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STATE of the STATE Survey

State *Of the* State Survey

*Public Opinion on
K-12 Education in Michigan*

*by Sandra Vegari
Michael Mintrom*

Briefing Paper No. 98-36

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

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Public Opinion on K-12 Education in Michigan

prepared by

Sandra Vergari

Assistant Professor

Department of Education Administration and Policy Studies
State University of New York at Albany

Michael Mintrom

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science
Michigan State University

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Please contact the following for further information:

About this report: Michael Mintrom, Department of Political Science (Phone: 517/355-7682; Internet: mintrom@pilot.msu.edu). **About SOSS:** Brian D. Silver, Department of Political Science and Director of SOSS (Phone: 517-355-2237; Internet: Bsilver@pilot.msu.edu); or visit the SOSS Web site (<http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/soss/>). **About the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research:** Philip R. Smith, Director, IPPSR (Phone: 517/353-9019; Internet: philip.smith@ssc.msu.edu). General contact for media and press: AnnMarie Schneider, Public Relations, IPPSR (Phone: 517/355-6672 x 143; Internet: wolf@pilot.msu.edu).

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BACKGROUND

Education issues are prominent items on policy agendas at the local, state, and federal levels of government. In collaboration with the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, we decided to examine the opinions of Michigan residents about: (1) their community schools, (2) national goals and standards for schools, (3) charter schools, and (4) a voucher system of education. In addition to measuring general public opinion on these issues, we wanted to find out if there were any differences in opinion according to demographic factors such as the type of community in which one lives, race, income, and party identification.

Charter schools are publicly-funded entities that are free of many of the regulations placed on traditional public schools. Charter school laws are now in place in 29 states and Washington, D.C. In 1993, Michigan became the third state to adopt a charter school law. With over 100 charter schools in operation, Michigan is one of the most active charter school states (Michigan Department of Education).

Proposals for publicly-funded voucher programs are the most controversial of the major reforms being discussed in current education reform debates. Under a full voucher system of education, parents would be permitted to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice; and parents who chose private or parochial schools would have the state pay all or part of the tuition. While numerous privately-funded voucher programs are in place across the nation, publicly-funded voucher programs presently exist in only two cities — Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio.

Some voucher proponents view charter schools as a stepping-stone to introducing vouchers, while other voucher proponents see charter schools as an inadequate half-way measure. On the other hand, some charter school proponents view charters as a good way to introduce choice and competition among public schools without moving to the more radical voucher approach. We examined whether Michigan residents who favor charter schools also favor vouchers. In order to avoid potential preconceived notions or misunderstandings about the politically-charged term “voucher,” we did not mention the term in our survey question on this issue. Rather, as noted in the section of the paper titled “Survey Questions,” the question included an accurate description of the components of a full voucher system.

THE SURVEY

A telephone survey of 971 adult residents in the state of Michigan was conducted by Michigan State University’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research between December 1997 and March 1998. The thirteenth quarterly MSU State of the State Survey (SOSS) focused on education and health care issues. The overall sampling error is $\pm 3.1\%$.

The sample was designed to be representative of the state and its regions: Detroit City, Southeast Michigan (excluding Detroit), Southwest Michigan, West Central Michigan, East Central Michigan, Northern Lower Michigan, and the Upper Peninsula. (See attached information sheet for a list of the counties included in each region.) The data reported here are weighted to make the results representative of the adult population in Michigan.

KEY FINDINGS

Grading the Public Schools (see Table 1 and Figure 1)

- **Overall, Michigan residents are less than delighted with the performance of the public schools in their respective communities.** A mere 12% of the residents assign their local public schools a grade of “A.” The modal response is a “B,” with 42% assigning such a grade. In contrast, 23% give their schools a “C,” and 10% assign a “D” or an “F.” (Question 1—*exact wording is given below.*)
- **The ability to assign a grade to public schools varies across communities.** Fourteen percent of all Michiganians do not know what grade to assign to their public schools. However, the percentage of “Don’t Know” responses is highest among suburban residents at 22%. In contrast, only 10% of urban residents report an inability to assign a grade to their public schools.
- **Whites and African-Americans grade their public schools differently.** Sixteen percent of whites do not know what grade to assign to their schools; however, only 6% of African-Americans do not know what grade to assign. For whites, the modal grade assigned is a “B,” at 44%. Only 8% of whites give their public schools a “D” or “F.” On the other hand, the modal grade given by African-Americans is a “C,” at 38%. Moreover, a full 23% of African-Americans give their public schools a “D” or “F.”

