

What Do We Value? The Future of Education for Newmarket

A NH Listens Summary Report

November 8, 2014



ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

Our Mission:

To bring people together for engaged conversations

Our Work:

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

Our Principles:

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

New Hampshire Listens

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EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

Event

What Do We Value? The Future of
Education for Newmarket

Date

November 8, 2014

Duration

Three hours

Participants

72 Community Members

Project Team

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Location

Newmarket Junior/Senior High School
Newmarket, NH

Question

What do we value? The future of
education for Newmarket

Background

On Saturday, November 8, 2014, dozens of residents of Newmarket, New Hampshire, gathered to discuss their values, ideas, and aspirations regarding the town's schools. The conversation was intended to give participants the opportunity to share their own views while listening to the views of others. The impetus for the community conversation was the vote on a bond to fund the construction of a new junior/senior high school, which had taken place in March, 2014. The warrant article engendered strong views both in favor and opposed to the bond, and the final vote, which was essentially 50 percent in favor and 50 percent opposed, left many residents and community leaders feeling that the issue had not been resolved satisfactorily and that lingering divisions within the town would be harmful to its future.

The results of the community conversation that took place in November are intended to be useful to the participants, the Newmarket School Board and Town Council, school leaders, and others who are involved in setting school policies and budgets. Over about three hours, eight small groups—each with a trained facilitator—identified what is most important to them about Newmarket's schools and expressed their priorities for future planning and decision making.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

1. Academic Quality and Educational Opportunities

Out of the topics discussed, all eight groups spent the most time in their conversations discussing the importance of high quality educational resources and opportunities for youth in the Newmarket community. There was a shared commitment to excellent schools responsive to a range of student needs, with a particular emphasis on the importance of effective curriculum and teacher quality.

2. Balancing Quality, Affordability, and Community Values

All eight of the groups spent considerable time talking about how to balance quality and affordability in the Newmarket schools. Groups talked about a range of potential options for the future of schools, including keeping students in the community, tuitioning out students to nearby communities, or creating a cooperative school that was housed in Newmarket but welcomed students from other towns. Each of these options was discussed in relation to community values such as preserving Newmarket's close-knit small town culture, local businesses, and affordable lifestyle.

3. A Long-Term Vision for Newmarket Schools

All eight of the groups expressed the desire for a long-term vision for Newmarket schools. Groups commented on a need to carefully research and weigh all options, project future outcomes of each option, think about long-term implications, and then articulate a plan that includes clear, attainable goals and steps for the next twenty years or more. Participants placed value on an inclusive, respectful planning process that considers multiple viewpoints in the community.

4. Communication and Information Sharing

All eight of the groups talked about the need for more effective communication and information sharing from the schools and town to the community. There was an interest in information that could reach the diversity of individuals in the community. Participants wanted information to be shared in a range of platforms from electronic media to more traditional communication forums. Participants expressed the need for clear, accessible information that provides sufficient detail to effectively understand the issues at hand.

5. Moving Forward in Positive and Productive Ways

The majority of groups (6/8) discussed tensions in the community from recent decisions made about Newmarket schools. Rather than dwelling on these tensions, participants expressed the desire to heal and move forward. Groups talked about the need for respect, positivity, and collaboration among individuals from a range of perspectives.

THEMES

years making towns activity affordable board class information

safe must community conversation funding
create cost curriculum decision development change future different downtown know
educators people effective explore cooperative financial population group
good high term important enrollment impact involvement issue keep key kids

long lack families learning look need losing move investment size
newmarket offer opportunities parents new pay diverse plan potential
district process small use program provide questions teachers business results

priorities students school science sense space
support take resources trust technology quality threats access tuition solution
values state want building social facility option

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March 2015

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The following appendices to this report are located at <http://nhlistens.org>:

Appendix A: Invitation to Participants

Appendix B: Discussion Guide

Appendix C: Small Group Notes

Appendix D: Summary of Participant Evaluations

Appendix E: How NH Listens Collects and Reports Findings

The Community Conversations

During the summer and fall of 2014, a group of volunteers comprised of Newmarket residents organized Newmarket Common Ground and worked with New Hampshire Listens to design a community conversation about the future of education for the town. The conversation was intended to help Newmarket residents to engage in respectful conversation so that the community could move forward in light of the intense divisions that surfaced during the March, 2014, town vote on funding for a new high school.

The conversations were open to anyone who wanted to attend them on the Saturday morning of November 8, 2014, from 8:30 to 12:00. The participants in the conversations spent three hours in a facilitated discussion about their priorities and concerns for the future of Newmarket's schools. Around sixty people registered in advance to participate in these conversations, and seventy-two people total attended.

Focus Questions

Newmarket Common Ground and New Hampshire Listens worked collaboratively to develop a set of focus questions to guide the discussion. The questions are shared below.

Participants were first asked to discuss community values, which included the following questions:

- What do you value most about the Newmarket community?
- What do you think are the greatest threats to those values?
- What role should Newmarket's schools play in supporting the values that are important to you?

