

South Carolina Public School Opinion Survey: A Report of Parents' Opinion on School Start Dates and Year Round School¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is developed to provide a detailed, descriptive, and analytical presentation of public opinions on preferences for public school start schedules and length of school terms. This study presents an accurate and reliable measurement of South Carolina parents' views on public school start dates and year-round versus traditional school calendars. A succinct, yet comprehensive and complete survey was designed to assess the opinions of parents of students in the 85 school districts of the South Carolina public school system. A 21-item mail questionnaire was sent to 7500 randomly selected households to collect data on these very important and debatable topics. These issues affect the entire State of South Carolina including families, institutions, and businesses.

South Carolina households returned 898 useable questionnaires on the public school system, yielding a response rate of nearly 12%. The number of responses exceeded the pre-specified criteria of statistical requirements for returns. The data were entered into a statistical program and thoroughly analyzed based on frequency of occurrence. Results for all survey questions are tabulated and presented in this report.

Presently, South Carolina public schools start in five different weeks throughout August. The first research objective addressed South Carolina parents' views on public school start dates. The majority of the respondents, 45.3%, selected the latest available public school start date of "after Labor Day". The second most common response, 34.6%, indicated "August 20th - Labor Day" as their preferred public school's start date. The least desirable option was "August 2nd - August 20th" receiving 20.1% of the responses.

The second research objective addressed South Carolina parents' views on year-round versus traditional school calendars. The more popular choice of those responding indicated a preference for the traditional school terms, preferring regular fall through spring school schedules with summers off. This response was 72.1% for those who elected to maintain the existing school calendar. Resultantly, 27.9% preferred a year-round school system, with nine-week school terms and four week breaks between terms.

Demographic insight was gathered from the respondents, who are employed in approximately 70 different occupations. Information was collected on county of residence, area of residence, grade levels of students and the number of students in each grade per household. In addition, head of household information was collected for gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, educational level, and occupation. Also, information was gathered on household income. In the final question, parents were asked to provide general comments on the survey.

This study answers the questions of what parents think about public school start schedules and school calendars, while providing background information on the respondents. The

¹ A Report for the Ashby Ward Research Fellowship Award. Sponsored by the South Carolina Travel & Tourism Coalition

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evidence in this study has been statistically supported and should provide an effective representation of the views of South Carolina parents and their preferences on school calendars and start dates for their children.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to design and conduct a valid poll of South Carolina parents, using a statewide sampling addressing views on public school schedules with the following objectives:

1. To determine public opinion on school start dates.
2. To determine public opinion on year-round versus traditional school calendars.

The survey was designed to achieve a minimum of 95% level of confidence, with a maximum statistical error of +/- 4%. The collected data were analyzed and results compiled.

SURVEY DESIGN

Residents with school-age children were contacted using a direct mail questionnaire. Direct mail was considered an attractive delivery method for the questionnaires due to relative convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. This survey utilized a mailing list of the 667,676 students of South Carolina public schools. The survey population consisted of the households that contained students ranging from four-year old kindergarteners (K-4) to twelfth graders encompassing 85 school districts in all 46 counties of South Carolina.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was methodically designed and developed to incorporate questions to directly address the research objectives. In addition, a query of parents, teachers, academic researchers, and industry personnel was conducted. The questions were inserted in accordance with input from these various constituencies of families, academicians, and practitioners. A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was created. The initial questionnaire contained six multiple-choice school related questions, ten demographic questions, and four open-ended response questions (Appendix A). The survey contained an introductory paragraph, indicating the purpose of the survey, and an assurance of privacy to the parents.

The one-page front and back survey was pre-tested in a mailing to 100 randomly selected households of South Carolina public school parents in northwestern South Carolina. Thirteen surveys were returned, corresponding to a thirteen percent response rate. Upon reading and analyzing the responses and comments to the questionnaire in the pre-test, the questionnaire was edited and revised.

The final questionnaire contained 21 questions (Appendix B). There were ten multiple-choice school related questions, followed by ten close-ended demographic questions, and one open-ended general comments question. Three open-ended questions from the pre-test were re-phrased as multiple-choice questions to facilitate a more efficient analysis. The questionnaire was composed of two sections, school opinion items and personal information. Demographic questions were asked for the purpose of compiling profiles of those who responded to the survey. Personal questions were positioned after the most vital research objectives in the event that respondents elected not to respond to questions that they were uncomfortable answering. The questionnaire was constructed with the intent of being concise, non-threatening, and easy to read, yet, robust, valid and reliable.

To address the research objectives, specifically, the first question asked of the sample group was “When do you think the school year should start?” There were three possible responses, “between August 2nd and August 20th”, “between August 20th and Labor Day”, or “after Labor Day”. Presently, South Carolina public schools start at different times in each of the five weeks in August.

