above 400 percent of FPL) investing more in education was actually mentioned most often, by 45 percent of respondents, compared to 41 percent who said creating more jobs, with women's greater concerns about education driving the difference.

Education is a priority that unifies New Yorkers, not only across income, but across lines of race and ethnicity. After job creation, Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites all identify investing more in education as their second most important issue for the next mayor to focus on. Differences, however, emerge by party affiliation. Democrats and Independents see education as their second highest priority after jobs, while Republicans rank education a more distant third alongside reducing crime, and after jobs and keeping local taxes down.

The massive infusion of resources, sustained attention, and some well-publicized gains in high school graduation rates have paid off in improving public opinion. New Yorkers want to keep up the effort.

Specifically, we also asked New Yorkers about their willingness to support programs to improve high school graduation rates and to give young people who have dropped out of school another chance to earn a high school diploma or GED. New Yorkers favor expanding both types of programs, even when the question was posed with the high bar of whether or not *they would be willing to pay more taxes themselves to increase spending on such efforts*. When asked how willing they would be to personally pay more in taxes to spend more on programs to improve high school graduation rates, two-thirds (67 percent) said they were willing, with over a third (36 percent) very willing (a “7” on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being not willing and 7 being very willing).

Support was nearly as strong for programs to give young people a second chance at a diploma or GED. Sixty-three percent of New Yorkers said they would personally be willing to pay more taxes to increase spending on such programs, including 32 percent who would be very willing to do so. New Yorkers, across income and racial lines, are willing to pay higher taxes to help more young people

earn diplomas or GEDs. Blacks voiced the greatest support, with about 8 out of 10 willing to pay more taxes to increase spending to improve graduation rates and provide second chance programs.

Such widespread support makes sense in a city where over 91,000 young adults alone have left school without a diploma [see box]. Findings from *The Unheard Third* 2010 survey showed that only 3 percent of New Yorkers think that someone can get a good job with less than a high school diploma. (Almost a third thought someone needed at least a four-year college degree.) Sixty-three percent, however, thought that getting a GED would help those who haven't graduated high school get a better-paying job. New Yorkers make the connection between educational attainment and employment—a connection borne out by the data. According to the New York State Department of Labor, in 2009 the statewide median weekly earnings for someone with less than a high school diploma were \$450, compared to \$653 for someone with a high school diploma or GED.

How do New York City's GED results measure up against the numbers lacking a high school diploma?

In New York City, more than 91,000 young people ages 16 to 24 do not have a high school diploma and are no longer in school. Another 741,100 working-age adults lack a high school education.¹ Yet only 8,886 people took and passed the GED in 2009, a figure down from the 13,536 who passed in 2007. The 2009 New York City pass rate of 42.2 percent was lower than that for other major cities, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Philadelphia.²

A recent analysis of New York City labor trends by the Fiscal Policy Institute showed that the unemployment rate for those with less than a high school diploma was 12.6 percent, compared to 9.8 percent for those with high school or equivalent and 8.9 percent for all workers one year into the weak recovery from the recession.³

¹ 2009 ACS, US Census

² 2007 data for NYC provided by NYS Department of Education, 2009 data for NYC and other cities from the American Council on Education.