Participants were then asked to review data about the schools and community and discuss the framing question and sub-questions below:

Framing question: What Do We Value? The Future of Education for Newmarket

Sub questions:

- What are the most important ingredients of a quality small elementary, middle, or high school?
- How can the curriculum support optimal learning for our students?
- How can school facilities support optimal learning for our students?
- What role could technology play in future schools, and how would that affect the curriculum and facilities that will be needed?
- What criteria should the School Board and Town Council use as they decide next steps for Newmarket's schools?

Key Findings

Participants at the conversation on the future of education for Newmarket expressed a range of perspectives, all of which were recorded by facilitators. Some of the most commonly discussed topics include the following, although even within these topics a range of values were expressed:

- **Strengths of Newmarket and threats to the community**
- **Academic quality and educational opportunities**
- **Balancing quality, affordability, and community values**
- **A long-term vision for Newmarket schools**
- **Communication and information sharing**
- **Moving forward in positive and productive ways**

These community conversations help to augment (not replace) traditional forms of government and policy making. What follows is a detailed description of the outcomes of the conversations and an analysis of all small group notes to identify areas for further consideration and action (all small group notes may be found in Appendix C). The results of the conversations, as presented in this report, are intended to be shared with all those who participated, as well as with Newmarket's school and town leaders and Newmarket Common Ground.

Strengths of Newmarket and Threats to the Community

Newmarket as a close-knit affordable community that embraces diversity, community support of children, and local business

At the beginning of the conversation, participants were asked to identify strengths and threats to the Newmarket community and its schools. These strengths and threats provide the foundation and context for potential solutions or next steps that groups explored throughout the conversation. All eight groups placed particular value on the small town, community feel of Newmarket, where they felt that people know and look out for each other and neighbors help neighbors. The majority of groups (5/8) commented that this close-knit culture was valuable in the schools because children are known and know each other, which helps to create a supportive environment for Newmarket's young people. Participants felt that small class sizes and the small town allowed teachers and staff to know students well so that the needs of young people are understood and addressed. The majority of groups (5/8) also viewed diversity in the community as a positive part of the town. Many groups (7/8) commented specifically on the beauty, charm, and local businesses that they enjoyed in the downtown area of Newmarket. Several groups (3/8) also felt that Newmarket's affordability make it a great place to live.

Most of the concerns about threats to the Newmarket community stemmed from a fear of losing the above characteristics and values. For instance, some groups expressed concern that moving the schools out of town could weaken Newmarket's close-knit community. Other groups feared that increased funds to schools might inflate tax rates and hurt affordability in the community. There was also talk about divisions within the town, including between "old and new" groups in Newmarket, as well as disrespect and negativity surrounding the March 2014 school funding vote. Some groups felt a lack of trust in current community leaders. The ideas developed by all groups, detailed below, provide common themes about how to uphold the aspects people enjoy about Newmarket and effectively address threats to the community.

Academic Quality and Educational Opportunities

The most widely discussed topic among all eight groups was the issue of ensuring that Newmarket offers a high quality education for all of its youth, which included a focus on curriculum, school resources, extracurricular opportunities, and teacher quality. Groups talked about both the pros and cons of Newmarket's size. As benefits, Newmarket schools offer students small classes, individualized attention, and a close-knit community. However, the small nature of Newmarket schools sometimes results in a lack of opportunity for students in course offerings, extracurricular opportunities, and other resources. Groups expressed concern that other schools could offer more variety in courses and electives, such as AP courses or trade and technology programs. A large majority of groups discussed the need for expanded science and technology offerings. This commentary may have been related in part to information in the Discussion Guide that showed Newmarket students' science scores are lower than the state average (see Appendix B). Some groups questioned if a lack of adequate facilities and up-to-date technology is a barrier to student learning in these subjects. Groups also talked about how Newmarket schools should meet the needs of a spectrum of learners, including special education students, high achievers, and students seeking trade-related education. Some groups expressed particular concern about Newmarket students leaving Seacoast School of Technology if the decision was made to tuition out students to other schools.

The Importance of Teachers

In addition to the focus on offering students a high quality curriculum, all of the groups specifically discussed the importance of high quality teachers for the youth in their community. The majority of groups (5/8) expressed praise for the teachers in the Newmarket schools, commenting that teachers were dedicated and attentive to students. Many groups expressed concern about losing these high quality teachers; some groups felt that the indecision about the school's future may encourage teachers to look for new jobs. One group commented that the town should reach out specifically to teachers to learn what resources and facilities

teachers felt their students needed. Another group suggested that the community reach out to graduates of the Newmarket school system to see what these alumni felt that the schools needed and what they might have lacked in their education.

There was also an interest in ensuring that students were prepared for life beyond the Newmarket schools, either through career or college preparation. Groups also placed value on engaging parents in the schools through effective communication and opportunities for parent involvement.

Balancing Quality, Affordability, and Community Values

Exploring Different School Structures

All of the groups discussed the complex balance of maintaining a high quality educational system that is affordable for the community. Many different approaches to this balance were discussed, including keeping all students within the town, creating cooperative schools in the community, or tuitioning out students to a different town's schools. As mentioned previously, at the beginning of the conversations participants were asked to identify what they valued about Newmarket as a town. Many participants commented on the close-knit nature of the community, high quality schools, downtown area, and affordable living as attractive features of the town. Participants' concerns about affordability and the future of the schools seemed to connect to each of these values.

