



# Newton Perspectives

A Probe of Climate, Culture, and Upper Grade  
Retention at Newton School

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## Newton Probe 2019: Key Findings

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This probe analyzes 322 survey responses, 110 interviews from students, educators, parents, and community members to inform the school system about perspectives around climate, culture, and upper grade retention at Newton School. Key findings include:

### Climate and Culture

The top climate and culture priorities overall for surveyed groups are **Respect** and **Friends**. For parents, priorities are **Education Quality** and **School Environment**. In a tale of two schools, parents leaving report negative experiences about these priorities; parents staying report positive ones. Current students share they care about these areas and also express concerns about student attitudes towards teachers and each other. But, they give overall positive ratings to adult attitudes towards students and other adults.

### Grade Levels to Offer at Newton

**All of the current Newton School grade levels have 50% or more support for continuing from people surveyed.** The priority order is K-5 (91.7%), 6<sup>th</sup> (83.4%), Pre-K (63.4%), then 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade (51.78%). Uncertainty around 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade surfaces in interviews and written comments. But, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades rate more strongly on questions of importance, with around 60% rating it as very or somewhat important to include. In the interviews/ written responses, Keep 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade and related codes of support appear as a strong qualitative data codes.

### Leaving Reasons and the Exodus

People leaving Newton early report climate and culture difficulties in the classroom. There's a call for **More Care** of students, particularly around **discipline** and **teacher respect** and **teacher care for students** in the upper grades. Concerns surface around **Bullying**. People share perceptions that **Academics Vary** in quality, with math preparation seen as strongest, and reading and writing to follow. Parents who are leaving or have left Newton early advocate moving to choice for 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade most strongly, though other plans arise including private school partnering. Almost as many parents plan to leave (31) as plan to stay (35) for upper grades, with a large group of undecided parents (81) who are the school's opportunity.

### Building for Tomorrow

Many share various hopes and ideas to improve the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade including the following. Build on the **community love of school**, of local, of having older students nearby and connect more with Strafford and other communities. **Individualize** for every student, taking the successful lessons from helping students who struggle to **design a caring environment** adapting for high flyers as well as kids who struggle. Create **professional learning communities** to better tap internal and expertise to improve work. **Design for adolescent student** leadership interests and skills. Develop a vision, reinvent, explore themes for bold change to harness a small school's ability to personalize and be nimble. Commit to **inclusion and equity**. **Strengthen pre-K** so working families can opt in. To be ready if student levels continue to drop unsustainably, consider identifying a breaking point and preparing an if-needed plan for moving to choice, with a choice that could include a Strafford option.

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# Newton Perspectives

## A Probe of Climate, Culture, and Upper Grade Retention at Newton School Brief for School Board

By Dawn M. Ellis, Ed.M., Dawn M. Ellis and Associates, LLC

May 8, 2019

### Probe of Climate and Culture Related to Upper Grade Retention

Purpose: At a time of exodus from its upper grades, this probe is designed to help The Newton School in Strafford, VT and its school board evaluate its school culture and climate as part of ongoing internal improvement work around upper grade retention.

The following report shares insights into the experiences and priorities of people participating in a probe led by Dawn M. Ellis and Associates, LLC (DME) in collaboration with the Newton School and White River Valley School Board from January – May 2019.

### How We Did the Probe

Newton School administrators and school board members invited Dawn M. Ellis and Associates, LLC (DME), a Vermont consulting firm, to work with them to probe the question:

*What do students and families consider about the climate and culture of the school as they choose whether or not to keep their students at the school for 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade?*

DME developed an online survey instrument in collaboration with the principal and school board based on interests and concerns they heard from the school community. Led by the school principal, the school administration invited current and former students, families, and community members to respond the survey online or using paper questionnaires, encouraging participation in the probe during January 2019.

DME President Dawn M. Ellis visited the school in an intensive visit to observe classes; eat with students; and lead 5 minute interview sessions with school and community members to learn about their perspectives on climate, culture, and upper grade retention. To support the DME probe, the administration and leadership coordinated interviews, volunteer support, permissions, and participation during the probe, investing a significant investment of time beyond normal responsibilities.

As a result, the survey received 322 responses from a town of 1045 people<sup>1</sup>. Closed survey responses were analyzed with R Statistical Software, and examined more closely by role of person and by families planning to stay, go, or undecided on their 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade plan. People from across the school community participated in DME led five minute interviews in-person or by phone resulting in 110 interviewees agreeing to participate in the probe project including a randomly selected group of students. DME coded and analyzed concurrent notes into 515 codes from the in-person interviews and

<sup>1</sup> Based on the 2000 census.

examined patterns in the concurrent notes from the phone interviews. Using qualitative research software, DME tabulated codes and built themes from these codes that addressed the research question<sup>2</sup>.

### **Addressing Needs**

More Care  
 Better Conflict Handling  
 Academics Vary  
 Exodus Wave  
 Uncertainty  
 Money Matters

### **Building for Tomorrow**

Vision  
 Reinvention Ideas  
 Build on Strengths  
     Heart of Community  
     Local Matters  
 Emphasize Inclusion  
 Structures for Today's Families  
 Invest Young

The following report highlights some key priorities and ideas from Strafford residents young and old participating in this work. We offer these results to inform the school board as it works with the school and community to plan its continued management of the school.

## **General Trends**

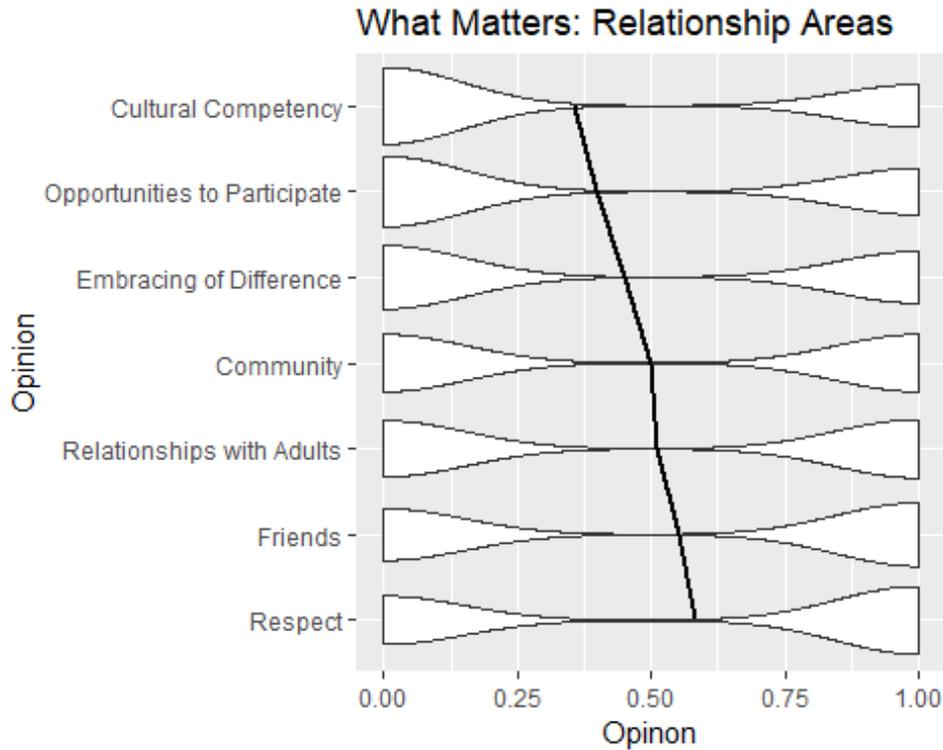
### **Relationships**

When it comes to climate and culture, relationships among people matter. Looking across questions related to relationships at the school, one sees a picture of groups of people having very different experiences<sup>3</sup>. Overall, **Respect** is rated as most the important relationship area. Between groups, opinions disagree sharply on whether the experience with respect was positive or negative at Newton School.

In interviews, we hear a range of stories. We heard from some parents and students experiencing a lack of respect in their interactions in with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and the school. We also hear from some parents, staff, community members, and students speak of a caring school that nurtures students.

<sup>2</sup> See The Appendix for Detailed Methods for more on data collection and analysis processes.

<sup>3</sup> To interpret this graph, the tipped hourglass shape suggests strong opinions about whether the experience is positive (averaging above 0.5) or negative (averaging below 0.5). The areas are ranked by line from least important to most important.