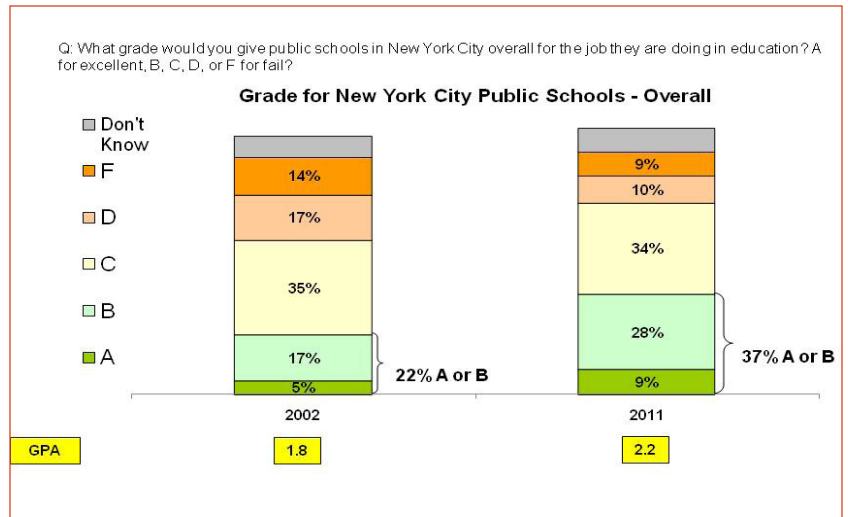
³ The State of Working New York City 2011, Fiscal Policy Institute Report, July 20, 2011, p. 11.

Conclusion

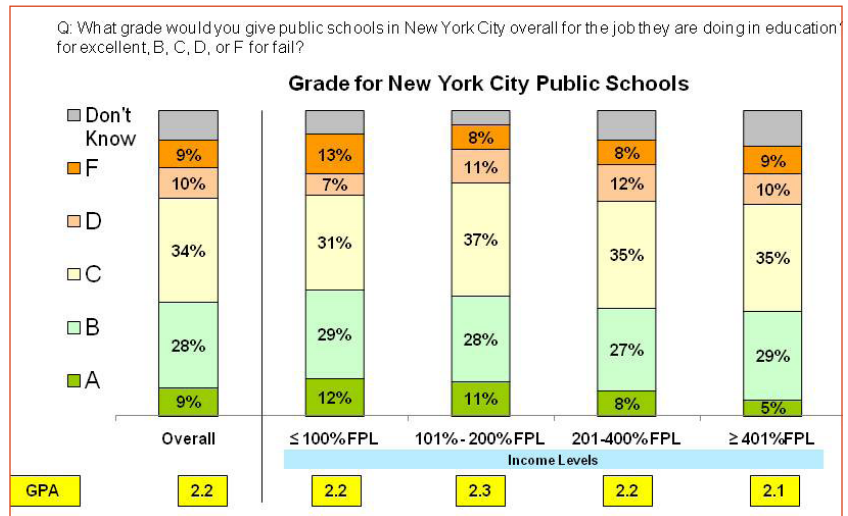
Educators often argue that you cannot expect to see dramatic progress from educational reforms overnight; it takes time to assess the real impact. While test scores and graduation rates are the most common measures of school performance, public perceptions matter a great deal, too. Views about the quality of the schools affect business decisions to locate in the city and hire graduates, families' decisions on where to live and where to send their children to school, and politicians' decisions on educational spending and policies. *The Unheard Third* surveys provide a unique opportunity to look at public perceptions before and after a decade-long sustained effort under a single mayor's leadership to turn around the largest school system in the nation.

New Yorkers largely agree that the public schools have improved during the Bloomberg administration, but they are far from satisfied. Few think the schools are excellent. They see continuing to invest more in education as a top issue for the next mayor and, in particular, express a willingness to spend more to improve high school graduation rates and provide programs that give young people who have dropped out of school another chance at earning a diploma or GED. These findings show a striking public appetite for greater investment in education, despite—or more likely in reaction to—the continued climate of economic worries and uncertainty, high unemployment, and right-wing demands for slashing government spending. Decent jobs, with living wages and basic benefits, are disappearing for those without at least a high school diploma. And remaining ones are increasingly being taken by better-educated workers unable to find jobs in the wake of the deep recession. New Yorkers are clear about their top priorities for their next mayor: jobs and better education. These are not competing agendas, but a clear recognition that education is the ticket into the 21st century labor market and the New York dream.