Keeping a School in Town Compared with Sending Students to a New Community

For instance, participants who were concerned about the affordability of a new school were concerned that the cost of a new facility might drive up taxes, which would threaten the affordability of the community overall. Participants also expressed concern that the cost of a new facility might take away funds from teacher salaries or other needed student services and actually diminish rather than increase the quality of education in the town.

Participants who valued the close-knit nature of the community feared that by sending students to other towns for their schooling, Newmarket might lose connections among students, teachers, parents, and the schools. There was also a fear that tuitioning out students might result in a loss of power over decisions made about the town's education since these decisions would have to be negotiated with the priorities and budget of a different community. There was a concern that tuitioning out students might affect Newmarket's local businesses and downtown economy. Some participants worried that Newmarket students might lose their pride and connection to the community if they attended school elsewhere. One group also expressed concern that Newmarket students might be seen as outsiders or treated unequally if they attended other schools.

However, in addition to potential cost reductions, participants saw benefits to tuitioning out students such as expanded course offerings, extracurricular opportunities, and college preparation programs. There was talk about how other schools may have more resources that Newmarket students could benefit from using.

Newmarket-Based Cooperative Schools

There was discussion about whether tuitioning out students was a sustainable option for the long term. As a middle ground, several groups suggested that perhaps Newmarket should host a cooperative school. This would mean that the school would stay in Newmarket (or a new school would be developed) and that students from neighboring communities like Lee, Nottingham, Barrington, or Epping would be welcomed to partake in a cooperative school system. Thus, Newmarket would receive tuition from these communities rather than paying tuition to another community. Groups supportive of a Newmarket cooperative school felt that this would allow decision making power to remain in Newmarket while balancing financial needs. One group expressed some confusion about this idea, commenting that clarification about cooperative and tuition agreements was needed.

Innovative Ideas for Future Schools and Facilities

Groups who were supportive of keeping a school and students in Newmarket discussed a variety of innovative ways that the town might be able to balance quality and affordability. Some groups suggested that there needs to be better coordination of funding efforts or that external funds such as grants should be pursued. All of the groups spent some time talking about school facilities. There were questions about how much a new school building would cost and how long it would take to build. Two groups specifically commented that facilities should be created in response to curriculum and programming decisions rather than existing or new facilities bearing influence on what was taught and how it was taught in the schools. Some groups felt it was helpful to separate out what is required, needed, and wanted in terms of facilities, as that could help to prioritize decision making. There was an interest in creating facilities that have the flexibility to adjust to an uncertain future, since changes in education and youth populations would be inevitable over time. Several groups suggested that if a new school building were created that it serve not just as an educational facility but as a multipurpose community facility that could be used to host adult classes, senior activities, or summer events. For instance, one group suggested that the town create an auditorium that could be rented out and used as a generator of income. One group mentioned that the town could consider lengthening the school year, which could be a way to balance the use of the school facilities for other community purposes. Groups also discussed alternative ways to learn such as pods, or using remote and online learning options like the Virtual High School (VHS) or Virtual Learning Academy (VLACS).

Several groups expressed interest in Newmarket becoming some kind of specialized school, perhaps with a focus on STEAM, STEM, or magnet programs in science, mathematics, and technology.

School-Community Connections

Participants discussed the importance of connecting young people with the Newmarket community. This could be through academic learning that connects to local business, volunteering, or other forms of community connections. There was also an interest in engaging parents in the schools by providing opportunities to participate in different school-community groups and generally get involved. Overall, participants placed value on making sure that Newmarket students are connected to the town of Newmarket and all it has to offer.

A Long-Term Vision for Newmarket Schools

All of the groups talked about the need for the town to take the time to consider a long-term, sustainable and effective approach to the future of education in Newmarket. Many groups discussed how this meant considering both short-term plans of five years or less as well as long-term visions of twenty years or more regarding what the schools and community needed over time. Several groups commented that they would rather see the town make a well-reasoned decision than gravitate toward short-term solutions or “bandaids” on problems. Participants expressed the desire to explore several scenarios for the future of education, all that were well-researched with data and projected results for each option. Participants from one group commented that the process of decision making was important and that the town leaders should ensure that all perspectives in the community are heard and respected. Overall, once a decision had been made, groups wanted a vision for how the decision would be carried out, complete with benchmarks such as one-, three-, five-, and ten-year strategic goals.

Communication and Information Sharing

All of the groups expressed a need for improved communication and information sharing from town leaders and the School Board to the community at large. Participants expressed the need for more specific information about the issues at hand, which connects to the above desire for information to develop each “scenario” for a long-term plan. Participants also commented on the need for more accessible information about the issues. One group talked about how a centralized information hub might help information to get out there. Other groups discussed the need for a town-wide communication plan with multiple platforms and media (that is, social media, paper flyers, newspaper announcements) so that a range of diverse individuals in the town are reached out to equally. One group discussed the need for the town leaders and

School Board to reach out consistently as well as effectively. Another group felt that more conversations in face-to-face forums would help to clarify information and improve communication.

