

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

2004 District 214 Residential Study

Methodology:

Decision Resources, Ltd., contacted 600 randomly selected households in Township High School District 214. The sample was stratified by High School Attendance Zones. Residents were interviewed by telephone between December 16th, 2004 and January 6th, 2005. The average interview took twenty-six minutes. The results of this sample may be projected to the universe of all adult residents of District 214 within $\pm 4.1\%$ in 95 out of 100 cases.

Findings:

Residential Demographics:

The typical adult resident of Township High School District 214 has lived there for 17.8 years. Thirteen percent have resided in the school district for five years or less, while 22% lived there for over 30 years. The median adult age is 48.2 years old. Fourteen percent are under 35 years old; thirty percent are over 55 years old. The typical resident reports having attended college, but not receiving a degree. However, 49% of the respondents are college graduates. Women comprise 53% of the sample, with men at 47%.

Twenty-eight percent of the households in the school district contain children attending high school; within that group, 96% attend District 214 public schools. Thirty-two percent of the households report the presence of school-aged children below high school grades. Forty-three percent of the households contain District 214 high school graduates; similarly, 17% of the respondents, themselves, are graduates from District 214 high schools.

Nineteen percent of the households in District 214 report languages other than English are spoken in their homes. Spanish is spoken in eight percent; Asian languages, in five percent; and, European languages, in six percent. Eighty-two percent of the respondents are White. Ten percent are Hispanic-Latino, while five percent are Asian-Pacific Islander, and two percent, African-American.

Seventy-eight percent of the respondents own their present residence. The median total pre-tax household income in the school district is \$74,600.00. Only 11% report household incomes under \$35,000.00; forty-two percent post household incomes over \$75,000.00.

Perceptions of the School District:

In discussing aspects of District 214 they like most, 24% point to “good teachers,” while 19% comment on the “quality of education.” Eleven percent like the “curriculum;” eight percent, “programs;” and four percent, “preparation for college.” When asked about the most serious issue facing District 214, 38% cite “inadequate funding.” “Overcrowding” concerns nine percent, while “drugs and gangs” are pointed to by seven percent. Five percent feel there is “no serious problem” facing District 214 at this time.

A very solid 86% rate the quality of education provided by District 214 High Schools as either “excellent” or “good;” in fact, 59% rate it as “excellent.” Only five percent post lower ratings, and ten percent, usually older empty nesters, are uncertain. Among the 32% rating the school district lower than “excellent,” several suggestions for improvement are posted by moderate numbers of residents: “improve curriculum,” “lower class sizes,” “improve discipline,” “more communications from the School District,” and “recruit better teachers” are suggested by at least seven percent each.

When asked if District 214 high schools meet the learning needs of all students, 16% say they meet the needs of “all students” and 69% think they do so with “most students.” Eight percent think District 214 meets the needs of “only some” students, and one percent consider it meeting the needs of “very few students.” Only six percent report they are “unsure.”

Indicators of the quality of education provided by a school district were discussed. Residents were asked to choose the most important indicator in shaping their perception of a high quality school district. The table below denotes the set of indicators, the percent choosing that indicator as the most important, and the rating of the School District on each chosen indicator:

Indicator	Percent “Most Important”	District 214 Evaluation		
		Excellent	Good	Negative
Student scores on standardized test	10%	34%	50%	8%
Percentage of high school graduates going on for further education	45%	35%	52%	6%
Percentage of high school graduates successfully prepared for the job market	12%	19%	57%	19%
Broad curriculum serving all students regardless of their future plans	21%	45%	41%	5%
Reasonable class sizes	4%	12%	44%	16%
Safe and secure buildings	3%	38%	44%	13%
Schools contributing to the maintenance of high property values	2%	42%	42%	17%

The top ranked indicator is the “percentage of high school graduates going on for further education,” at 45%. District 214 has a very positive rating: 87% to 6%. Next, “broad curriculum serving all students regardless of their future plans” is the choice of 21% of the sample. Again the District rating is a strong 86% to 5%.

When compared with the quality of the education provided by District 214 five years ago, 41% see it as “better,” while 31% think it is “about the same.” Six percent view it as “worse,” and 24% are “unsure.” In comparison with the high school education provided in neighboring school districts, 46% rate District 214 as “better,” while 37% see it as “about the same.” Only four percent think it is “worse,” and 13% are “uncertain.”