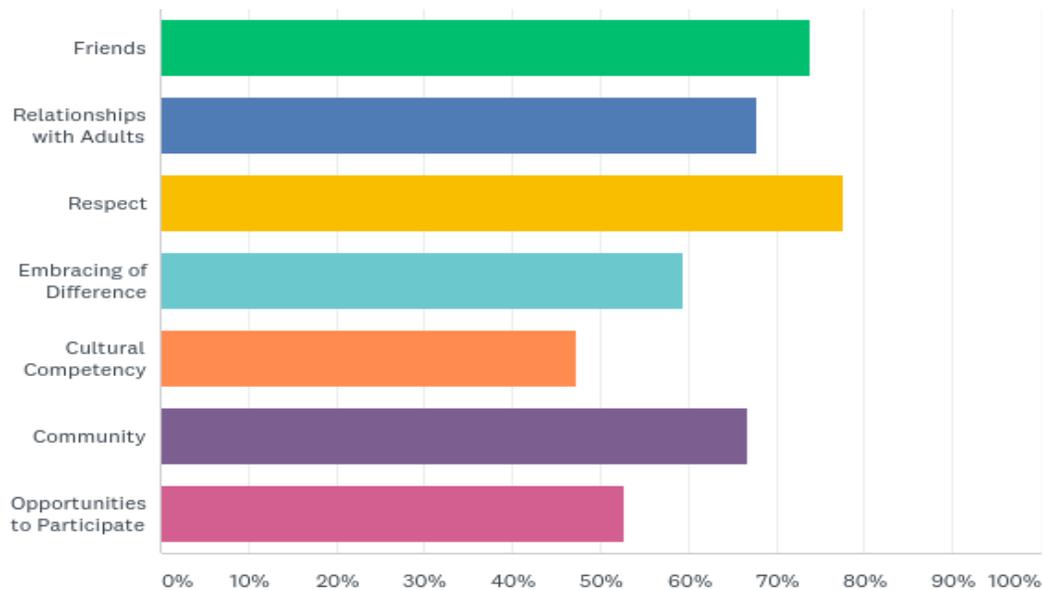
After Respect, surveyed people rate **Friends** as the next most important relationship area. In the interviews, we hear of families prioritizing their student's desire to stay with friends as an important reason to stay in the school through upper grades. Conversely, disaffected families speak of leaving to find a broader selection of peers who could become friends with their student.

In general, safety concerns can't be generalized to the whole group of survey responders, as the results ended up in the middle. However, recess does not rise to a safety concern in the full set of survey responses, suggesting when there are concerns about safety, *recess is not the problem*. Parents who are leaving report feeling concerned about safety.

## Q23 Check relationship areas that matter to you when choosing to stay in 7th or 8th grade at Newton.

Answered: 165

Skipped: 157



Moving beyond trends in the full group of respondents, DME analyzed questions based on group roles; some priority areas follow.

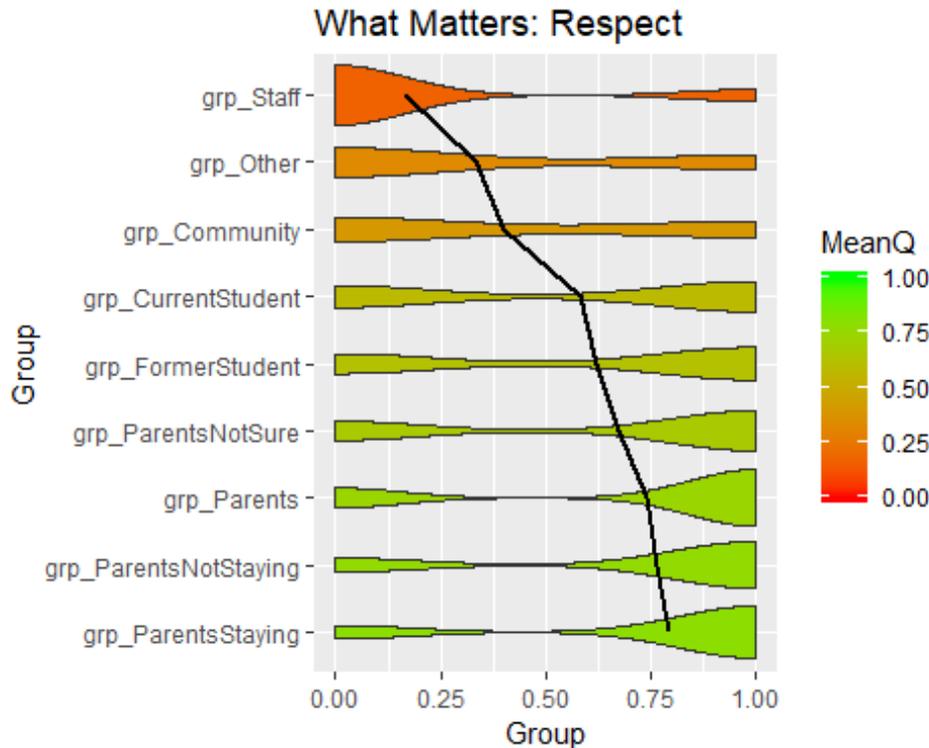
### Parents: Same Priorities, Different Experiences

Surveyed parents report the top most important school areas as **Education Quality** and **School Environment**. Interestingly, this remains constant whether the families plan for a child to leave or stay in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels. No other area mattered strongly in the answers of over 50% of parent respondents. For parents planning to leave rate *variety of offerings*, *teacher variety*, and *school discipline* as important. For parents planning to stay, *location* and *safety* factor as strong considerations.

All parents taking the survey report care about **Relationships with Adults**, **Respect** (see following chart)<sup>4</sup>, **Embracing of Difference**, and **Cultural Competency**<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> When reading the heat map, the midpoint line breaks positive scores on the right (above 0.50 average) with negative scores on the left (below 0.5 average). Colors also illustrate the positive and negative ratings, with red as negative, yellow/mustard in the middle, and green as positive.

<sup>5</sup> R analysis graphs for each survey question with significance levels and accompanying tables will be made available to the school board, but are not included in this report.



Parents planning on staying also identify *friends* and *community* as important. They also respond so strongly to *local living*, *educational choices*, *class size*, *transportation*, and *high school preparation* they raise the overall average of scores in these areas across all groups. Class size matters much less to parents opting to leave, in the survey ratings.

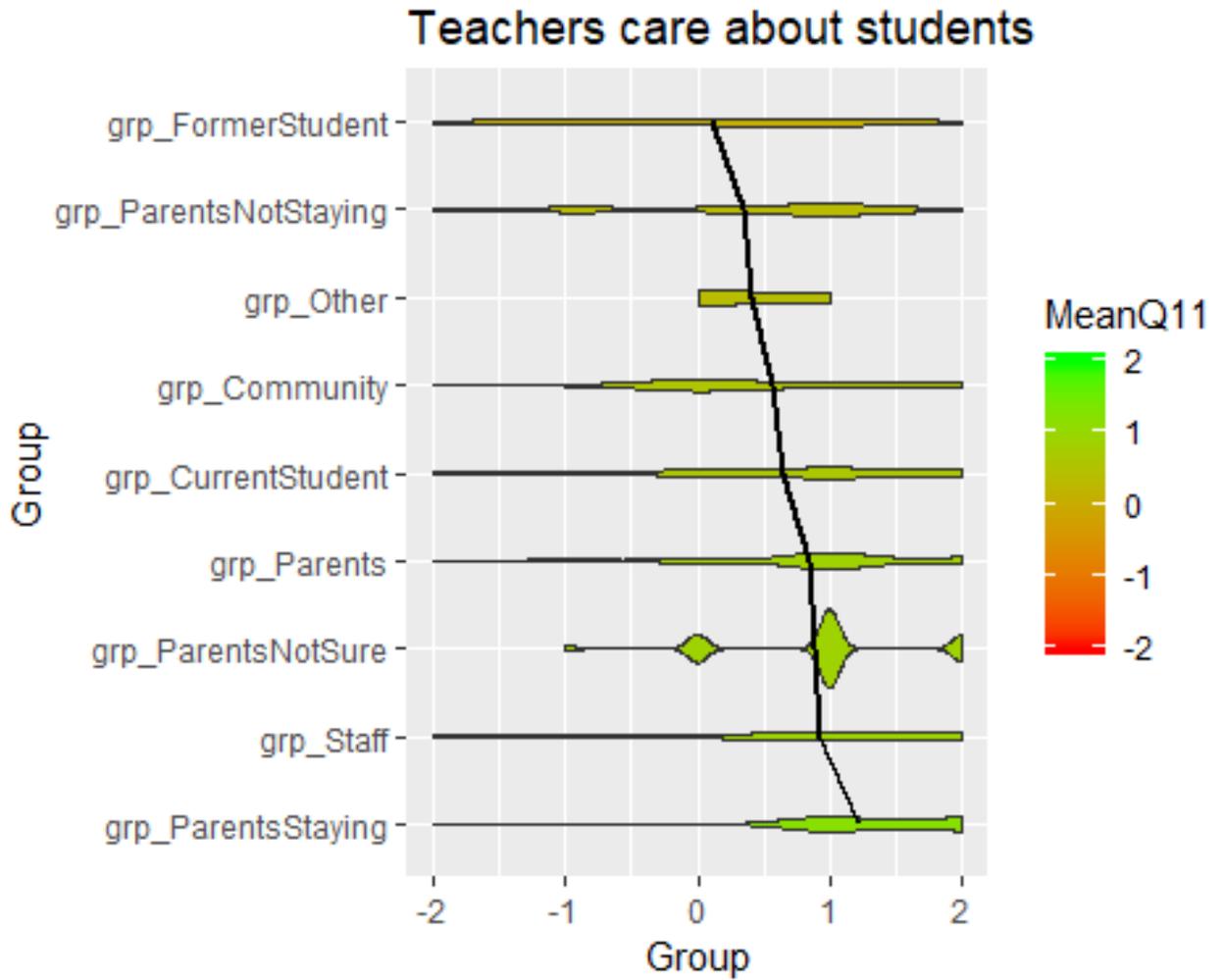
#### Current Students: Challenging Peer Interactions, Overall More Positive About Adults

For current students, the top surveyed educational areas are sports, school environment, education quality (all three about 60% support) and teacher variety (just over 50%).