Moving Forward in Positive and Productive Ways

The majority of groups (6/8) felt that there was considerable tension within the community resulting from recent decisions about the schools. Groups talked about how it felt like there was a divide in the town, where people were on “sides” of an issue. This divisiveness within the town created negativity, misunderstanding, and an inability to work productively together. Five groups commented specifically on negativity through social media such as Facebook. Two groups felt that the town should make it a priority to move forward with school issues in a productive manner that was respectful and inclusive of everyone in the community. A couple of groups commented specifically that there seemed to be an “old” and “new” Newmarket, where people who had not lived in the community long or who were not homeowners were not treated with the same respect as those who had been part of the community for a long time. There was a desire to be responsive to the needs of all individuals in the community. Overall, there was a desire expressed to move forward in cooperative and respectful ways that were responsive to the needs of the diverse individuals who make Newmarket the vibrant, close-knit community that it is.

Participant Attendance and Evaluation Summary

NH Listens gathers basic demographic data to provide information on who was interested and able to attend this event about the future of education in Newmarket. It’s important to note that the content of this report has been generated from the people who attended the event and, consequently, does not represent all voices or viewpoints in Newmarket. Still, the demographic information presented here from the event indicates a healthy mix of backgrounds and experiences, ensuring that the conversations summarized in this report have great value. For more information, please see Appendix D, which includes a summary of all completed surveys.

Who Attended the Event?

Of the 72 people who attended these conversations around the state, 60 completed the evaluations. The following information is generated from those 60 responses (see Appendix D for a full summary):

- The average age of participants was 46.1 years old. There were almost twice as many individuals who were retired (9.3%) than there were students (5.9%) at the event.
- The majority of participants were women (63.6 percent); men made up a little over a third of those who came (34.5 percent).

- Although participants had varying levels of education ranging from a high school education through graduate school, 82.8 percent of participants had earned a higher education degree (Associate, Bachelor, or Graduate/Professional). Almost half of the group (48.3 percent) had earned a Graduate or Professional degree. Everyone at the event had achieved higher than an 8th grade education, which also signifies that middle school or younger age populations were not present at the event. There were no individuals age 18 or younger who completed the survey.
- When it came to political leanings, there were significantly more people who identified as liberal or somewhat liberal (45.6 percent) than there were who identified as conservative or somewhat conservative (15.5 percent). 38.6 percent of the group identified as political moderates.
- 98.3 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the facilitator made sure everyone took part in the conversation. Only 1.7 percent disagreed. This indicates that most participants felt facilitators were impartial in the process and that Newmarket residents were able to be inclusive in their discussions.
- 96.6 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their group talked about the most important issues related to the topic. Only 3.4 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates most participants felt that conversations represented the issues at hand related to education in Newmarket.
- 80.7 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the conversation helped them to become better informed about the issues. However, almost 20 percent (19.3) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case. This may indicate a need for more information sharing and communication about school-related issues within the community.
- 98.3 percent of participants felt that their perspective was respected in the conversation. Only 1.7 percent felt that the conversation was not respectful. This indicates that Newmarket residents are able to come together in respectful ways to talk about community issues, even when they come from different backgrounds or do not agree.
- 96.6 percent of participants surveyed were glad they participated in the conversations about the future of education in Newmarket. Only 3.4 percent did not feel glad they had participated.
- All participants surveyed (100 percent) claimed that they would or would consider attending another community conversation on the same issue or a different topic.

Figure 1. Participants’ self-reported highest levels of education achieved.