To address the second component of the research objectives regarding year round versus traditional school calendars, the survey sample was asked the question “Which do you prefer?” The question offered two possible answers, “regular school schedule, with summers off” or “year-round school, with 9 weeks in each school term and a 4-week break between school terms”. The school calendar question was placed ninth on the questionnaire, following school start related questions.

Another important issue for the state of South Carolina involves how many families would vacation within the state, if school started later. To address this concern, parents were asked, “If school started later, would you vacation within the extra time?” Three choices were provided, “Yes”, “No”, or “Maybe”. The follow-up question asked, “If so, where would you vacation?” Options for this question were “In South Carolina” and “Out-of-State”.

Supplemental questions were placed on the questionnaire to add breadth and depth to the survey. Multiple-choice questions were asked regarding family travel for recreation or leisure during the summer and school year. Also, parents were asked if they traveled in or out of the state of South Carolina. Finally, parents were asked, “Should the time for each school day increase to make the school year shorter?” They were given the choices of “yes” or “no”. The “yes” response provided three options: make each school day 10, 15, or 20 minutes longer to make the school year 5, 7.5, or 10 days shorter, respectively.

Several demographic questions were posed to ascertain parent and student profiles of those responding. Questions were asked to attain area and county of residence information, as well as, grades and numbers of students in the homes. In addition, information was requested regarding head of household gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, education, and occupation. The final demographic question was for household income.

Based on a minimum of 95% level of confidence, with a maximum statistical error of +/- 4%, it was calculated that a sample size of approximately 600 responses were needed. To acquire a minimum of 600 respondents, 7500 questionnaires were mailed randomly to households of South Carolina public school parents, with an expectation of a ten percent response rate or 750 returns. Also, to ensure a representative sample of the public school parent population in the state, the mailing list was weighted proportionately by zip code. Each questionnaire was sent accompanied with a cover letter (Appendix C) explaining the purpose of the survey. The questionnaire was addressed to the parents or guardians of the students. Each cover letter was printed on paper using Coastal Carolina University letterhead to signify the official nature of the survey. As an incentive to encourage returning the questionnaire, a coupon was included for entry into a drawing for a week’s stay at an oceanfront hotel in Myrtle Beach. The coupon was a separate card to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Each questionnaire contained a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope to facilitate ease of returns by the parents.