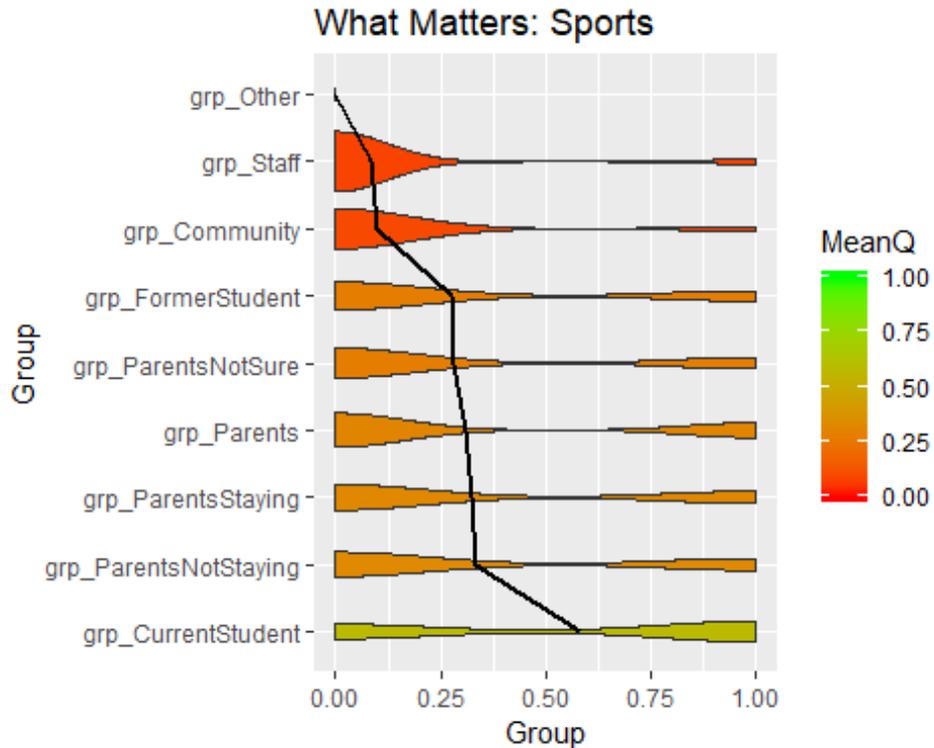
Current students offer in the middle responses to many climate questions, with a few areas they differ from the other groups. They give **negative ratings** to the **student attitudes towards teachers** and **student attitudes towards other students**. We also hear in interviews with a variety of groups of people of concerns about **students acting out with each other** and **with teachers**. But the interviews and open-ended questions also speak of **discipline approaches needing to be reinvented**<sup>6</sup>. Surveyed current students, who may come from a wider array of grade levels than the interviews, are **most positive in relationship to other groups** when asked about **various adult attitudes towards students** and **adult attitudes towards other adults** in the school environment. Current students responding to the survey **overall rate teacher to student attitudes as positive**. The difference between this and the very negative

<sup>6</sup> "Discipline changes needed" =Most frequent in qualitative code instances, n= high 30's.

ratings by some adults surveyed, particularly the group of parents who are leaving, may suggest an opportunity for adults to improve their relationships with each other within the school community.



Current students are the only group that rated sports as a priority.



DME heard about student interest in more robust sports opportunities.

#### Staff and Administration

Overall, of all the different types of respondents, surveyed staff (n=36) on average give the highest rating for their relationship with administration. But, there is high variability in the ratings, so there are a few teachers giving top ratings and others reporting a negative relationship.

#### Larger forces at work

Through the interviews and open-ended responses, we hear of forces affecting the school that stretch back in time and beyond the town of Strafford. Those influencing factors include:

- ✓ A long period of principal turnover in the school's history,
- ✓ The "loss of some great teachers"

A sense of:

- ✓ Changing community demographics,
- ✓ Changing family values,
- ✓ I-Pad/ Smartphone native students entering schools.

With the past turnover and loss, people speak of the current administration inheriting a tumultuous period. While some current teachers are beloved, many miss some of the awarding winning teachers of the recent past, and see the upper grades as missing a balance of teacher personality types that benefited the students. Longtime Strafford

families speak of the town becoming wealthier, and the expectations and interactions changing with the school. Trends towards educating the whole child may dovetail with some families wanting the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade to balance the school's tradition of academic rigor with an equal level of social and emotional support for this sensitive developmental period. Some speak of the Newton students of today coming in as the new digital natives, used to iPads, Smartphone's, with frequent digital multitasking and stimulation. With the change may come the expectation and need for different sorts of educational experiences beyond the lecture format.

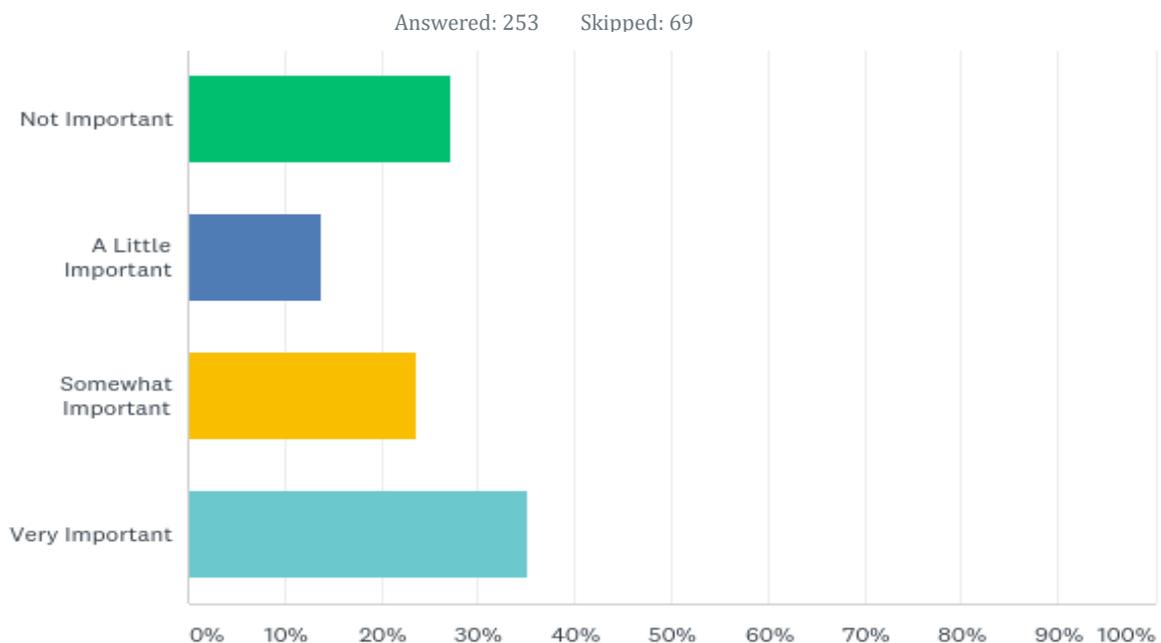
### What Grade Levels Do People Want Newton School to Offer?

As the school board grapples with an unusual rapid exodus of students from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades these last few months, it wanted to know what grade levels, if any, were important to offer in the school. A few survey questions address this. First, know that Newton School still has a place in the Strafford heart. There was no reported support for closing the school.

**The majority of survey responders answer that having a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade in Strafford is somewhat or very important (58.9%, n=253).**

This response where three-fifths of the surveyed people place the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels in higher importance gives an important analysis point for keeping the upper grades right now.

### Q25 How important is it that we have a 7th and 8th grade public school in Strafford?



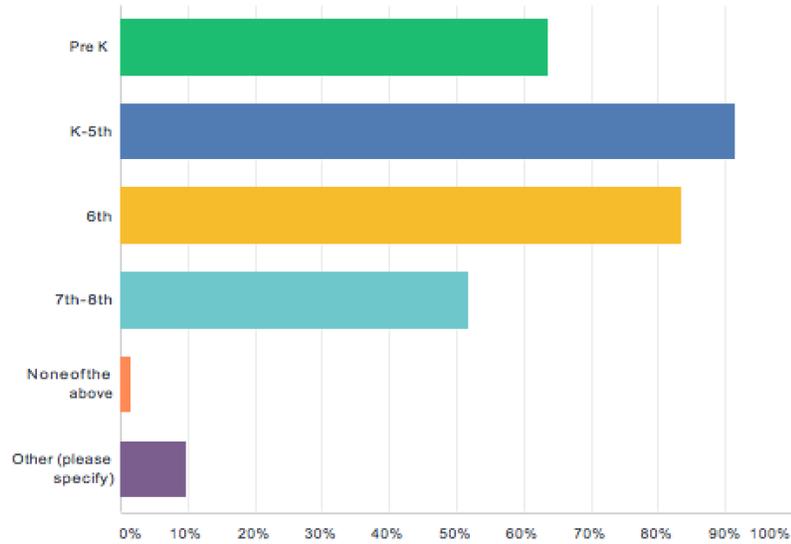
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Not Important	27.27%	69
A Little Important	13.83%	35
Somewhat Important	23.72%	60
Very Important	35.18%	89
TOTAL		253

However, this level of support diminishes to a positive, but more uncertain level, when the same number of people (n=253) select which grades to offer at Newton School in a later question.