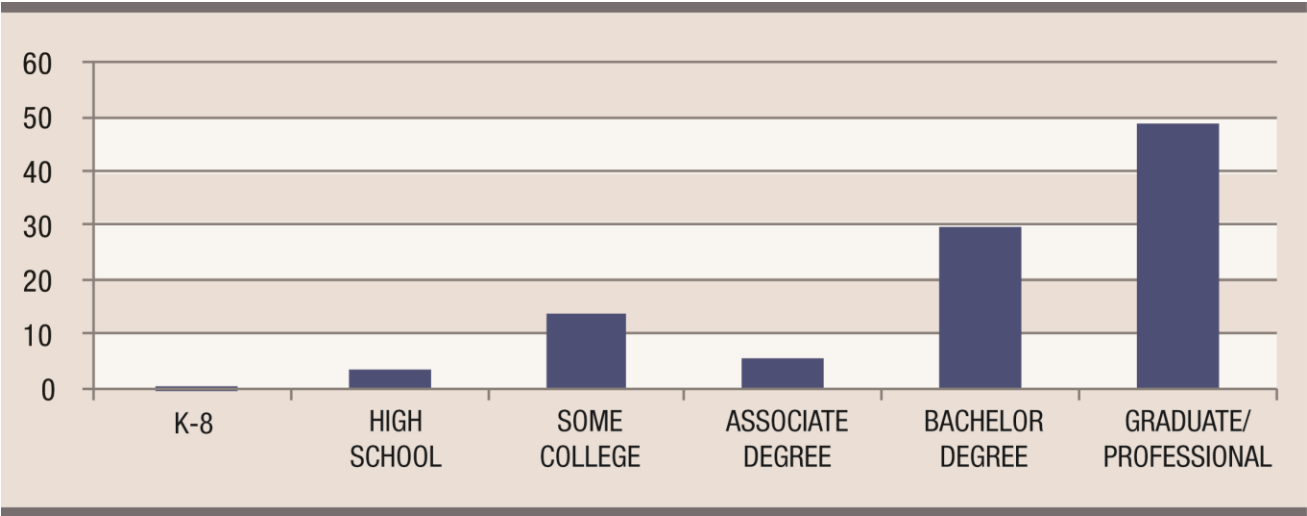


Figure 2. “How would you describe your political leanings?”

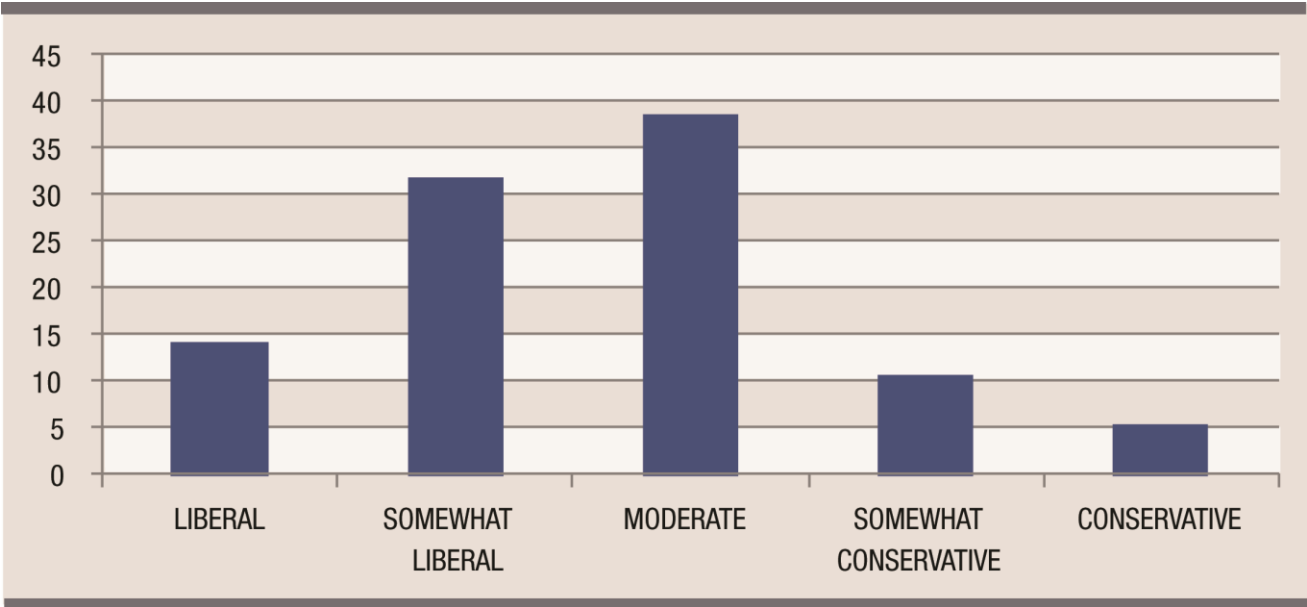


Figure 3. “The facilitator made sure everyone took part in the conversation.”