National Standards (see Table 2 and Figure 2)

- **An overwhelming majority (80%) of Michigan residents support national goals and standards for public schools.** (Q. 2)
- **Michigan residents who support either charter schools or vouchers, or both, also support national standards by large majorities.** Of those who favor charters, 82% favor national standards. Of those who favor vouchers 81% favor national standards.
- **Supporters of national standards are more supportive of charter schools than of vouchers.** Of those who favor national standards, 64% also favor charter schools while 59% also favor vouchers.

Charter Schools (see Table 3 and Figure 3)

- **A majority of Michigan residents (63%) favor charter schools.** About one quarter (23%) are opposed to charter schools. The remaining residents are either indifferent or do not yet have an opinion on charter schools. (Q. 3) A majority of Michigan residents (56%) think the number of charter schools permitted to operate in Michigan should be limited. Thirty-five percent are opposed to such a limit and 9% do not know if charter schools should be limited in number. (Q. 4)
- **The lower the grade they give to their public schools, the more likely Michigan residents are to favor charter schools.** Of those giving a grade of “A” or “B” to their public schools, 53-58% favor charter schools. Of those assigning a C grade, 72% favor charter schools. The percent in favor of charter schools jumps to 81% for those who give their public schools D or F grades.
- **Enthusiasm for charter schools differs according to community and race.** While 70% of urban residents favor charter schools, suburban residents are the least likely to favor charter

schools (57%). Sixty-two percent of whites favor charter schools while 69% of African-Americans favor charter schools.

- **Republicans and Independents are more likely to favor charter schools than are Democrats.** Sixty-eight percent of Republicans and 66% of Independents favor charter schools while a much lower 52% of Democrats favor charter schools.

Vouchers (see Table 4 and Figure 4)

- **A majority of Michigan residents favor a voucher system of education.** Fifty-nine percent favor vouchers and 37% are opposed. Five percent do not have an opinion on vouchers. (Q. 5)
- **Support for vouchers differs according to race and income.** Fifty-seven percent of whites favor vouchers while 65% of African-Americans favor vouchers. In general, the lower a person's household income, the more likely the person is to favor vouchers. Of Michigan residents with incomes of \$80,000 or higher, 53% favor vouchers. In contrast, 66% of residents with incomes up to \$19,999 favor vouchers.
- **Support for vouchers differs according to partisan identification, with Republicans giving the highest level of support.** Sixty-six percent of Republicans favor vouchers while 54% of Democrats and 57% of Independents favor vouchers.
- **Most residents who favor vouchers also favor charter schools and vice versa.** Of those who favor vouchers, 73% also favor charter schools. A smaller percentage (68%) of charter school supporters also favor vouchers.
- **A majority of the charter opponents also oppose vouchers but most voucher opponents are not opposed to charter schools.** Fifty-nine percent of those opposed to charter schools also oppose vouchers. However, only 38% of those opposed to vouchers also oppose charter schools.

DISCUSSION

In general, Michigan residents are neither overwhelmingly satisfied nor extremely dissatisfied with the performance of their public schools. However, there are differences according to community and race. When we compare urban and suburban residents, urban residents appear to be much more aware of the performance of their public schools. Moreover, while about 8% of whites assign their public schools a grade of “D” or “F,” nearly one quarter of African-Americans give their public schools such grades.

Proposals for national academic goals and standards reflect a preference for some degree of centralization in the administration of public education. A substantial majority (80%) of Michigan residents favor national standards for public schools. Charter schools and, especially, vouchers represent a more decentralized system of public education. Nonetheless, Michigan residents who support either charter schools or vouchers, or both, also support national standards by large majorities. It should be noted that supporters of national standards are more supportive of charter schools than of vouchers.

A majority of Michigan residents (63%) favor charter schools and 23% are opposed. It is noteworthy that, in a state with a relatively large number of charter schools, 14% of Michigan residents are either indifferent on the matter or do not yet have an opinion on charter schools. When we correlate the data on school grades with opinions on charter schools and vouchers, we find that the more dissatisfied Michigan residents are with their public schools the more likely they are to favor these two education reforms.