Specific Perceptions of Aspects of District Operations:

Respondents were asked how they view the School District on a number of dimensions, ranging from fiscal credibility to teaching staff. Each of four statements is arrayed below, along with the percentages of those who agree, disagree, or are uncertain:

Statement	Agreement	Disagreement	Uncertainty
During the last few years, District 214 Administration and Board have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.	66%	15%	20%
Generally, District 214 High Schools are held accountable enough for the quality of education provided to their students.	79%	11%	10%
District 214 does a good job of involving community leaders, parents, and interested citizens in decisions about the schools.	72%	15%	14%
District 214 has been able to maintain a high quality teaching staff in its schools.	84%	5%	11%

District spending, accountability, inclusiveness, and quality teaching staff maintenance enjoy strong levels of support.

In looking to the future, by an 86% to 4% margin, respondents agree, “school funding issues facing District 214 are likely to become very challenging in the next few years.” In fact, 32% “strongly agree” with this statement. By a 62% to 35% margin, residents think public education in Illinois is inadequately funded. But, in the case of District 214, a 44% to 42% split occurs on the question of adequate funding of its schools.

Seventy-nine percent regard the quality of education provided by District 214 in terms of the property taxes they pay as either “an excellent value” or “a good value.” Seventeen percent, though, see it as “an only fair value” or “a poor value.” Five percent are uncertain.

District 214 Educational Programs:

Respondents were asked for their evaluations about ten instructional programs. The table below summarizes the positive and negative evaluations for each program, as well as the percentage of residents unable to rate that program:

Instructional Program	Excellent + Good	Only Fair + Poor	Unsure
Access to computers and technology	80%	5%	15%
Co-curricular athletic and academic activities	80%	6%	15%
Instruction in regular academics including reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social sciences	78%	11%	11%
Music, theater and visual arts programs	76%	6%	18%
Educational opportunities for academically advanced students	69%	7%	25%

Instructional Program	Excellent + Good	Only Fair + Poor	Unsure
Student service or student volunteer programs in the community	67%	11%	23%
Class sizes	61%	18%	21%
Vocational and technical programs and services for students planning to enter the work force immediately after high school graduation	56%	15%	28%
Special education programs and services for students with learning disabilities	52%	12%	37%
Alternative programs for students possessing learning difficulties	47%	16%	38%

The top ranked programs, at 80% positive each, are “computers/technology” and “co-curricular activities.” Next, with positive ratings over 75%, are “music/theater/visual arts” and “instruction in regular academics.” No educational program scores a negative rating over 20%. Three programs did, however, post negative ratings above 15%: “class sizes,” “alternative programs,” and “vocational and technical programs and services.” Overall, among respondents indicating opinions, the positive-to-negative ratio did not drop below a very favorable 3-to-1.

Awareness of District 214's Community Education Programs is a high 75% of the sample. But, actual participation during the past five years is only 21%. Satisfaction among participants with the experience is a solid 90%.

A strong perception existing in the School District is that diverse student bodies are better for the overall education of children than are non-diverse school populations. Eighty-two percent think “children are better off attending high schools where students have very different ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds.” Only 13% choose the statement, “children are better off attending high schools where students have very similar ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds.” Six percent are unsure which approach is better.

Contact with District 214:

Thirty-five percent of the sample visited or contacted District 214 High Schools or the Administration Building. When queried about their last contact, each of the High Schools were indicated by five or six percent, while the Administration Building was contacted by three percent. Visitors rated aspects of the service they received very highly. Eighty-eight percent rate the “waiting time for staff to respond to you” as positive; 90% rate the “ease of finding a staff member who could help you” positive; and, 90% similarly rate the “courtesy of the building staff.” Negative ratings on each of these dimensions did not exceed 10%.

Job Performance Ratings:

Respondents were asked to rate the job performance of the District 214 Board of Education, Superintendent and Administration, High School Building Principals, and teachers and instructional staff. The table below shows the positive and negative evaluations for each group as well as the percentage of respondents unable to evaluate each one.

Group	Positive Rating	Negative Ratings	Uncertainty
Board of Education	65%	18%	17%
Superintendent and Administration	58%	17%	26%
High School Building Principals	67%	10%	24%
Teachers and Instructional Staff	82%	6%	24%

Majorities of residents award each group a positive job performance rating of either “excellent” or “good.” And, in no case did the positive-to-negative rating drop below a very strong 3.5-to-1.