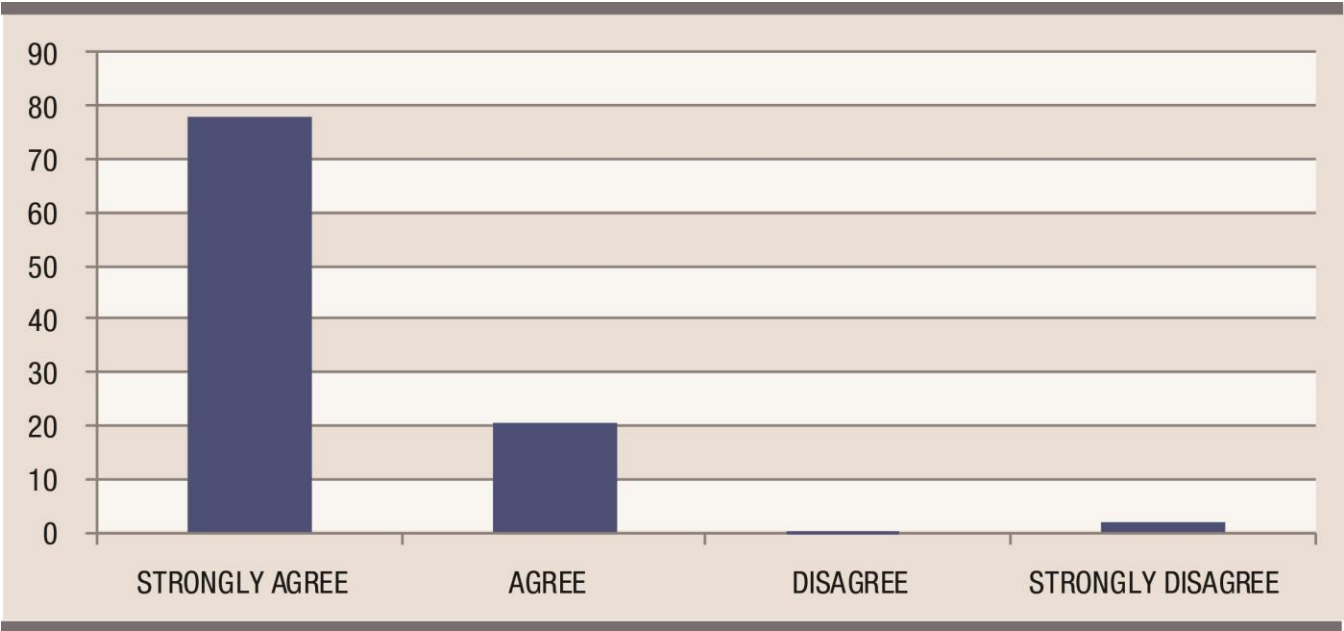


Figure 4. “Our group talked about the most important issues related to this topic.”

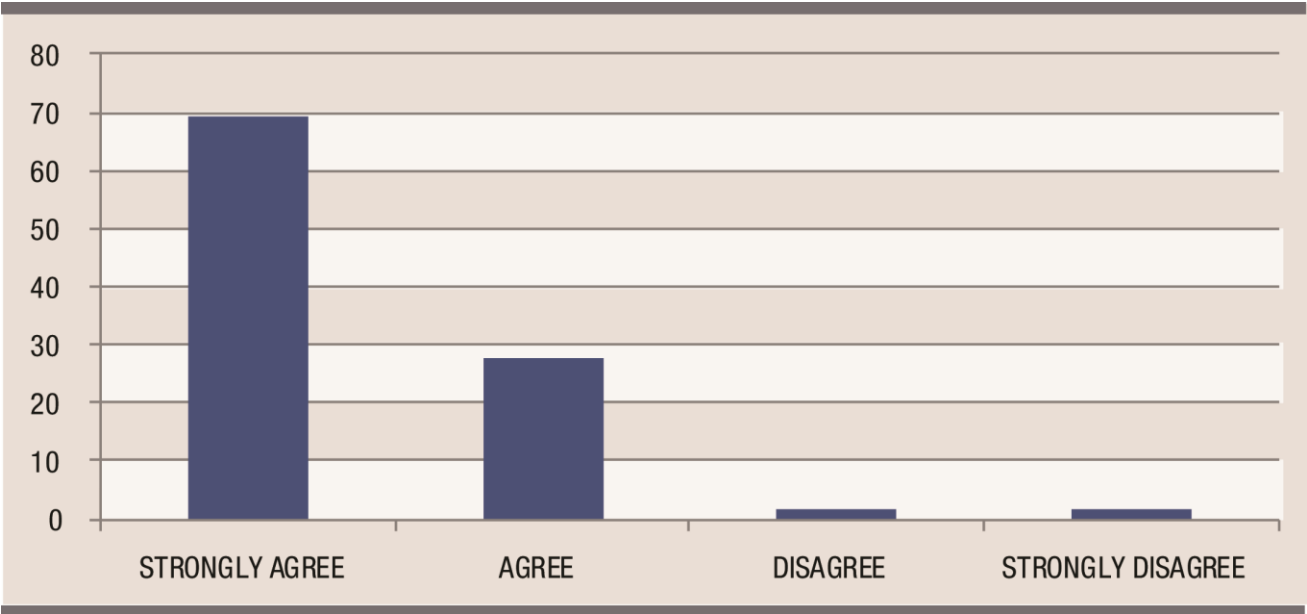


Figure 5. “The conversation helped me to become better informed about the issues.”