In this question, **over 50% of people surveyed ask to have each of the current grades continued, including a vote for Pre-K (n=253)**. As we break this down in the survey data, there is overwhelming support for K-5 (91.7%), followed by a strong call for 6<sup>th</sup> grade (83.4%). Pre-K comes in as a priority at the next level with 63.4%, perhaps indicating the interest in strengthening the early education options we hear about in the interviews. Then 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade receives a majority of interest with 51.78% of people surveyed calling for it to be included. With it being the lowest ranked of the grade levels, this reflects the current discontent, but it is still a simple majority. There are twenty-five additional selections of "Other" in this response, including comments that indicate some uncertainty, such as "unsure about 7-8th as it stands".

### Q27 What grade levels should Newton School teach, if any? (Check all that apply.)

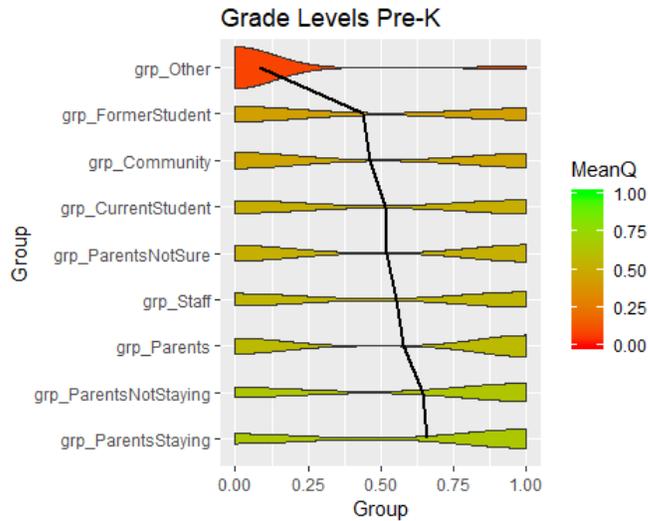
Answered: 253 Skipped: 69



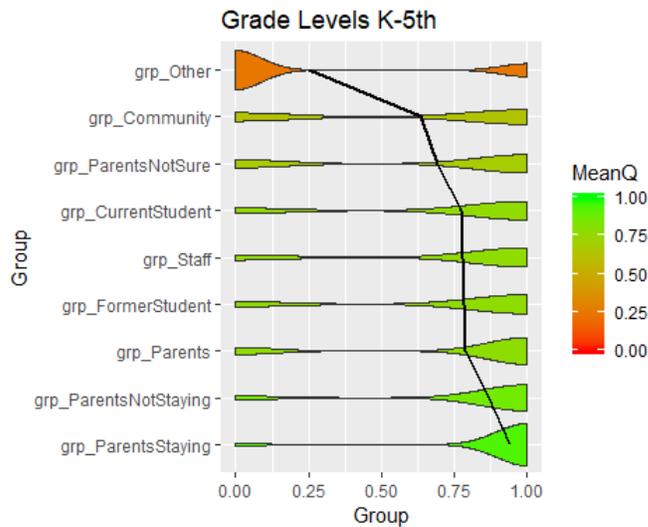
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Pre K	63.64%
K-5th	91.70%
6th	83.40%
7th- 8th	51.78%
None of the above	1.58%
Other (please specify)	9.88%

When we drill down to find out what groups voted for what, there are a few noticeable differences among the group types, as follow.

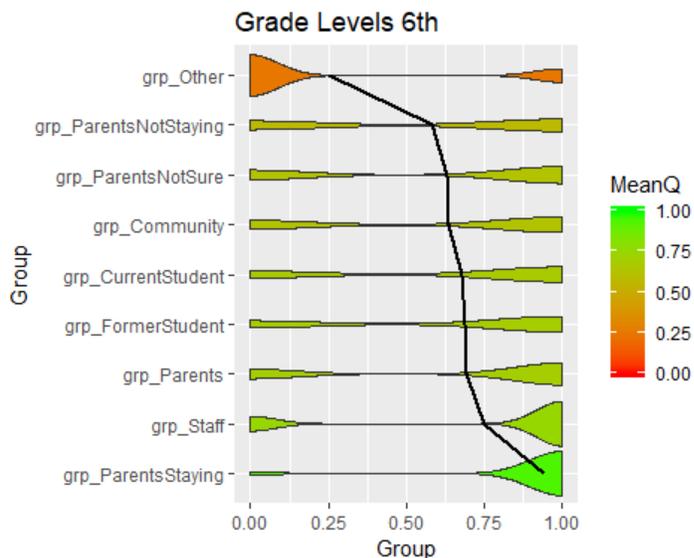
**GRADE LEVELS RATED IMPORTANT TO INCLUDE AT NEWTON BY ROLE**



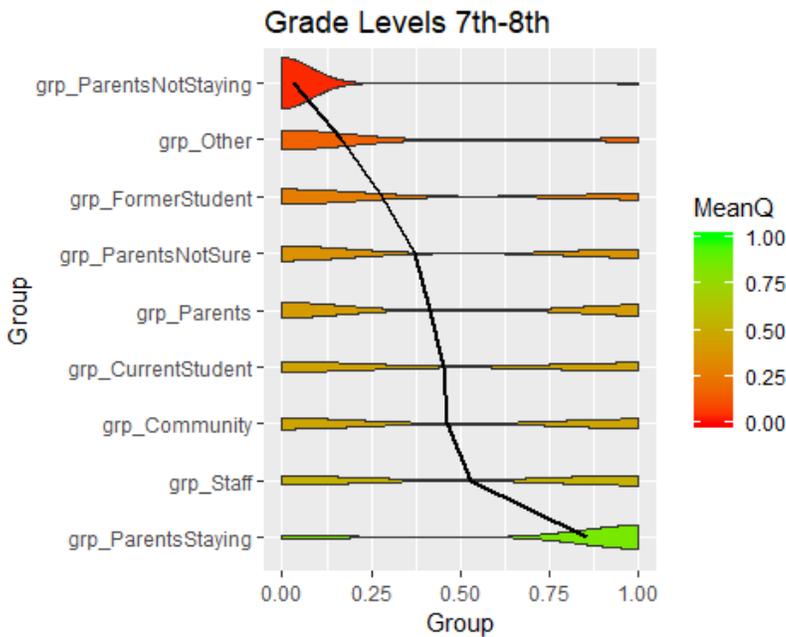
**Pre-K:** All parents taking the survey point to the importance of a strong pre-K program. Parents who are leaving vote in favor of pre-K even more strongly than parents who were unsure if they would leave.



**K-5:** Parents, staff, students, and community all express strong interest in the K-5 program. People falling in the other category have low interest.



**6<sup>th</sup>:** Parents staying feel very strongly Newton should have a 6<sup>th</sup> grade, according to survey results; even more strongly than staff, 75% of whom support it.



**7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>:** Parents who are staying are very supportive of keeping the upper grades. Staff is divided 50-50 about this. Parents who are leaving rate it of lowest importance, voting to get rid of it. Staff responses to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade questions are widely variable.

### Staying or Going: The Opportunity

The following table shares the breakdown of families (current and former students, parents/guardians) (n=177) and whether they plan to stay for 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade are undecided, or are planning to leave.

	DEFINITELY NOT	PROBABLY NOT	UNDECIDED	PROBABLY	DEFINITELY	N/A	TOTAL
(no	18.64%	12.43%	19.77%	12.43%	23.16%	13.56%	
label)	33	22	35	22	41	24	177

When look just at surveyed parents, who have the power to decide whether students remain at the school or not, **an almost equal number of parents declare they plan to stay for 7<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> grade at Newton School (35) as leave (31)**. Those planning to exit, primarily parents in the older grades, express strong passions for leaving and are often the most negative responders on all survey climate questions. Those planning to stay, primarily in the K-5 grades, can be counted as among the strongest supporters of the school in a variety of survey areas, rating many climate areas even more positively than the school staff. By far, most parents (81) fell in the middle. **Many of these parents who indicate they are unsure about staying or going have students in younger grades. This 55% represents the school's opportunity.** Should Newton School choose to make changes to the 7-8<sup>th</sup> grade while continuing to offer it, these are the

people looking for reassurance that upper grades climate challenges will resolve and the school on the whole will offer the educational opportunity their family seeks.

## Why Do People Leave Before Upper Grades?

Former students and parents who plan to take their students out of the school report the most negative responses on survey climate questions. Students and families, particularly those who are either leaving, left, or plan to leave, candidly share reasons for opting out of the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades in the interviews and open-ended survey responses. The data points to the following themes about why people choose to leave early.

### More Care Needed

Across role types from students and families to visitors, people shared a story of the loss of respect, trust and care from the educational environment. In the interviews and open-survey questions, themes appear of concern about the lack of care for students shown by certain upper grade teachers. They lament an overall climate that breeds distrust, sharing instances of mean actions, describing the drain of an environment full of increasingly negative energy.

*I have observed students emotionally "duck and cover" in the presence of a faculty member. ~ Survey Respondent*

The top three individual codes deal with this challenge: Changes needed in the discipline approach, Lack of teacher respect of student, and Lack of teacher care for student.