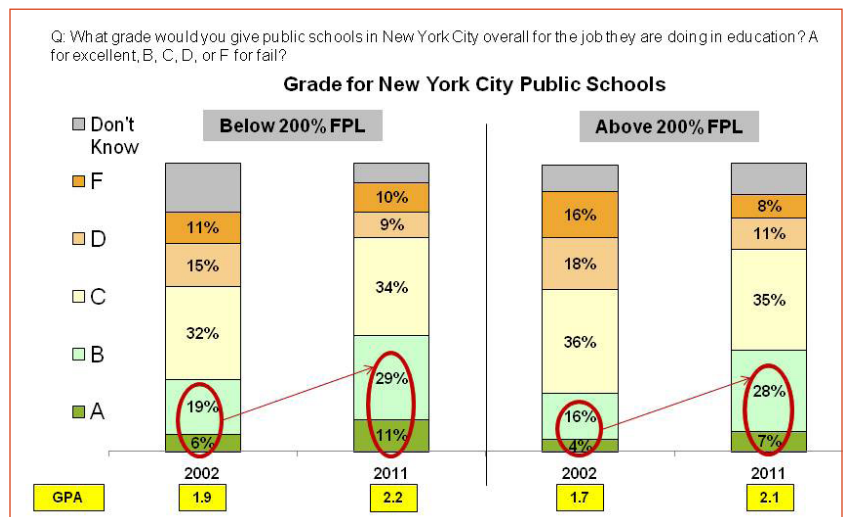
Now, more than one third of New Yorkers give public schools an A or a B, compared to just 22 percent in 2002.



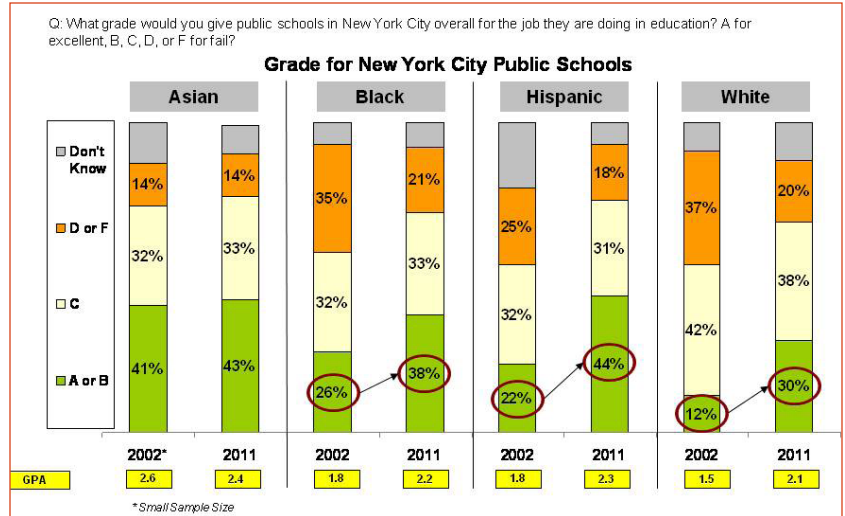
In 2011, New Yorkers across income groups give NYC Public Schools similar grades, though top grades decline slightly as income rises.



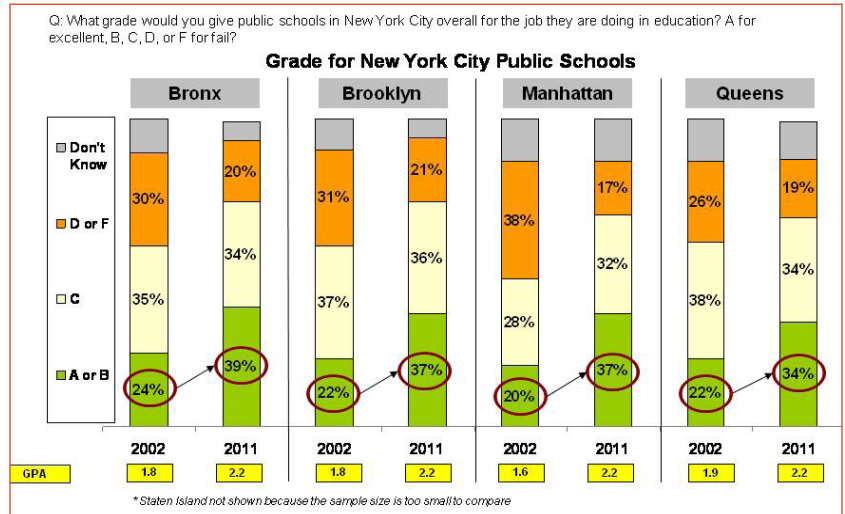
Across income, more New Yorkers give the public schools A's and B's and fewer give D's and F's now than when Bloomberg first took office.