Changes or Enhancements in the School District:

Residents were asked for their reactions to four facilities or programs in which interest has been previously expressed. Respondents were informed that funds may not be currently available and the proposals could not proceed without them. The table below lists each proposal, together the percentages of respondents who view it as a “top or high priority” or a “low or not a priority.”

Proposal	Top + High Priority	Low + Not Priority
Creating “magnet programs”	44%	20%
Large performance auditorium	16%	49%
Late-day or evening high school program	35%	30%
Construction of aquatic centers at two high schools lacking them	22%	37%

Respondents express substantial interest in the creation of “magnet programs.” A “late-day or evening high school program for students who work during the regular school day” receives moderate support. Both a “large performance auditorium” and “construction of aquatic centers at the three high schools currently lacking them” are not viewed as a key priority at this time.

Potential Budget Cuts to Balance the School Budget:

Respondents were asked for their reactions to ten possible budget cuts. The table below shows the proposal, followed by total support, total opposition, and uncertainty:

Budget Cut Proposal	Support	Opposition	Unsure
Increasing the average class size from 23 to 24 students per class	71%	24%	5%
Charging a fee for busing for District high school students	58%	37%	5%

Budget Cut Proposal	Support	Opposition	Unsure
Charging student fees for participation in co-curricular activities, such as athletics, band, debate, and theater	54%	41%	4%
Requiring all employees to pay a larger share of their health insurance coverage	45%	47%	9%
Proposing a property tax increase to avoid major program and staff cuts	39%	55%	7%
Reducing the number of elective classes available to students	23%	72%	6%
Reducing or eliminating a number of co-curricular activities, such as athletics, band, debate, and theater	11%	86%	4%
Reducing or eliminating programs and services for gifted and talented students	10%	86%	5%
Reducing or eliminating programs and services for at-risk students	6%	85%	10%
Reducing or eliminating alternative programs for students possessing learning difficulties	5%	90%	5%

Only three proposals score majority support: “increasing the average class size from 23 to 24 students per class,” “charging a fee for busing for District high school students,” and “charging student fees for participation in co-curricular activities, such as athletics, band, debate, and theater.” At the other extreme, four proposals generate intense and extensive opposition: “reducing or eliminating a number of co-curricular activities, such as athletics, band, debate, and theater,” “reducing or eliminating programs and services for gifted and talented students,” “reducing or eliminating programs and services for at-risk students,” and “reducing or eliminating alternative programs for students possessing learning difficulties.”

Communications:

A very high 63% feel either “very informed” or “somewhat informed” about the decisions made by the District 214 Board of Education and Administration. Thirty-eight percent perceive they are less well informed. Satisfaction with the current level of information also proves high: 70% express satisfaction, while only 15% are dissatisfied.

Respondents were asked to identify their principal source of information about District 214. They were then queried about the most preferred way they would like to receive that information. The table below arrays responses to both questions:

Source of Information	Principal Source	Preferred Source
None	4%	5%
School District Newsletter	23%	34%

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Source of Information	Principal Source	Preferred Source
School Building Newsletters/ Children	8%	8%
“Daily Herald”	34%	30%
Grapevine	17%	3%
School District website	2%	3%
School District staff	1%	1%
“Pioneer Press”	4%	3%
Mailings	2%	10%
School District employee	1%	0%
E-mail	0%	2%
Scattered	4%	3%

The School District Newsletter, “Frontline,” and the “Daily Herald” newspaper lead the list of both principal sources of information and preferred sources of information. The “grapevine” is also heavily relied upon, as are school building newsletters and children. “Mailings” is the only information source that receives a significant increase in preference from its current level of reliance.

Next, respondents were asked about their usage of seven potential sources of information about School District 214. The table below lists the source, the percentage of residents who receive “a lot” of information from it, and the percentage who receive “some” information” from it:

Information Source	A Lot of Information	Some Information
Articles in the “Daily Herald”	41%	26%
District 214 Newsletter	26%	30%
Articles in the Community Education brochure	8%	32%
Individual high school building newsletters	17%	15%
Articles in the “Pioneer Press” newspaper	9%	14%
District 214 website	5%	10%
Articles in the “Journal and Topics” newspaper	1%	6%

The two information sources with the widest reach are “articles in the ‘Daily Herald’ newspaper” and “the District 214 newsletter, ‘Frontline.’” “Articles in the Community Education brochure” and “individual high school building

newsletters” form the second tier of overall usage.