Top Codes	Frequency Rank
Sch(ool): Discipline changes needed	#1
T(eacher) Respect of S(tudent) – (negative)	#2
T(eacher) Care of S(tudent) – (negative)	#3

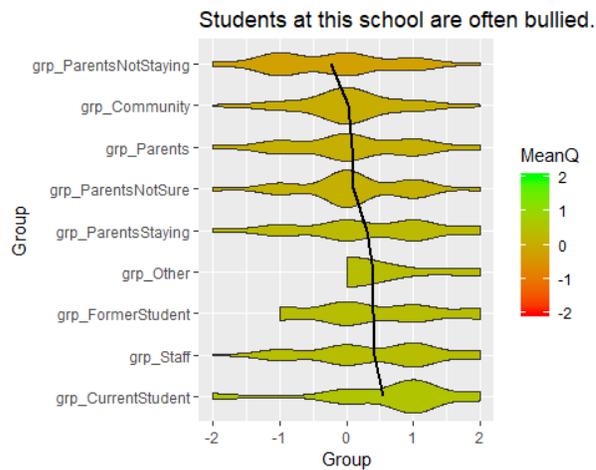
The words “Bullying”, and in one case, “harassment”, are described as problems in over twenty separate text source instances. In the interviews, both teacher-to-student and student-to-student instances described.

*Something has to be done with the bullying because when I was there nothing was done. Something has to happen because I am not trying to be mean but for me it was like walking into a living hell and I could not do anything thing about it.*

*~ Former Student*

Recess does not seem to be the problem, based on survey results. People in a variety of roles express a desire for more emotional safety within certain upper grade classrooms, describing a breakdown of the climate and culture that makes it hard to learn. Language like this raises red flags, putting the school system on notice that there are intense concerns.

Interestingly, surveyed current students suggest they see problem interactions that rise to the level of teasing and picking on people. But, they are the least likely of all the survey respondents to describe these negative interactions as bullying. At the other end of the spectrum, parents who are leaving express great concerns about bullying.



In a challenge of equal prominence, the interviews are also full of stories of students disrespecting teachers and students bothering other students, as situation that also adds to the negative climate<sup>7</sup>.

### Better Handling of Conflict

The most frequent code in the qualitative data is “discipline changes needed”. Students and others speak of too many interruptions in the upper grade classes, whether from student disruptions or adults halting teaching to address them.

*I think it is really important to have a middle school (5-8) at the school. To make this happen and improve, I feel like a few major changes need to happen. Discipline needs to be stronger because there is a lot of misbehaving and it is impacting my ability to learn as much as I could. ~ Current Student*

<sup>7</sup> Negative climate, various codes, n=20's.

Across the interviews, people called for the school to usher in a new approach to healthy limits for the school community. The hope articulated was to set expectations and boundaries that create the space for positive interactions in the classroom environment.

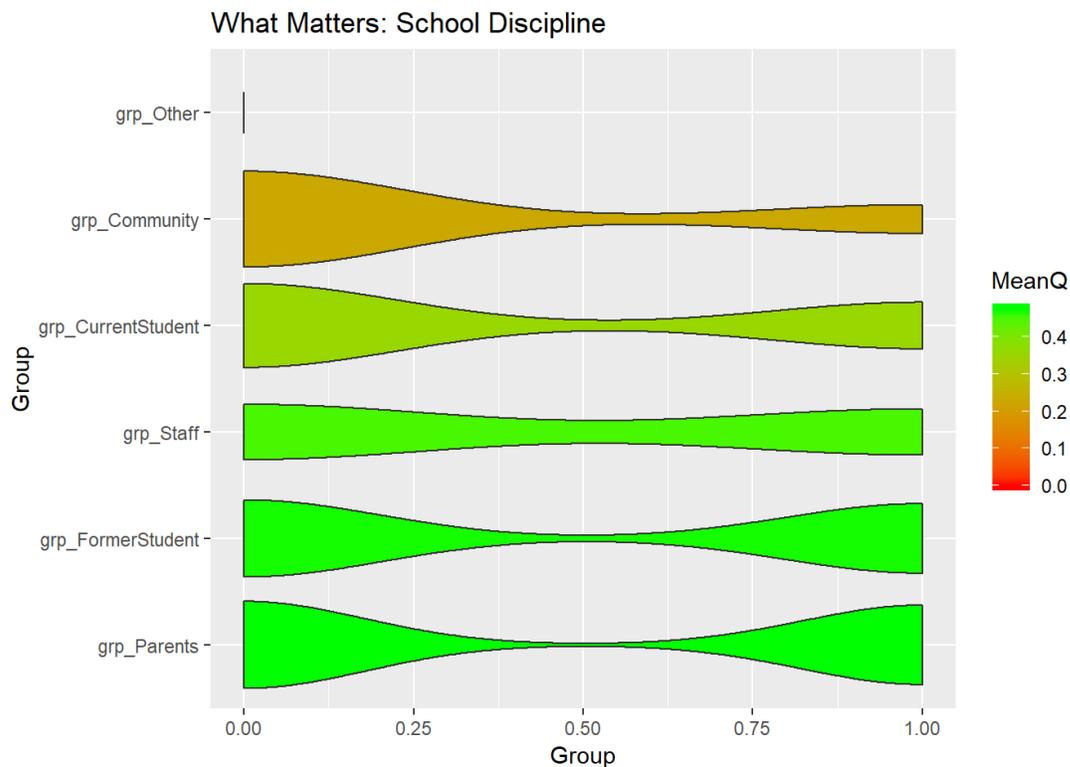
Students offered insight from their experiences:

- ✓ The five checks system quickly runs out of consequences, so loses effectiveness once you get five checks.
- ✓ Students may act out when bored or confused.

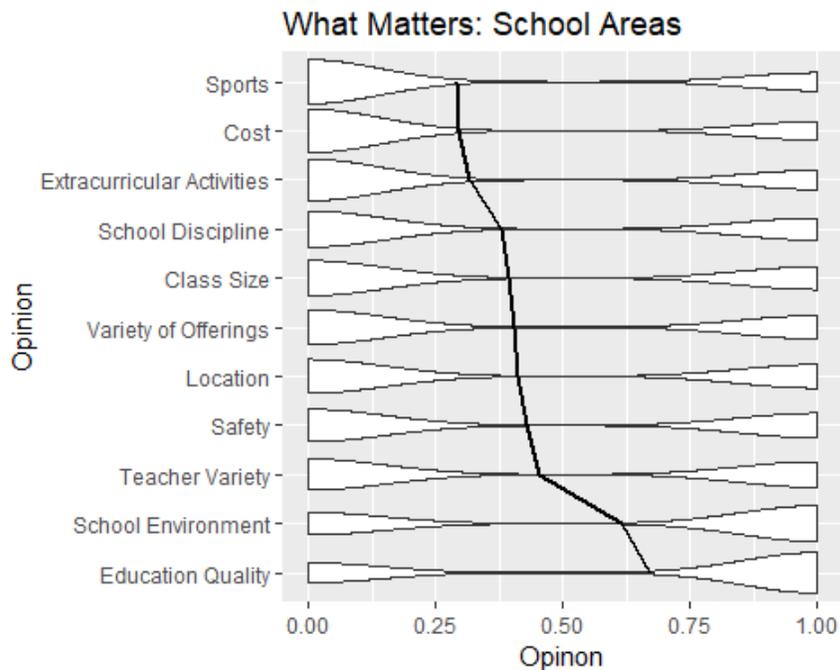
Various adults offered other ideas when looking at the system, including:

- ✓ Improve parent- teacher engagement sooner as students start to stray from behavioral expectations.
- ✓ Provide clearer consistency in application of rules.
- ✓ Work through consequences and accountability with students to help them learn.
- ✓ Model and teacher conflict management.
- ✓ Ensure students know they are valued, cared for, and that there are expectations.

The following graph from the survey responses paints a picture of school discipline as important to half of those in various groups types of responders.



When averaged across all groups, school discipline does not rank as mattering more than the Educational Quality and Environment areas. It seems to be most important to those considering leaving or people who have already exited the upper grades.



### Academics Vary

In people's spoken and written responses, they suggest Newton School has a history as a high scoring school in standardized academic assessments. This probe does not examine student achievement data, which the school board describes as already accessible to it for review. Rather, this investigation looked into people's perceptions about certain areas and their potential to influence upper grade retention. Parents who are leaving share a sense of variability in the quality of the academic experience. (For strengths, see more in section on Building on Strengths.) Top areas to improve in the upper grades, based on the interviews and the final open-ended question include:

- ✓ Science,
- ✓ Teaching to the level of advanced students, and
- ✓ Integrating teaching into online learning

When it comes to meeting the needs of students ready for advanced work, we see wide variability in the survey results, with the most negative feedback from parents who are leaving.

**Q 20. What level of preparation does Newton give students in the following academic areas?**

	POOR	ADEQUATE	GOOD
Math	14.92%	36.46%	48.62%
Science	28.81%	36.72%	34.46%
Reading	12.71%	45.86%	41.44%
Writing	13.89%	46.11%	40.00%
History	14.12%	51.41%	34.46%
Art	16.95%	49.15%	33.90%
Music	29.61%	48.60%	21.79%
Theater	18.86%	52.57%	28.57%
Foreign Language	44.57%	42.29%	13.14%
Physical Education	13.48%	50.00%	36.52%
Technology	19.43%	56.00%	24.57%

Math<sup>8</sup> rises to the top as the subject offering the strongest academic preparation at the school, from the survey and the interviews. On the survey, reading and writing are also rated as highly in academic preparation. Conversely, music and foreign language are rated the lowest in preparation on the survey; both are described in interviews as under-resourced and needing to be offered more robustly. Art appears differently, with current students and parents rating it very high in preparation, exiting parents in the middle, and former students rating it negatively. The averages in this section tend around Adequate, with no subjects receiving more than a 50% as top rating.