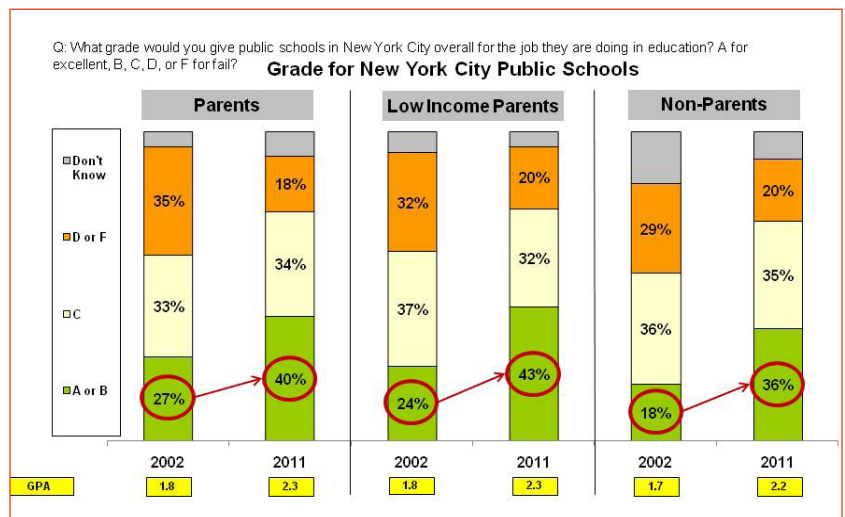
Public schools get higher marks from blacks, Hispanics, and whites now than in 2002. No change seen from Asians.



New Yorkers across the city give higher marks to public schools now than in 2002.



Parents, particularly low-income parents, give public schools higher marks than non-parents, but all groups give higher marks than they did in 2002.



Investing more in education is one of the top three issues across income groups; priority rises with income.

Q: In 2013 there will be an election for New York City Mayor. I know it is a long way off, but in that election what are the two most important issues that you would like candidates to focus on?

	Overall	≤100% FPL	101-200% FPL	201-400% FPL	≥400% FPL
Creating more jobs	47	52	48	50	41
Investing more in education	35	26	28	36	45
Making housing more affordable	23	31	26	20	18
Keeping local taxes down	20	15	24	18	22
Reducing crime, drugs and guns	20	25	20	20	16
Preventing cuts to programs for children/seniors	14	15	14	15	14
Keeping spending down	9	9	8	7	10
Protecting the City from terrorism	9	8	8	9	9
Making the City more attractive to business	8	5	10	8	7
Promoting policies like living wage & paid sick days	5	4	6	7	5

New Yorkers across racial and ethnic lines cite investing more in education as a top priority.

Q: In 2013 there will be an election for New York City Mayor. I know it is a long way off, but in that election what are the two most important issues that you would like candidates to focus on?