Eighty-four percent of the households in District 214 have Internet access from a computer at home. Thirty percent of the surveyed households accessed the School District website, www.d214.org. Among website users, 67% rated the website positively.

Conclusions:

1. School District 214 is exceptionally well regarded by residents of the district. The quality of education is viewed more positively by district residents than the Chicago Area and Upper Midwest Metropolitan Area norms:

Rating	District 214	Chicago Suburbs	Upper Midwest Suburbs
Excellent + Good	86%	76%	68%
Only Fair + Poor	5%	18%	21%
Unsure	10%	9%	11%

Similarly the ratio of positive-to-negative job performance ratings is higher than both sets of norms:

Group	District 214	Chicago Suburbs	Upper Midwest Suburbs
Board of Education	3.5-to-1	2-to-1	2.5-to-1
Superintendent and Administration	3.5-to-1	2-to-1	2-to-1
Building Principals	7-to-1	5-to-1	4-to-1
Teachers and Instructional Staff	14-to-1	7-to-1	8-to-1

And, the fiscal credibility is comparatively very strong:

During the last few years, District 214 Administration and Board have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.	District 214	Chicago Suburbs	Upper Midwest Suburbs
Agree	66%	52%	47%
Disagree	15%	31%	31%
Unsure	20%	17%	22%

When residents compare the district with nearby suburban school districts, the results prove very favorable. Similarly, the District does not have the commonly encountered perception that quality has declined over the past few years; quite the contrary, almost a majority see the quality of education improving.

2. The School District is viewed as remarkably successful on the indicators residents use to determine high quality. Most residents tend to use one of four indicators to shape their perception of a high quality school district: percentage of high school graduates going on for further education, broad curriculum serving all students regardless of their future plans, percentage of high school graduates successfully prepared for the job market, and student scores on standardized tests. On each indicator, the positive rating remains above 76%, and on three indicators, above 84%.

3. District 214 instructional ratings are rated very strongly by most residents. In particular, residents post positive ratings of over 75%: “access to computers and technology,” “co-curricular athletic and academic activities,” “instruction in regular academics,” and “music, theater and visual arts programs.”

4. While most residents see the funding of public schools in Illinois as inadequate, 62% to 35%, they split on the adequacy of funding for District 214, 44% to 42%. Even so, 35% regard inadequate funding as the most serious issue facing the school district. It is no surprise, then, residents oppose a property tax increase, by a margin of 55% to 39%, to solve the 2005-06 budget shortfall.

5. Customer service ratings of School District staff are exceptionally high. Among those having contact during the past two years, over 88% rate staff highly on three dimensions – wait for service, ease of finding helpful staff, and courtesy.

6. One change or enhancement in District 214 should be considered as a near-term priority: “magnet programs.” A secondary priority for discussion should be the offering of a late-day or evening high school program.

7. If budget cuts must be made in the 2005-06 budget, residents would prefer a set of incremental changes rather than reducing or eliminating programs and activities. There is strong support for an average class size increase of one student. Similarly, fees for participation in co-curricular activities and for busing receive majority support. Residents split almost evenly on requiring all employees to pay a larger share of their health insurance coverage. Otherwise, reductions or elimination of programs and activities – whether co-curricular, alternative programs, programs and services for at-risk or gifted and talented students – post opposition levels in excess of 85%.

8. Communication links between School District 214 and residents are very strong. More residents feel informed in District 214 than the norm:

Information Level	District 214	Chicago Suburbs	Upper Midwest Suburbs
Very + Somewhat Informed	63%	54%	52%
Not Too + Not At All Informed	38%	40%	42%
Unsure	0%	6%	6%

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Satisfaction levels are also outstanding; at 70%, they exceed the norm in both the Chicago suburbs and Upper Midwest suburbs by 12%. The reach of the District 214 newsletter, "Frontline," is at the Chicago suburban and Upper Midwest suburban norms. To improve the publication's reach, the School District may wish to consider a greater frequency of publication.

In conclusion, District 214 is an exceptional school district. Residents view the School District as highly effective – providing a high quality of education, fiscally credible, and responsive to both student and residential needs. There is a solid reservoir of goodwill toward the School District and an abundance of trust in its decision-making. But, with tougher fiscal times ahead, the District will need to be particularly careful in maintaining and strengthening links with the community and keeping residents informed about its actions to meet budget deficits.