In contrast to the 14% of Michigan residents without a clear opinion on charter schools, 5% do not have an opinion on a voucher system of education. While a majority favor vouchers, 37% are opposed. While most residents who favor charter schools also favor vouchers and vice versa, the same pattern does not hold for opponents of these education reforms. A majority of the charter opponents also oppose vouchers but most voucher opponents are not opposed to charter schools.

In total, the data discussed in this report indicate that Michigan residents see much room for improvement in public education in the state. Residents of urban areas in particular are the most likely to have a negative view of their local schools, and they are also the most likely to support school reform measures such as charter schools and voucher programs. The majorities in favor of charter schools and vouchers, combined with the overwhelming support for national academic goals and standards, suggest that Michigan residents favor a mix of centralization and decentralization in public education reform.

TABLES

Table 1: Grading the Public Schools

Grade	A	B	C	D or F	Don't Know
All Respondents	11.7%	41.9%	22.6%	10.1%	13.7%
<i>By Community</i>					
Urban	6.0%	20.8%	34.9%	28.2%	10.1%
Suburban	13.9%	40.9%	19.4%	4.0%	21.8%
Small City or Town	10.1%	47.0%	22.5%	6.5%	13.9%
Rural	15.4%	50.0%	18.7%	9.3%	6.5%
<i>By Race</i>					
White	12.4%	44.3%	20.0%	7.7%	15.6%
African-American	5.5%	27.3%	38.3%	23.4%	5.5%

Table 2: National Standards

Opinion on National Standards	Support	Oppose	Don't Know
All Respondents	80.3%	16.1%	3.6%
Charter School Supporters	82.1%	15.9%	2.0%
Voucher Supporters	80.7%	16.8%	2.5%

Table 3: Charter Schools

Opinion on Charter Schools	Support	Indifferent	Oppose	Don't Know
All Respondents	62.6%	7.1%	23.4%	6.8%
<i>By Grade Given to Public Schools</i>				
A	52.7%	8.2%	30.9%	8.2%
B	57.7%	7.7%	28.0%	6.7%
C	71.6%	5.0%	20.2%	3.2%
D or F	81.4%	6.2%	10.3%	2.1%
<i>By Community</i>				
Urban	70.1%	4.8%	21.1%	4.1%
Suburban	57.1%	10.2%	22.8%	9.8%
Small City or Town	65.9%	6.5%	22.8%	4.7%
Rural	60.5%	5.6%	26.0%	7.9%
<i>By Race</i>				
White	62.3%	7.6%	23.8%	6.3%
African-American	68.5%	2.4%	20.5%	8.7%
<i>By Household Income</i>				
Up to \$19,000	73.3%	8.6%	12.1%	6.0%
From \$20,000 to \$79,999	61.0%	7.3%	25.0%	6.6%
Above \$80,000	67.4%	6.1%	23.5%	3.0%
<i>By Party Identification</i>				
Republican	67.9%	9.1%	17.9%	5.1%
Democrat	52.3%	7.4%	31.6%	8.6%
Independent or Other	65.9%	5.4%	22.8%	5.9%

Table 4: Vouchers

Opinion on Vouchers	Support	Oppose	Don't Know
All Respondents	58.7%	36.7%	4.5%
<i>By Grade Given to Public Schools</i>			
A	45.6%	46.5%	7.9%
B	61.1%	36.1%	2.7%
C	57.3%	40.4%	2.3%
D or F	81.4%	13.4%	5.2%
<i>By Community</i>			
Urban	62.0%	31.3%	6.7%
Suburban	57.1%	39.4%	3.5%
Small City or Town	58.0%	38.2%	3.8%
Rural	59.3%	36.0%	4.7%
<i>By Race</i>			
White	57.2%	39.1%	3.7%
African-American	65.1%	27.9%	7.0%
<i>By Household Income</i>			
Up to \$19,999	66.4%	25.0%	8.6%
From \$20,000 to \$79,999	57.4%	39.5%	3.1%
Above \$80,000	53.4%	45.8%	0.8%
<i>By Party Identification</i>			
Republican	65.7%	32.8%	1.5%
Democrat	54.3%	41.9%	3.9%
Independent or Other	57.3%	37.9%	4.9%