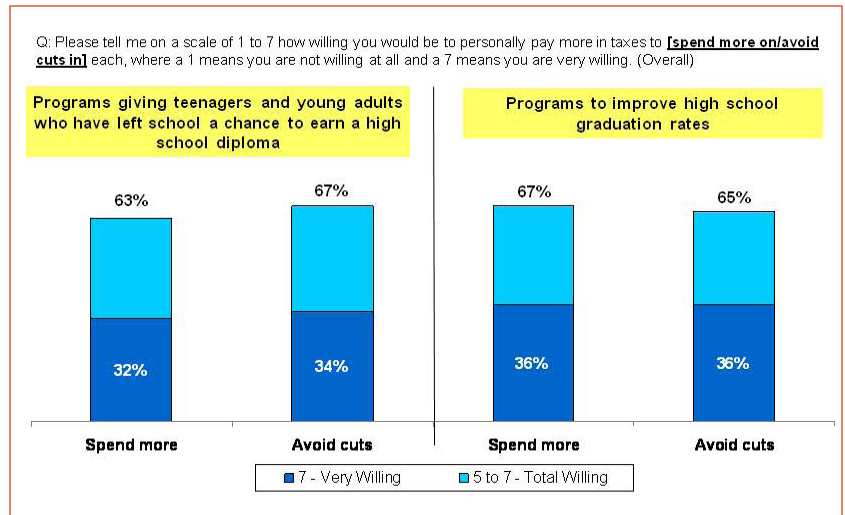
	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Creating more jobs	44	50	57	40
Investing more in education	35	36	28	39
Making housing more affordable	22	30	21	20
Keeping local taxes down	22	16	18	25
Reducing crime, drugs and guns	23	22	23	15
Preventing cuts to programs for children/seniors	7	18	12	15
Keeping spending down	13	3	9	11
Protecting the City from terrorism	7	8	10	8
Making the City more attractive to business	12	4	8	9
Promoting policies like living wage & paid sick days	8	3	6	5

Democrats are more likely to say education is a top priority than Republicans.

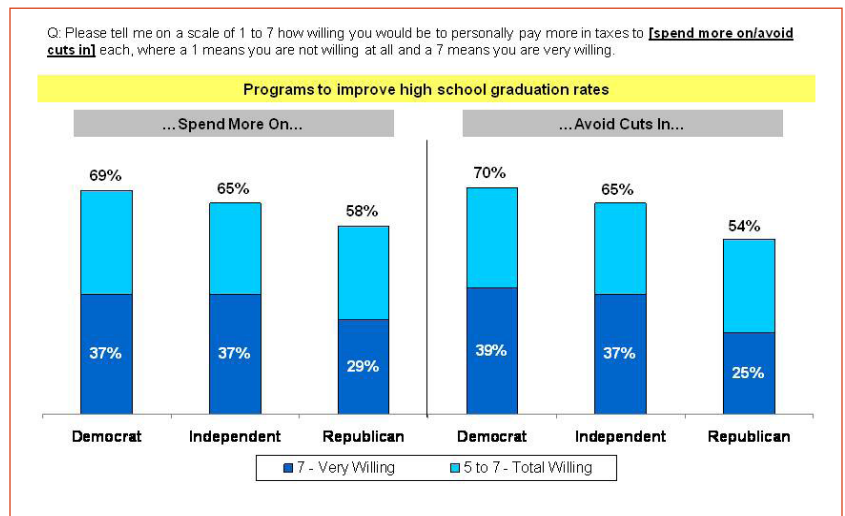
Q: In 2013 there will be an election for New York City Mayor. I know it is a long way off, but in that election what are the two most important issues that you would like candidates to focus on?

	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Creating more jobs	49	46	44
Investing more in education	40	30	21
Making housing more affordable	25	19	15
Keeping local taxes down	16	23	34
Reducing crime, drugs and guns	19	25	21
Preventing cuts to programs for children/seniors	16	11	12
Keeping spending down	6	13	17
Protecting the City from terrorism	8	7	12
Making the City more attractive to business	6	11	9
Promoting policies like living wage & paid sick days	6	6	4