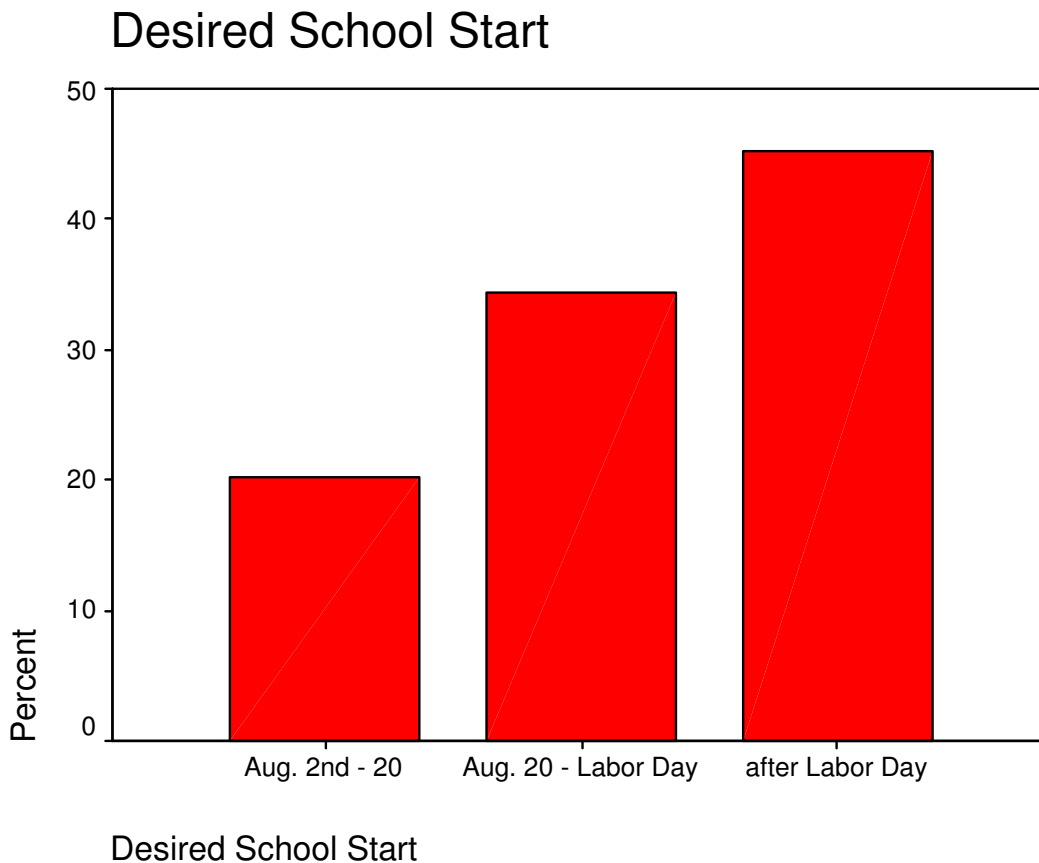
ANALYSIS

A significant number of questionnaires were returned. The minimum required number of 600 responses was exceeded by 298 returns. The parents returned 898 surveys, resulting in a response rate of 11.97%. The returned surveys produced a margin of error of 3%, which was 1% more accurate than the requirement. Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the collected data. The results were acquired using frequency analysis in SPSS for Windows, version 11.5, statistical software.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

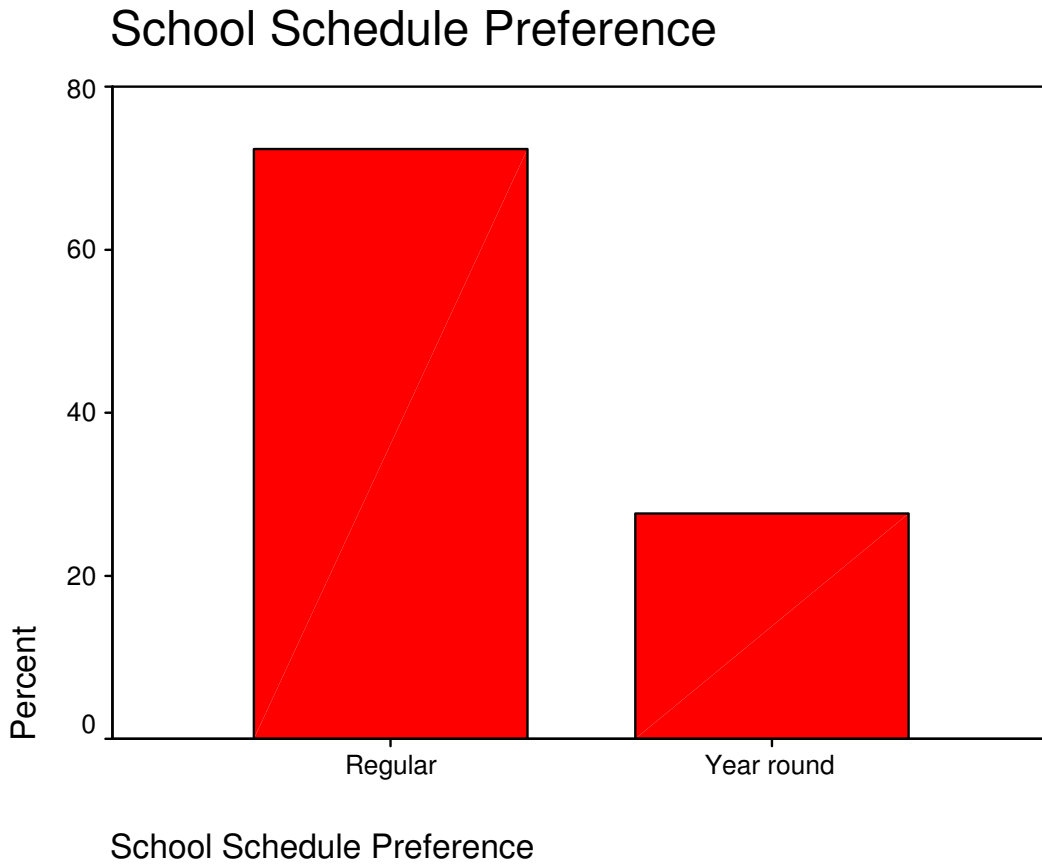
In answering the first research objective, the majority of those responding, 45.3%, selected a school start date after Labor Day (Exhibit 1). The majority response was followed by 34.6% selecting a start date between August 20th and Labor Day. According to the parents that returned the questionnaire, the least favorable choice was a school start date between August 2nd and August 20th. The number of parents with this preference corresponded to 20.1% of the respondents. This question received 885 responses, which corresponds to 98.6% of the returned questionnaires. Only 13 respondents elected not to answer this item.

FIGURE 1



In answering the second research objective, the majority of those responding, 72.1%, preferred the traditional school terms of regular fall through spring school schedules with summers off, while 27.9% preferred a year-round school system (Exhibit 2), with nine-week school terms and four week breaks between terms. Notably, this question received 891 responses, which represents 99% of the returns, while 7 households chose not to answer.