### Too Small

In the interviews and written responses, we hear some people's concerns about negative aspects of a very small school<sup>9</sup>. Concerns include:

- ✓ Feels like a family: negative dynamics, boundaries, and sibling rivalry
- ✓ Class size is too small: making it difficult to access new people to learn about difference, perpetuating personality conflicts, hard to make friends for some, and reducing the pool for innovation within the learning community

*Big classes would make me feel more welcome. You could have more friends...*

*~ Current Student*

<sup>8</sup> Math meeting needs, code instances in top of 10's, statistically significantly higher.

<sup>9</sup> Small school, negative, n=teens.

In addition, people share opinions that a larger school population could support better sports, facilities, technology, and more curricular choices.

### Examining the Exodus from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

People describe the current exodus from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade as it feeling like “waves of students leaving”<sup>10</sup>. Students describe the desire to join their friends at other schools. People comment on the morale effect when adults with longstanding relationships with Newton School choose to place their children in another educational situation. Parents whose child is not yet headed into 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade express concern and lack of empowerment as they watch the upper grade classes shrink in size, as one parent describes:

*I feel like I am watching a tennis match. I'm kind of removed; kind of seeing how is this playing out. If everybody saying they plan to leave leaves, then I will have (to give it) some thought. If (D's) own class shrinks...if some of those kids leave, I don't know how that continues....*

*~ Parent, names changed*

We hear concerns that the smaller the class becomes, the more difficult it is for current educational structures to work, fiscally or educationally, for remaining students.

There is a definite strand of uncertainty in the data as people look towards the future. The needs in the current situation leave evidence of high emotions, ranging from Stress and Sadness (both have code instances in the teens) and Anger (in the 5's). So, while decisions may be individual, the exodus wave affects other people, and therefore the system. The emotion, energy and tonality of the exodus itself becomes a force for the school administration to navigate.

### Exit Policies Advocated

Those who are leaving, have left, or are strongly weighing leaving have various educational change policies they advocate. Slightly most prominent in the interview data was advocacy for a switch to a choice system for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>11</sup>. Comments suggested a couple ways choice could work including:

- a) Closing the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade and providing tuition equal to the average per pupil amount or the tuition at another non-sectarian school, whichever is less, so families could send their children elsewhere<sup>12</sup>.

10 Waves of students leaving, n=twenties.

11 Switch to choice, code instances in ten's.

12 It is unclear with the recommended exit options what families would do who have limited choices for transportation or whose student requires support services.

- b) Creating a separate local Strafford middle school option and offering parents tuition as above, to choose where to send their children, including a choice of a local Strafford option.

Beyond choice, some advocate picking one private school and aligning with it to reinvent the current middle school. The Sharon Academy appeared prominently in the data with both positive supporters<sup>13</sup> as well as concerns about the school and the competition it is offering Newton as a private school<sup>14</sup>. Thetford Academy also appears in the data. Supporters of closing the Newton School 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade argue closing 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade is an equity issue, as some families can't afford to send their children to private school but would prefer to leave. However, some people interviewed envisioned additional barriers rather than increased educational access if Newton School and a local 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade educational option disappear.

Others speak of this situation as a money issue. Some who are paying for tutors or private school tuition would prefer not to double pay for the educational opportunity they seek. These are families who can afford the choice. Others, including taxpayers without family members at Newton right now, wonder about the fiscal viability of the upper grades should the exodus continue. They caution that taxes are bounded, and the town has upper limits on how much tax it will approve. Others point out the decisions related to the school may affect property values, whether positively or negatively.

## How Could Upper Grades Be Strengthened?

Since schools budget and plan many months in the future, The Newton School has its K-8 school planning underway now 2019-2020, even as it weighs a variety of longer term options. As such, the probe highlights strengths on which school leadership could build. People participating in this investigation provide some guidance about how to strengthen climate and culture in the upper grades.

### Build on Strengths

*We love the school. ~ Survey Respondent*

### School as the Heart of Community

From a variety of different voices, from parents to community members, we hear about the school as the heart of the community<sup>15</sup>, a school that includes a middle school. We heard of the long tradition of Newton as a gem, a central part of the community, as well as one of the historically best small schools<sup>16</sup>.

13 Switch to Sharon, code instances in ten's.

14 Each with code instances in the five's.

15 Middle school as heart of community, school as the community hub, each with code instances in the ten's.

16 Historically best small school, code instance in ten's.

*(I'm) concerned about the middle school; (We) would love to figure out how to make it work. This town is complete, from the rope tow, to the thrift store, to having middle schoolers hanging out and eating and having candy. ~ Parent*

For these Strafford residents, finding a way to keep a local middle school presence is about keeping the heart of Strafford alive and vibrant.

### Parents Who Stay and Their Priorities

The top survey priority school areas for parents opting for their child to stay at Newton for the upper grades shared priorities<sup>17</sup> include the following in ranked order, with insights added from the interviews and open-ended answers.

1. **Education Quality:** Some interviews express pride and satisfaction with the quality of education for their children.
2. **School Environment:** Some interviews suggest the school is welcoming<sup>18</sup> and that children are each known, so it is harder for them to fail. Also that some teachers care a great deal about the students.
3. **Location:** Close to home matters greatly to these parents, with more time with children and less time on buses.
4. **Safety:** Concerns about sending tweens off to be with older teenagers in faraway towns where “they vape in the bathroom” makes a local option where older students can be leaders more inviting.

These families speak of the benefit of young people staying connected with friends<sup>19</sup>. Their interest in local matches the high priority they put on location.

*I love Newton's small town middle school experience. Nothing compares to being with the same group of kids since kindergarten and being the top kids at Newton. I love the 8th grade bonding experiences and the graduation tradition. ~Survey Respondent*

This group planning to stay values educational choices and class size; perhaps connected to the individualized learning that is happening at Newton in the small classes. Less commuting transportation for students is desirable in these responses. High school preparation matters a great deal to these staying parents, who share that Newton has the ability to meet this need.

17 Educational areas rated as important to over 75% of the parents opting to stay for upper grades.

18 School is welcoming, n= in five's.

19 Friends, code instance just below ten's.

*I think I am planning on staying until 8<sup>th</sup> grade I think. I don't have a reason for leaving. I like it here....I like how small this school is, there is not a lot of hustle and bustle around everywhere. I like that... we have a lot of field trips, like to the Hood the stuff. ~ Current Student*

### “Some Teachers Are Great”

*I've seen that with (ST) and (LN) – (they) do an amazing job at teaching people at the right levels, not too hard and not too easy,...making sure that it's at the student's level and it's at where they want to be taught at: if they want to get more challenging work, if they want a little bit of easier work,...I feel like most teachers are doing a very good job.*

*~ Current Student*

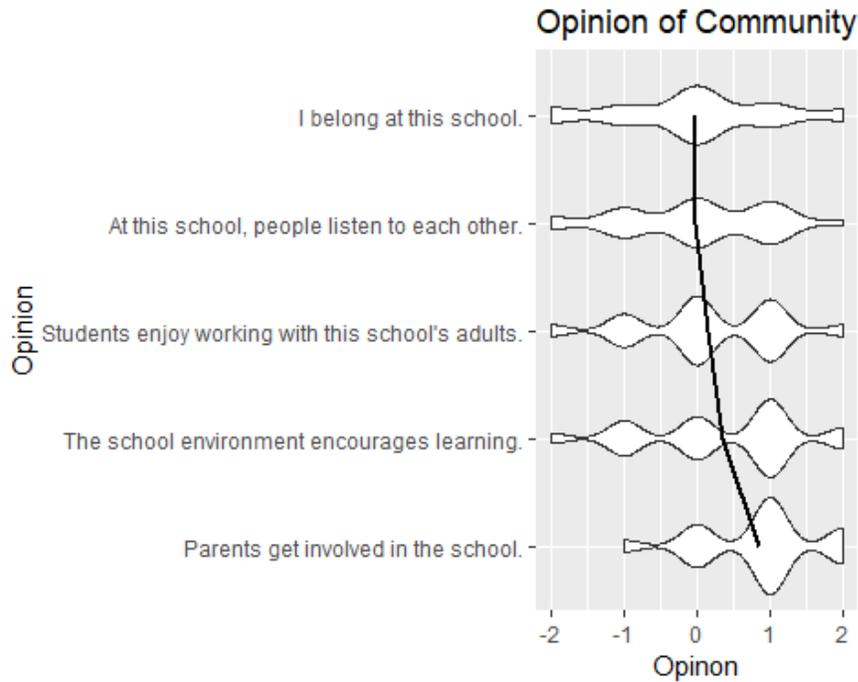
When building on strengths, respondents encourage Newton to build on the strengths within its educational staff. While the codes suggest some people find varied quality in the teaching staff<sup>20</sup>, some are great and well liked<sup>21</sup>. With these teachers, people describe how care and respect is apparent, greetings get the day started off right, and a love of teaching radiates. This finding fits well with the instances suggesting the right mix of education is happening for some students, whose families communicate they find respect and support.