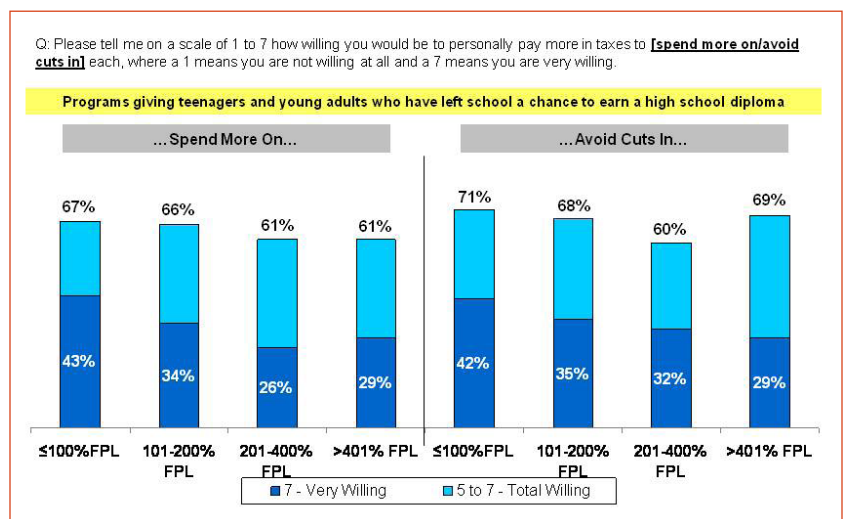
More than 6 in 10 New Yorkers are willing to personally pay more in taxes to spend more on (and avoid cuts to) educational programs.



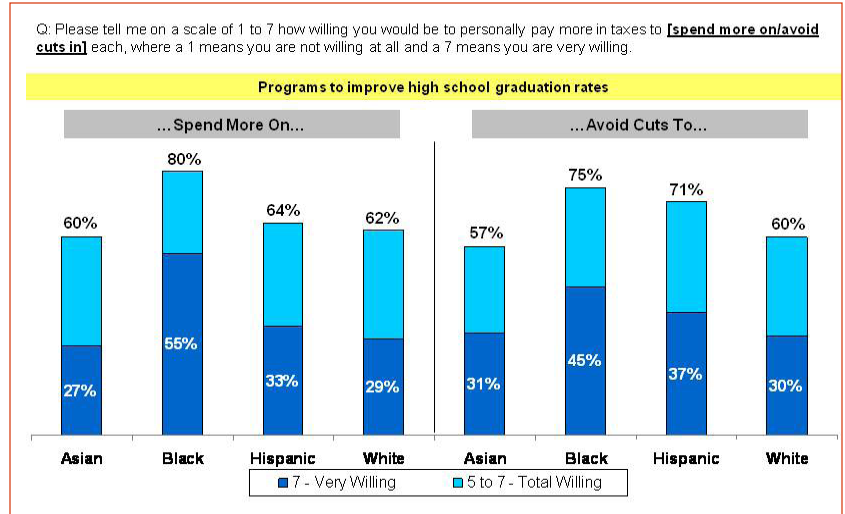
Almost two-thirds of Democrats and Independents, along with a majority of Republicans, would personally pay more taxes to improve H.S. graduation rates.



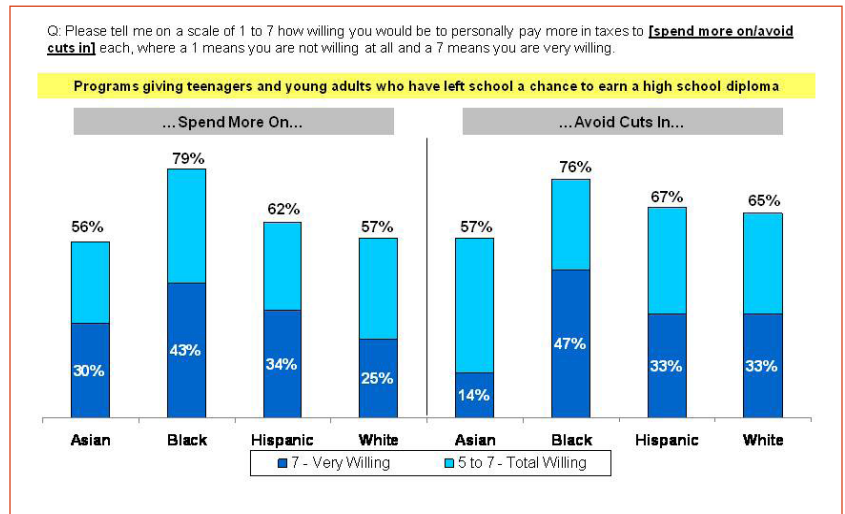
New Yorkers across income groups are willing to pay higher taxes to spend more on programs to give teens and young adults the chance to earn a H.S. diploma.