Figure 1. Percentage of Michigan Residents Giving a Grade of A or B to Their Public Schools

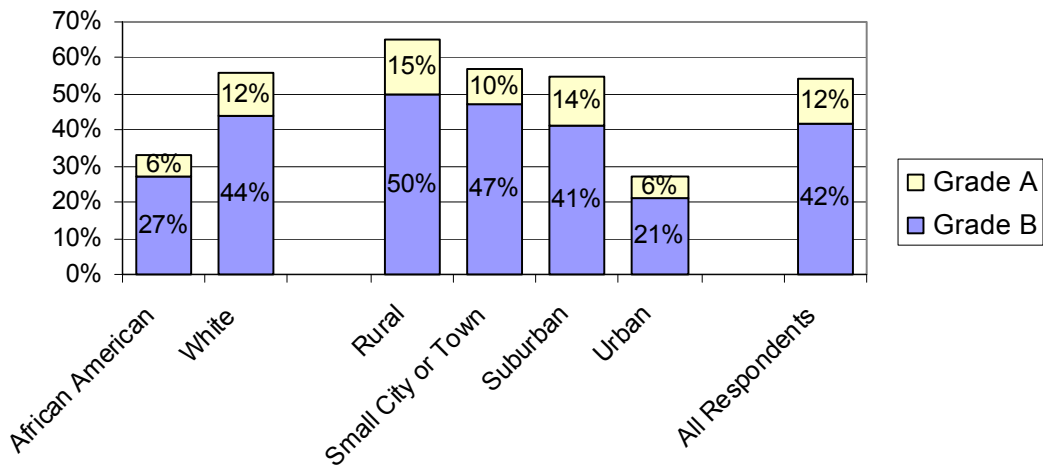


Figure 2. Do You Favor or Oppose National Standards for Public Schools?