### People Are Ready to Help

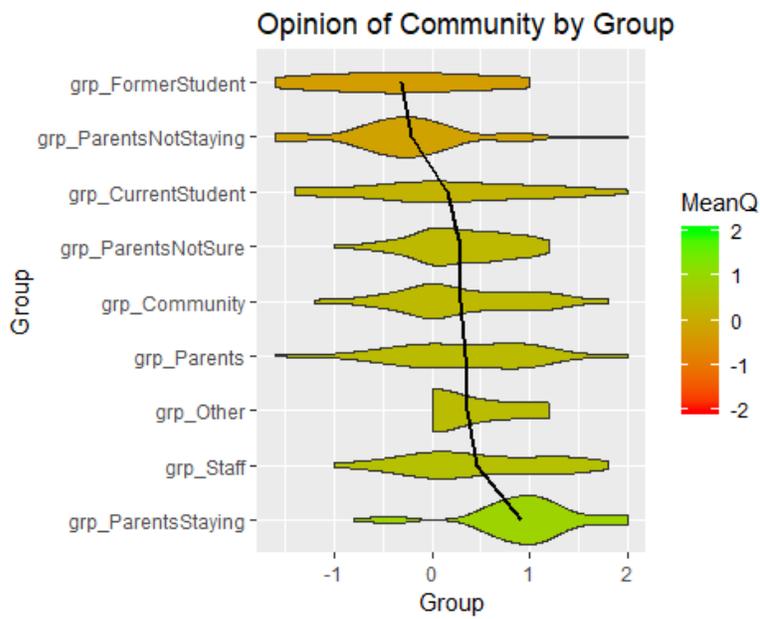
In the survey analysis, parents that stay share a priority around community. And, overall surveyed parents rate that parents get involved in the school. In the interviews, parents and grandparents share volunteering stories.

<sup>20</sup> Varied quality in teaching has code instances in ten's.

<sup>21</sup> Code instances of *some teachers are great* and *I like teachers* together with code instances in teens.



When we collapse various 'school community' survey questions together for a look at community as a whole, parents staying rate the school community most positively. To a lesser extent, staff, other people, all parents, community members, and current students also rate the community as positive.



In interviews and written responses, people speak up that they are ready to help the school. Newton School can consider these as assets, including:

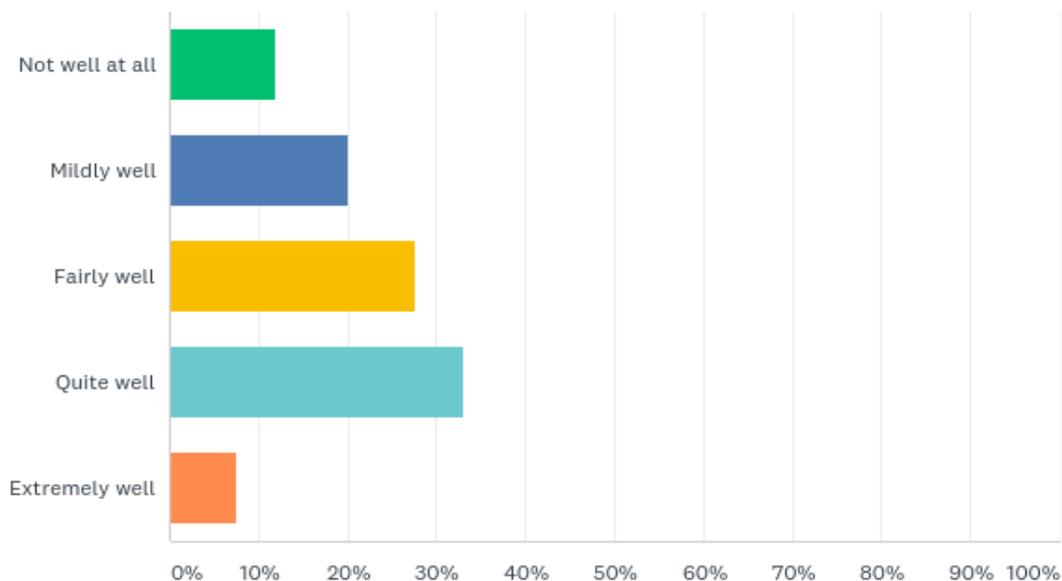
- ✓ **Students ready to lead.** Students themselves share how they take ownership of the school, have sent letters offering improvements, and are ready to be agents of positive change. They embody the potential that some adults speak of when they advocate more adolescent leadership and self agency.
- ✓ **Community members believe in the school.** Numerous community members reaffirm their belief in the viability of Newton’s middle grades<sup>22</sup>, that the community can get through this, and that they are ready to roll up their sleeves to help make things better.<sup>23</sup>
- ✓ **Make it so we can stay.** Some parents and students in particular speak of their hope to have a viable middle school option, with an urgent call for to fix problems<sup>24</sup>.

### Meeting Some Students Needs

Some people participating in the probe perceive that the academic preparation at Newton School meets their family’s needs in various areas.

## Q19 How well do you feel Newton School prepares children for the next academic year?

Answered: 185 Skipped: 137



22 “Keep K-8” codes in twenties; various codes of Newton school approval and support together make multiple code instances tallying in the 40’s.

23 “All hands needed to fix” codes in near twenties.

24 Climate, “make it so we can stay” codes in teens.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Not well at all	11.89%	22
Mildly well	20.00%	37
Fairly well	27.57%	51
Quite well	32.97%	61
Extremely well	7.57%	14
TOTAL		185

Some share stories of receiving the academic help they need.

*T started retaining information, ...they tested (T) here. (T)'s being successful. (T)'s able to read; math is (T's) favorite subject. The school changed (T's) life and ours.*

~ Parent (Child name changed for confidentiality)

These stories often detailed a student who at some point struggled, but received the support or help to tip it and start to make stronger academic strides.

*My children need the small classes and personalized education that Newton provides. My older child was well prepared for high school. He most likely would have slipped through the cracks in a larger middle school. ~ Parent*

Other codes suggest this, including ones suggesting that teaching to different levels works well, special education supports students reaching higher levels, and special education supports needs<sup>25</sup>. In the survey, parents staying give positive ratings to the school's ability to meet the needs of students ready for advanced work as well as its ability to provide supports.

The survey results suggest some find that students receive strong supports, while others find them lacking. Overall, the averages are slightly positive in this area in the survey.

25 Various teaching to needs/ special education codes each in the fives.

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREEO OPINION	AGREESTRONGLY AGREE	WEIGHTED AVERAGE		
Teachers give students attention when they need it.	7.63%	21.61%	21.61%	39.41%	9.75%	
	18	51	51	93	23	0.44
Staff do a good job helping parents know how to support their children's learning at home.	6.87%	24.03%	28.33%	32.62%	8.15%	
	16	56	66	76	19	0.22
The school makes it easy for me to participate fully.	8.15%	21.03%	26.61%	35.62%	8.58%	
	19	49	62	83	20	0.31

## Vision

With some families exiting and others uncertain, people call for leadership<sup>26</sup>, guidance, and engagement to develop a fresh, positive vision for the future, if there is to be a middle school at Newton. There is some energy for radical change and big brave experimentation at this time of need. Some voices call for exploring a middle school fix first, so as not to prematurely deny the next families with young children that opportunity. With a prominent set of responses about the current middle school structure not working<sup>27</sup>, with room to improve<sup>28</sup>, some invite a change to the way the school system approaches middle school<sup>29</sup>. There is energy for re-envisioning what 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade could be at this small school. If the classes are going to be small, some challenge the school to make the most of this size and restructure to the upper grades to become nimble, thematic, and well adapted to older students.

## Design for Adolescent Developmental Needs

The interviews and open-ended responses both emphasize that adolescent needs are different<sup>30</sup>, one of the most frequent codes. People insist that social emotional aspects of education matter<sup>31</sup>. Some call for educational structures that meet the adolescent need to take leadership and have agency over their own learning.

26 "Leadership-" (negative), code instances in the teens.

27 "Middle school structure not working", code instances in the teens.

28 "Room to improve", codes in the fives.

29 Various improvement suggestion codes totally in the fives.

30 "Adolescent needs are different", code instances in 20's.

31 "Social-emotional matters", code instances in 20's.

## Reinvention Ideas

*My favorite class at moment is social studies,...we're doing a (fun) game; (it's) helping me learn about the continents and the countries...there is this big map and you get to collect countries and put on some presentations...you get your choice.*

### ~ Current Student

As Newton school board examines and designs the middle school's future, we offer a snapshot of various suggestions from the data to inform that work, including:

#### Teaching Suggestions

- ✓ More project-based learning, as seen in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
- ✓ Teach with more depth, even if some breadth is sacrificed
- ✓ Create culture of reflective learning
- ✓ Take advantage of small to further individualize learning

#### Themes/ Programs

- ✓ Increased art/ music/ theatre
- ✓ Arts integration
- ✓ STEM/ STEAM preparation for jobs
- ✓ Connect content to student interests
- ✓ Separate the elementary school and middle school expectations
- ✓ Build on Outdoor Learning

#### Partner

- ✓ Position coursework for life beyond school, relevant to careers
- ✓ Embrace homeschoolers, design to include/ attract them

#### Educational Approaches/ Structures

- ✓ Make evidence-based changes, proceeding thoughtfully
- ✓ Explore new ways to use the basement spaces, giving everyone access to the light-filled upstairs and/ or using the space to bring new partnership activity into the school building.
- ✓ Offer more student-driven recess

## Educator Development and Support

To support the educational staff in their work with students<sup>32</sup>, people across the system – from staff to parents to community members – called for increased opportunities for educators to learn and work together to meet the needs of every student. Deeper and ongoing opportunities in professional development for teachers and the administration

<sup>32</sup> Support teachers- (negative), code instances in the fives.

are described as ways school professionals can gain the support to adapt where needed.