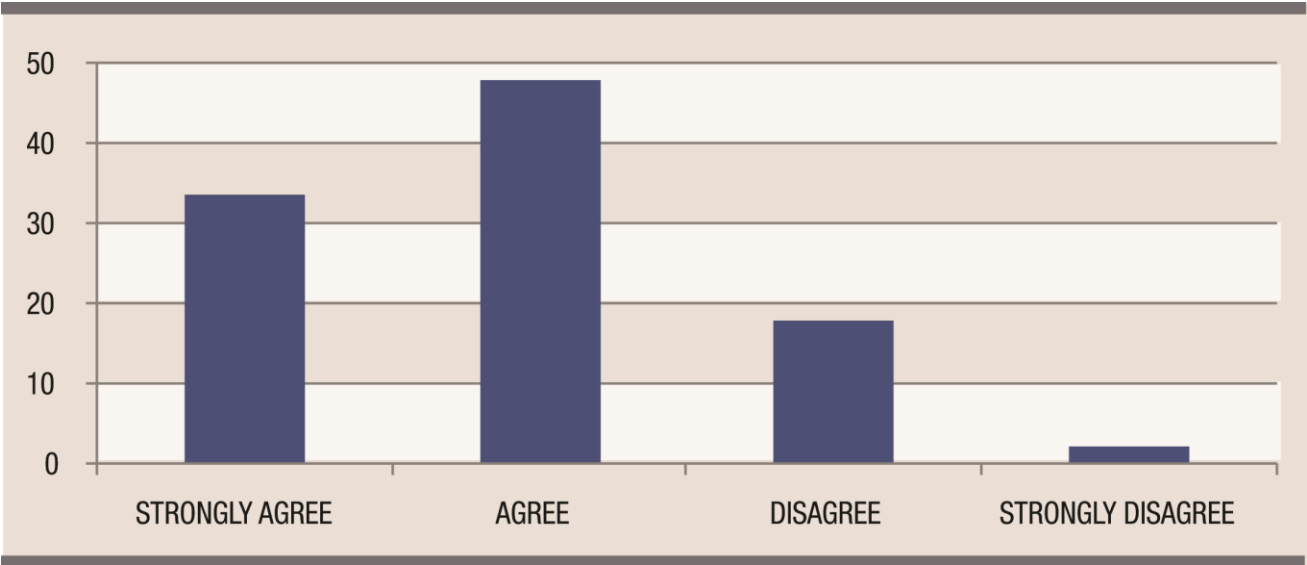


Figure 6. “I felt that my perspective was respected in this conversation.”

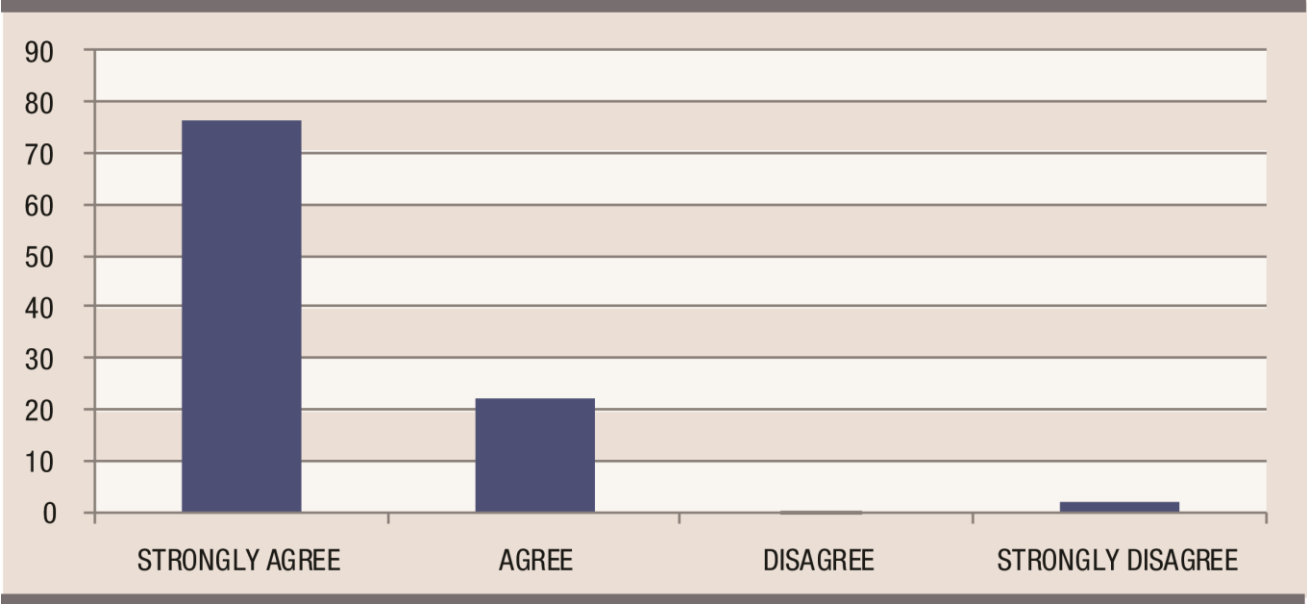


Figure 7. “I am glad I participated in these community conversations.”

