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Montanans Give Education High Marks but Residents See Level of Funding and Tuition as ‘Very Serious Problems’

HELENA, Mont. (March 14, 2006) — Montanans believe their children are receiving an above-average education from the public school system but that view may be threatened in the future because of school funding challenges and rising tuition costs, according to a quality-of-life survey commissioned by PPL Montana.

The statewide survey found that education is one of a number of issues on which longtime residents and newcomers to Montana generally agree. The majority of both camps give education systems in the state high marks, but those who were born in the state see educational concerns in a slightly more serious light.

Montana’s children receive a solid start to their education, according to a majority of the state’s residents. Six in 10 Montanans give public school education a grade of “B” or better. About 25 percent give the quality of elementary and high school education a “C,” and fewer than one in 10 residents give it a substandard rating of “D” or a failing “F.” This view is shared by all adults, not just by parents with school-age children.

Nearly two-thirds of the longtime residents and just over half of newcomers award public school education a grade of “B” or better.

According to the survey, Montanans also give high marks to higher education, with seven in 10 rating the quality of education at the state’s public colleges and universities as “B” or better. Colleges and universities receive a “B” or better from three-quarters of the longtime residents, and nearly two-thirds of newer residents agree.

Money is a key issue at all levels of public education, according to the survey.

Eight in 10 respondents are concerned about the level of funding for public schools, with nearly half — 46 percent — saying lack of money is a “very serious problem.” Concern about funding levels far outstrips worries about overcrowding or falling enrollment numbers.

On the issue of school funding, more than eight out of 10 longtime residents say it’s a serious problem, and nearly three-quarters of newcomers have the same concern.

Montanans also are concerned about the affordability of the state’s higher education system. Eight in 10 adults believe that the rising cost of tuition is a “serious problem.” And nearly half of those — 46 percent — say rising tuition is “very serious.” Only 14 percent say it is “not very serious” or “not a problem at all.”

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Almost nine out of 10 longtime residents see rising college tuition as a serious issue, while three-quarters of newcomers have the same opinion.

The Roper Public Affairs Group, which conducted the wide-ranging survey for PPL Montana, interviewed 1,013 adult residents across the state during a two-week period last December. The University of Montana consulted on the survey.

PPL Montana operates coal-fired power plants at Colstrip and Billings, as well as 11 hydroelectric power plants throughout the state. PPL EnergyPlus operates a trading floor in Butte that markets and sells power in the wholesale energy market. With offices in Billings, Butte and Helena, the companies employ 500 people in Montana.

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Editor's Note: This is the first of two sidebar news releases expanding on results of a statewide quality-of-life survey announced today by PPL Montana. Please call the number above if you did not receive all three news releases. Additional survey information can be found on our Web site at www.pplmontana.com.