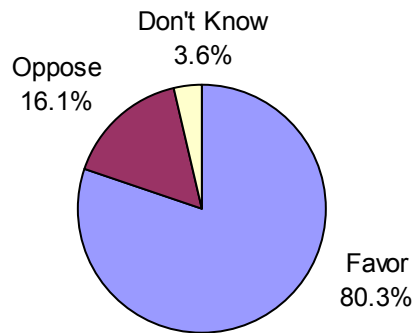


Figure 3. Percentage of Michigan Residents Who Favor Charter Schools

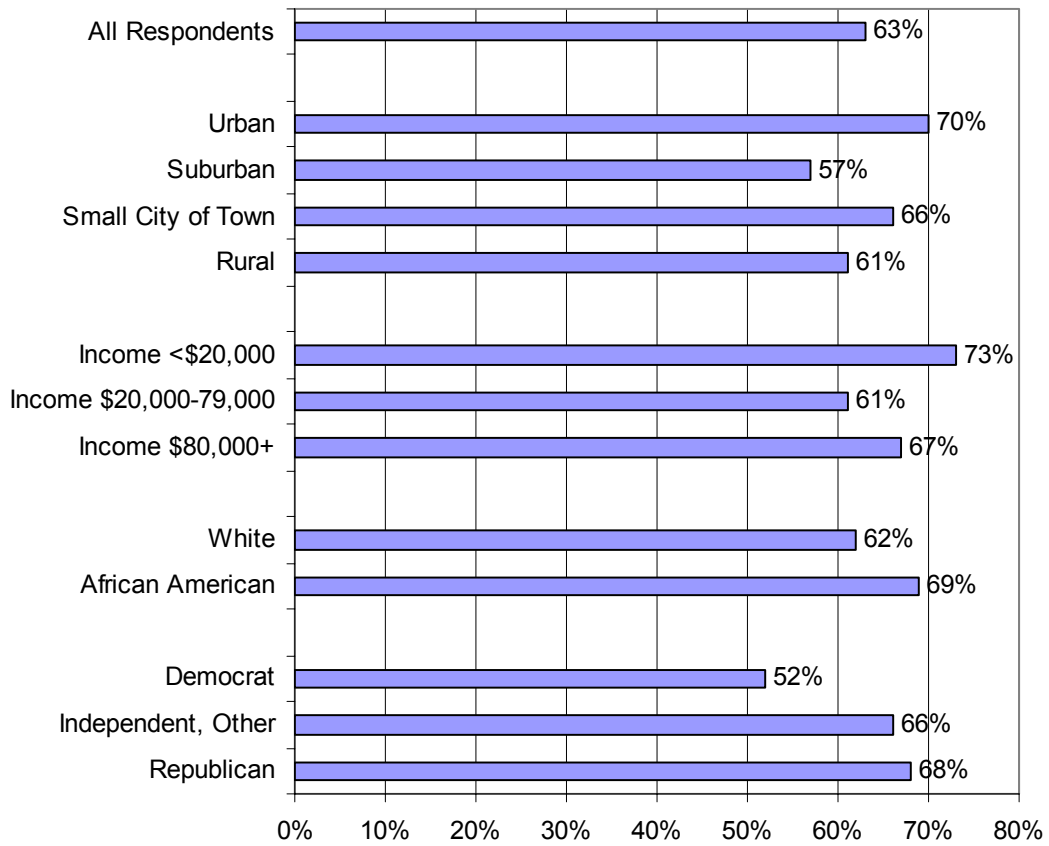
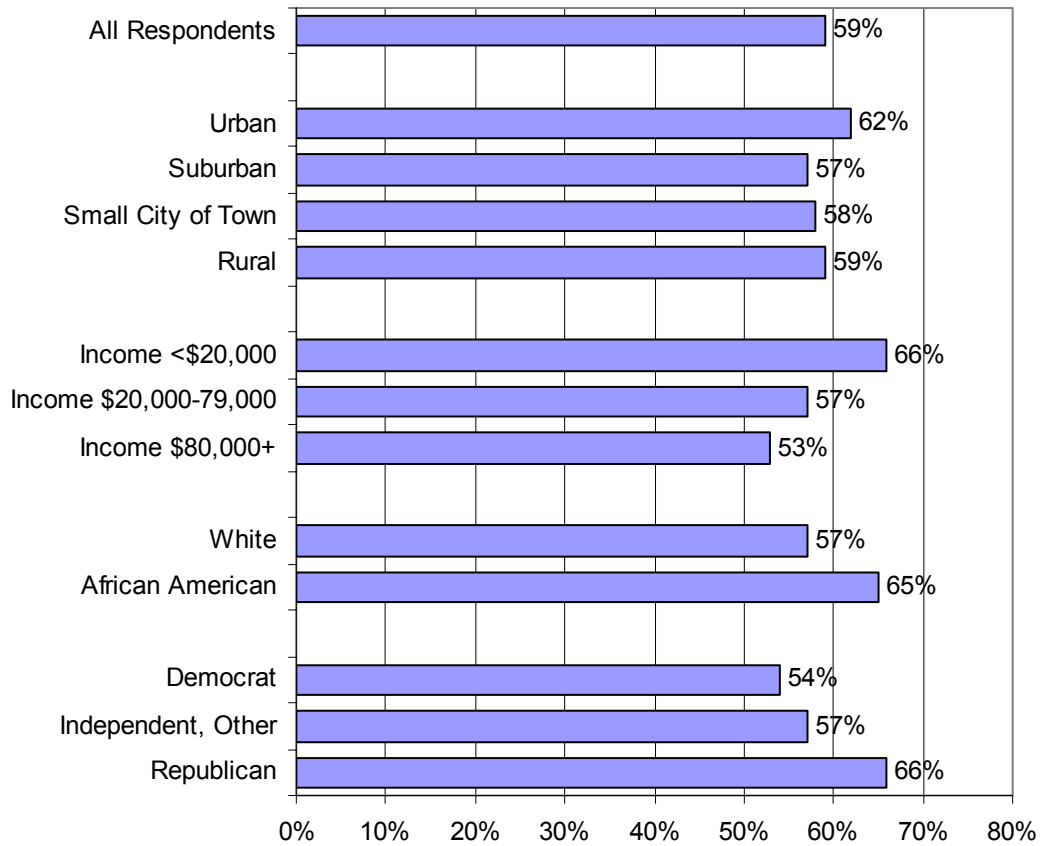


Figure 4. Percentage of Michigan Residents Who Favor School Vouchers



SURVEY QUESTIONS

The questions for the education items discussed in this briefing paper are listed below. The bracketed numbers correspond to the actual question numbers in the survey instrument. Overall, the interviews lasted an average of 19 minutes. The education questions consumed about two minutes of that time.