New Yorkers across racial and ethnic lines, especially African Americans, would pay more in taxes to spend more to improve H.S. graduation rates.



New Yorkers across racial lines are willing to personally pay higher taxes to spend more on programs to help dropouts earn a H.S. diploma, with the strongest willingness among African Americans.



How the surveys were conducted

The Community Service Society designed these surveys in collaboration with Lake Research Partners, who administered the surveys by phone using professional interviewers.

The 2011 survey was conducted from July 5 to July 31, 2011. The survey reached a total of 1,419 New York City residents, age 18 or older, divided into two samples:

- 915 low-income residents (up to 200% of federal poverty standards, or FPL) comprise the first sample:
 - 454 poor respondents, from households earning at or below 100% FPL
 - 461 near-poor respondents, from households earning 101%-200% FPL
- 504 moderate- and higher-income residents (above 200% FPL) comprise the second sample:
 - 301 moderate-income respondents, from households earning 201%-400% FPL
 - 203 higher-income respondents, from households earning above 400% FPL.

This year's survey also included an oversample of 200 cell phone interviews among adult residents at up to 400% FPL.

Telephone numbers for the low income sample were drawn using random digit dial (RDD) among exchanges in census tracts with an average annual income of no more than \$40,000. Telephone numbers for the higher income sample were drawn using RDD in exchanges in the remaining census tracts. The data were weighted slightly by gender, age, region, immigration status, education and race in order to ensure that it accurately reflects the demographic configuration of these populations. In the combined totals respondents in the low income sample were weighted down to reflect their actual proportion among all residents. Also, in the combined totals, the sample is weighted by telephone status. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish and Chinese.

In interpreting survey results, all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results of a survey may differ from those which would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends

upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of responses to a particular question. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 2.6%. The margin of error for the low income component is +/- 3.2% and for the higher income component is +/-4.4%.

The report also contains data from the 2010 and 2002 surveys. The 2010 survey was conducted from July 7 to August 8, 2010 and reached a total of 1,414 New York City residents, age 18 or older. There were 900 low-income respondents (up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level or FPL) and 514 moderate- and higher- income respondents (above 200 percent FPL). The sample also included an oversample of 200 cell phone interviews among adult residents up to 400 percent FPL. The margin of error for the low-income component is +/- 3.3 percentage points and +/- 4.4 percentage points for the higher income component.

The 2002 survey was conducted from August 21 through September 3, 2002. The 2002 survey reached a total of 800 New York City residents, age 18 or older, divided into two samples:

- 600 low-income residents (up to 200% of federal poverty standards, or FPL) comprise the first sample
- 200 higher-income residents (above 200% FPL) comprise the second sample

Telephone numbers for the low income sample were drawn using random digit dial (RDD) among exchanges in census tracts with an average annual income of no more than \$35,300. Telephone numbers for the higher income sample were drawn using RDD in exchanges in the remaining census tracts. The data were weighted slightly by gender, age, region, immigration status, education and race in order to ensure that it accurately reflects the demographic configuration of these populations. In the combined totals respondents in the low income sample were weighted down to reflect their actual proportion among all residents. Also, in the combined totals, the sample is weighted by telephone status. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish and Chinese. The margin of error for the low income component is +/- 4.1%. The margin of error for the higher income component is +/-6.9%.