FIGURE 2



When the households were asked whether they would vacation within the extra time if school started after Labor Day, 43.7% of the respondents answered “Yes” (Exhibit 3). Of those responding, 11.7% said “No”. However, the largest group answered, “Maybe”. The “Maybe” group was 44.6% of the responses. When asked where they would vacation, if school started after Labor Day, most respondents, 52.3 % (Exhibit 4), selected South Carolina for travel. Secondly, 36.2% of respondents responding indicated out-of-state travel. Thirdly, 11.5% of the replies indicated both destinations.

FIGURE 3

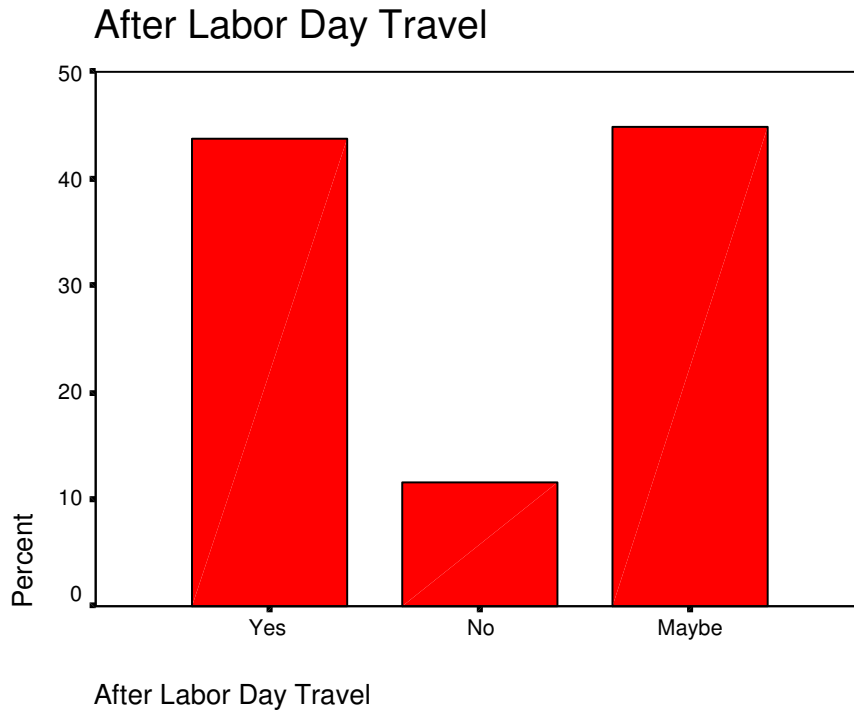


FIGURE 4



Other responses in the survey yielded insight on travel destinations for recreation and leisure during the summer breaks and school terms (Table 1). The percentage of responding households who travel during the summer was 88.8. The number of households who travel during the school year corresponded to 54.7% of the sample. Of the responding households who travel during the summer, most travel within the state. Reportedly, 38.3% travel in South Carolina, 38.0% travel out of state, and 23.7% travel in state and out of state during the summer. Regarding family travel during the school year, most families that travel chose South Carolina. Those who travel in South Carolina resulted in 44.4% of the sample. The households that recorded “out of state” as a preferred destination accounted for 39.2% of those who travel during the school year. Several families, 16.4%, travel in state and out of state during the school year.

Furthermore, an inquiry was made to determine the number of households with children in school who, also, worked. The data collected in this survey reveals that 1,985 students in the 898 households that responded have school-age children who are employed, which is an average of 2.2 students per household. Of those students, 26.7% of them work a summer job.

Among the households who recorded demographic information (Table 2), the largest group of respondents was male (70.8%), living in a rural environment (46.2%), white (70.8%), aged 41-50 (46%), married (73.3%), with some college (35.1%), a professional/technical occupation (19.4%), with a household income of \$21,001-40,000, 27.1%. Occupations not listed on the questionnaire are included in Appendix D of this report. Detailed student information is in Table 3.

General comments on the survey from the responding households can be found in Appendix E.

CONCLUSION

This study met its research objectives to design and conduct a valid poll of South Carolina residents with school-age children, using a statewide sampling addressing views on public school schedules. The study evaluated public opinion on school start dates and year-round versus traditional school calendars. A random proportionate sample was selected from the SC household public school population. In addition, the survey was designed to achieve a minimum of 95% level of confidence, with a maximum statistical error of +/- 4%. Those goals were met, also. The data were methodically collected, statistically analyzed, and detailed empirical results were compiled and tabulated. This study revealed that the largest group of South Carolina households with public school students, 45.3%, prefers a school start date after Labor Day. Also, most South Carolina households, 72.1%, prefer the traditional school terms of regular fall, winter, and spring school schedules with summers off. The data collected in this survey were supported by demographic information, as well as, a qualitative assessment of South Carolina households' views on public school issues. This statistically significant study provides a valid and reliable assessment of South Carolina public school parents and their views on public school calendars and start dates.