Suggestions offered during the probe to support educators and teacher learning include help for them to:

- ✓ Identify and answer their own questions to improve/ change practice with support from colleagues;
- ✓ Meet the expanding expectation of schools, as students and communities change,
- ✓ Weigh or match the curriculum against each student's needs;
- ✓ Ensure science is taught with content expertise;
- ✓ Delve into cultural competency;

There is also interest in bringing fresh ideas<sup>33</sup> into the educator learning community to move away from historical teaching styles and into a re-envisioned educational approach.

### Culture and climate change

To evolve from the current 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade climate, respondents share the importance of listening<sup>34</sup> and building trust.

*What would make the difference is if people would think about other people – before they say anything or do anything. ~ Current Student*

In general, people call for more responsive structures within the school community including:

- ✓ Complaint mechanisms,
- ✓ Periodic dialogue,
- ✓ Adaptability of the system to changes in the community or students, and
- ✓ Balancing competing needs to teach all students

### Inclusion and Equity

As Newton plans for the future, it has the opportunity to place inclusion and equity as a centerpiece for the educational community, regardless of how many grades the school offers. We hear in spoken and written voices of the need for more inclusion. We hear of the need for understanding how to make a welcoming school that meets the educational and emotional needs of every child. While we hear this level of welcoming is occurring for some families and students, it is the voices of those who do not feel included that we highlight below. Priority areas from the data include:

### CARING SYSTEMS

<sup>33</sup> “Fresh ideas help”, code instances in teens.

<sup>34</sup> Listening- (negative), code instances in teens.

- ✓ Redesign for inclusion. Too many people report students feeling excluded<sup>35</sup> and difficulty with being different<sup>36</sup>.
- ✓ Welcome all parents. Current parental involvement approaches may favor certain socio-economic classes over others; find ways to include, engage, and value all families.
- ✓ Develop caring systems. Nurturing is important. Identify and acknowledge the assets in every child.
- ✓ Welcome newcomers. Some families report being new is very hard, as students have known each other for years. Develop structural ways to integrate new students and families more seamlessly into the community.

## EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

- ✓ Continue to expand how Newton teaches to every child. Harness the intimacy of the school to know every child's needs, meet every child's needs, and teach to the different levels<sup>37</sup>. Some report the desire for more rigorous high school preparation<sup>38</sup>.
- ✓ Academic accessibility. In the survey results, parents who are leaving report concerns about this, even as parents who are staying have positive feedback about it.
- ✓ Recommit to equity. Some respondents report concern that not all students can access to school attention or high educational quality, with concerns about biases<sup>39</sup> and equity<sup>40</sup>.

*You are either liked as a student or not, if you are not liked you're treated much differently. ~ Survey Respondent*

## WORKING FAMILIES

Some self-identified working families describe gaps between what the current school structure offers and what would work for them, given scheduling, access, time and economic constraints. They offer guidance on better inclusion of working families, such as:

- ✓ **Out-of-school learning** opportunities could extend until dinnertime, when parents return to the area, to make a full day of learning for children and provide safe, educational places for them to be while parents work.
- ✓ **Afterschool activity times** could start later so commuting parents can attend games and performances.

35 Excluded, code instances near 10.

36 Difficulty being different, code instance near 5.

37 Both inclusion codes in the teens.

38 For more rigorous preparation in advanced work, code instance near ten

39 Various bias related codes totaling over twenty instances.

40 Equity-(negative) codes in teens.

- ✓ **Full day early education option** to allow working families to tap the assets of a strong Newton preschool program.

People who are at work all day every day are not likely to be available to pick their children up in the middle of the day or to stay home from work some days of the week.

## STRONG EARLY YEARS

The survey and interview data speaks of pride in the quality of the early grades at Newton, including the pre-K program in town. Codes speak of a child-focused 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade with strong project-based learning in the early grades. Some, though not the majority, recommend focusing Newton's energies primarily at this level<sup>41</sup>. Interviews encourage not losing focus on the strong elementary<sup>42</sup> during this introspective time for the school. In addition, there is a strand of support for investing fully in a robust early education<sup>43</sup> from birth through Pre-K, where pre-K could work for all families.

## Reflections

The Newton School and school board has important work ahead of it. Through reflection, discussion, and decision, it plans to proceed. The results of this probe suggest the divisions, tensions, and challenges for some students and families with culture and climate in the upper grades are real. People leave the school speaking of the need for emotional safety for their children. Around 80% of the responding parents surveyed report not knowing if their child will continue into the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade years at the school. It will be important to attend to and learn from this challenging moment in the school's history.

At the same time, the data suggests the Newton School community has resilience. People at all levels of the system, from students, teachers, to community volunteers, offer their services to work for the Newton middle school of tomorrow. With the 2019-2020 year planning and funding already underway, this offers a tremendous opportunity to explore the guidance and ideas the whole community shared as part of the probe. It is through the public school context that resources, supports and mandates set the expectation that every child receive a free appropriate education at public expense. From the probe, we hear about this importance for students with disabilities, who need extra help, who have limited transportation options or need to stay close to Newton, and whose parents work long hours or far from home.

While the school may not be able to keep the same structure with very few students in the upper grades, Newton School can seize this as an opportunity to experiment. Is there a theme or set of themes and approaches that would excite and inspire new focused energy and learning? Can small mean nimble, to allow for more time spent learning out of the building from communities and expertise beyond Strafford? How can adolescent development inform a structure of a very small middle school program? Are there partners whose energy and presence within the Newton School building could add

41 Focus on young level code instances in 5's.

42 Focus on early years/ strong elementary codes various totaling in the twenties.

43 Strong earliest years education, n= in fives.

to the educational opportunities, as well as the climate and culture? Are there creative ways to entice some homeschooling and formerly attending students to engage or reengage in the middle school community?

For those families exiting, a choice option for middle school seems to be the most prominent option of preference, although there are numerous proposals. This is worth examining to be prepared, since if all the students were to leave the upper grades, there would be no 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade by exodus. But, by also having an if-needed upper grades choice plan that can be activated should students reach or stay at an unsustainable level of Newton School's choosing, the school can proactively position for the future regardless of whether enrollment rises or declines. With creativity, this choice plan could also include a Strafford option.

In summary, the probe results show challenge and uncertainty around the upper grade climate and culture driving an unprecedented exodus. But, a majority of respondents suggest they want to fix it. Results point towards investing in the healing and reinvention the upper school grades, as long as the middle school remains viable.

## Appendices

### Detailed Methods

Current or former Newton students came in at 108; 168 as a Newton parent/guardian; 124 as community; and 36 as Newton employees, with people able to select multiple roles. One-hundred ten (110) people agreed to participate in the research with their interview, whether in-person or by telephone in early winter 2019. Twenty-four (24) students were randomly selected from the 5<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> grade for first round invitations to participate in interviews at school, using replacement by other students based on interest and permission form readiness. Other interviewees included former students, teachers, school staff, parents/ guardians, and community members both at school and during a community night. In addition, during a DME site visit to the school, the lead researcher visited classrooms and had lunch with students in the cafeteria.

DME analyzed the questionnaire results in Survey Monkey using R statistical software and ongoing triangulation of the data. This was not a random sample, so it is not generalizable beyond the people who responded. For distinct analysis of how different groups felt, responses were divided into mutually exclusive groups by the following roles in priority order: current student, former student, staff, parent/guardian, community member, and other. Also, the survey analysis compared responses of parents planning to have their child leave the school rather than attend 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade at the school, parents planning to stay, and undecided parents.

DME coded responses to the final open-ended survey question and concurrent DME digital notes from in-person interview responses using a qualitative research approach that builds codes that relate to the inquiry while reviewing texts. Concurrent digital notes from phone interviews were visually scanned for thematic patterns. Analyzing for patterns and priority areas, DME used the qualitative software research tool Hyper Research 3.7.3 to tabulate codes. 515 populated codes emerged from the data, which DME organized into categories including: Community, Leadership, Planning, Structure, Teachers, Students, Parents, Equity, Safety, Exiting, Environment, Academics, and Research. From here, DME grouped similar codes, and organized them into the following themes and areas to inform the probe question and support the school and school board's work:

#### **Addressing Needs:**

- More Care
- Better Conflict Handling
- Academics Vary
- Exodus Wave
- Uncertainty
- Money Matters

**Building for Tomorrow:**

Vision

Reinvention Ideas

Build on Strengths

    Heart of Community

    Local Matters

Emphasize Inclusion

Structures for Today's Families

Invest Young

**Appendices Under Separate Cover**

**January 2019 School and Community Questionnaire**

**January 2019 Survey Monkey closed-answer question responses**

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