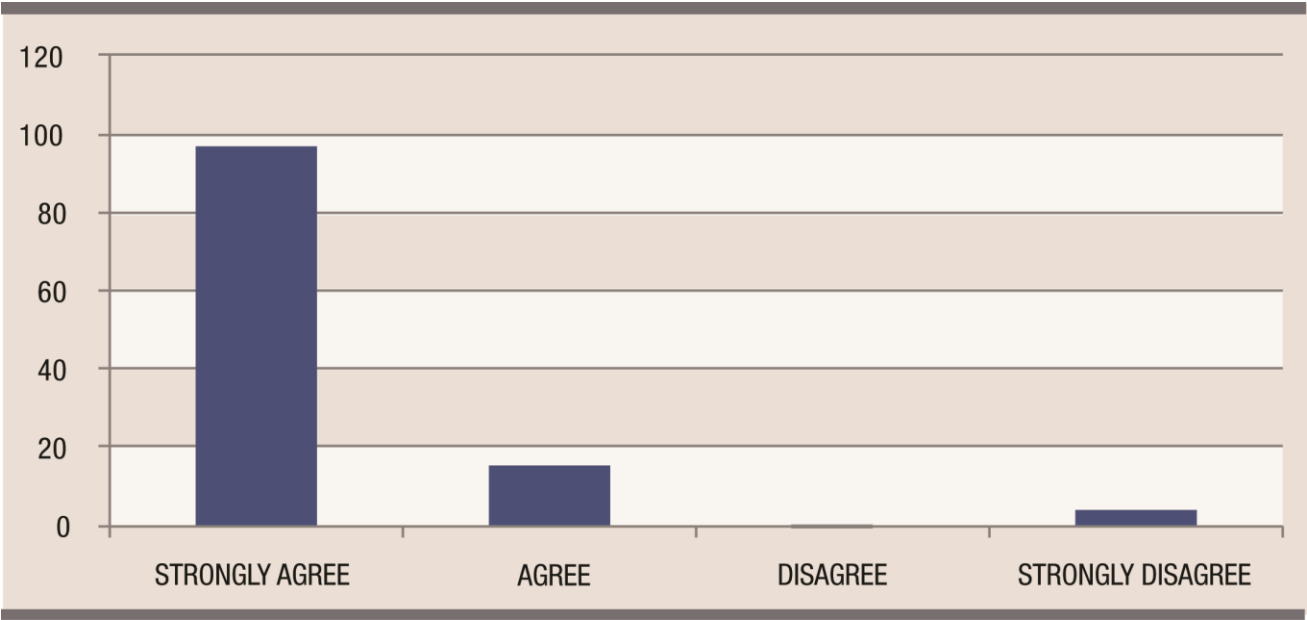
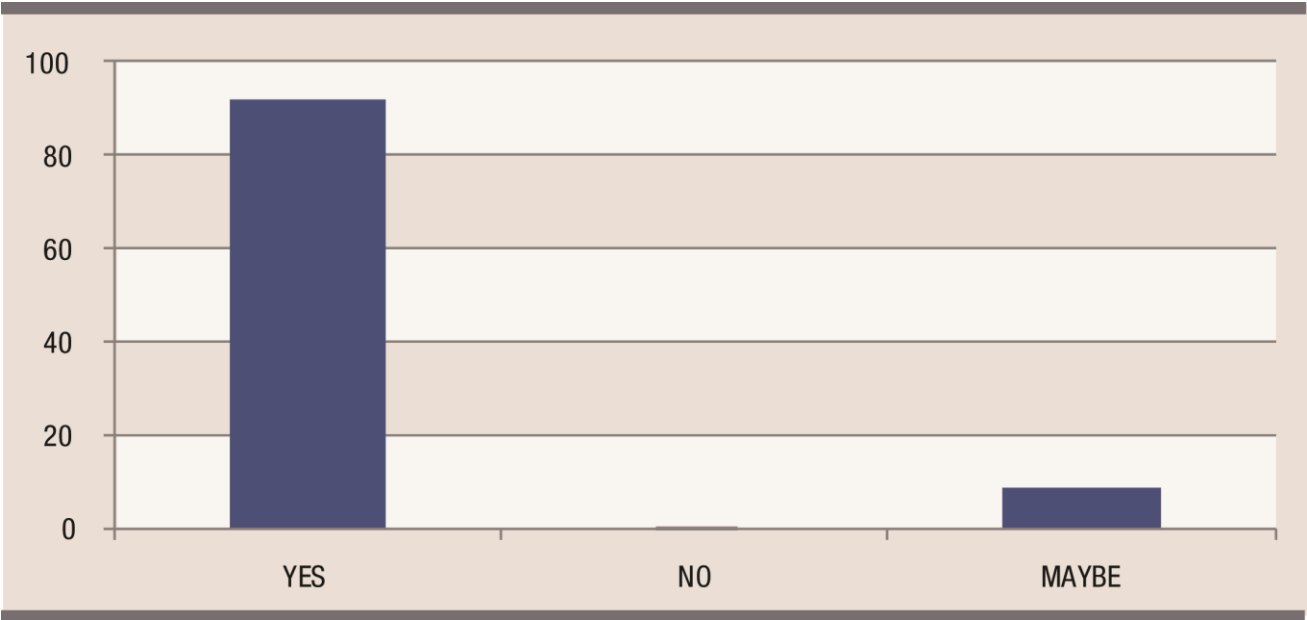


Figure 8. “I would attend another community conversation on this or a different topic.”



Conclusion

Seventy-two people from the Newmarket community participated in conversations centered on what the community values for the future of education. A range of ages, genders, and political perspectives were represented at the event. Attendees' final recommendations and key areas of concern centered on a few distinct areas, although there were different views about how to approach these issues depending on the range of perspectives present in the group. The priority topics for final recommendations included:

- **Strengths of Newmarket and threats to the community**
- **Academic quality and educational opportunities**
- **Balancing quality, affordability, and community values**
- **A long-term vision for Newmarket schools**
- **Communication and information sharing**
- **Moving forward in positive and productive ways**

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