Q. 1. Next, I would like to ask you a couple of questions about education in Michigan. Students are often given the grades, A, B, C, D, and F as well as a plus or minus to indicate the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools in your community were graded in the same way. Taking all things into consideration, what grade would you give your community's public schools? [E1]

Q. 2. Would you favor or oppose establishing *national* education achievement goals and standards for public schools? [EP1]

Q. 3 Charter schools are independent *public* schools that are free from many of the regulations placed on traditional public schools. Charter schools can be organized by anyone, as long as they receive approval from a public sponsor such as a school district or a university. Do you favor or oppose charter schools in Michigan? [E4]

Q. 4. Should there be limits placed on the number of charter schools that are allowed to operate in Michigan? [E6]

Q. 5. A proposal has been made which would allow parents to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice. Parents who choose private or parochial schools would have the state pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal? [V1]

REGIONAL CATEGORIES

NOTE: These regions are the ones used by the Michigan State University Extension Service, except that we treat Detroit City as a separate region.

Detroit: City of Detroit

Southeast: Genesee, Lapeer, Lenawee, Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, Wayne (excluding Detroit)

Southwest: Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Eaton, Hillsdale, Ingham, Jackson, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, Van Buren

West Central: Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Lake, Manistee, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, Osceola, Ottawa

East Central: Arenac, Bay, Clare, Clinton, Gladwin, Gratiot, Huron, Isabella, Midland, Saginaw, Sanilac, Shiawassee, Tuscola

Northern L.P.: Alcona, Alpena, Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, Crawford, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Iosco, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Missaukee, Montmorency, Ogemaw, Otsego, Oscoda, Presque Isle, Roscommon, Wexford

U.P.: Alger, Baraga, Chippewa, Delta, Dickinson, Gogebic, Houghton, Iron, Keweenaw, Luce, Mackinac, Marquette, Menominee, Ontonagon, Schoolcraft

Background Information

Michigan State University State of the State Survey [MSU SOSS]

What Is MSU SOSS?

The MSU State of the State Survey is a quarterly statewide survey of a random sample of the residents of Michigan. Although dozens of surveys are conducted in Michigan every year, no other one is designed to provide a regular systematic monitoring of the public mood in major regions of the state. Through SOSS, MSU aims to fill this information gap. SOSS has five main purposes: (1) to provide timely information about citizen opinions on critical issues; (2) to provide data for scientific and policy research by MSU faculty; (3) to provide information for programs and offices at MSU; (4) to develop survey research methodology; and (5) to provide opportunities for student training and research.

Each quarterly round or “wave” of SOSS has a different main theme. The general plan for the themes is: (a) Winter–quality of life, governmental reform, higher education; (b) Spring–family, women, and children; (c) Summer–ethnic and racial groups, Michigan communities; (d) Fall (even numbered years)–politics, the election, and political issues; (odd-numbered years)–health and the environment. This wave of SOSS departed from this pattern and focused predominantly on health care related issues.

Who Is Conducting SOSS?

The State of the State Survey is administered by the Survey Research Division (SRD) of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR), using its computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology.

The design and overall planning of SOSS is the responsibility of a 17-person Steering Committee chaired by Dr. Brian D. Silver. The Steering Committee consists of representatives from sponsoring units, which are primarily colleges and other administrative offices within MSU.

Subject to final approval by the Steering Committee, the questionnaire for each wave of SOSS is developed by a Working Group, most of whom also serve as principal investigators or analysts for that wave. The people listed below (all from Michigan State University unless otherwise noted) comprised the Working Group for the Fall 1997 survey (Wave 13):

Andrew Hogan, Associate Professor, Department of Medicine

Maureen Mickus, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry

Michael Mintrom, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science

Brian Silver, Professor, Department of Political Science; Director, State of the State Survey

Sandra Vergari, Assistant Professor, Department of Education Administration and Policy Studies, State University of New York at Albany

Mark Wilson, Associate Professor, Department of Geography and Urban and Regional Planning