

“Supporting Youth Supporting Community”

A NH Listens Summary Report

February 2015



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

Supporting Youth, Supporting Community

Date

October 25, 2014

Duration

Three hours

Participants

42 Community Members

Project Team

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Location

Nute Middle High School

Question

How can we all make Milton a healthy place for young people to live, learn, work, and play?

Background

This report and community conversation is part of a comprehensive effort by the Milton School District to engage the entire town, including Milton Mills, in creating the most healthy and positive environment possible for all residents. Our focus is on the young people who attend our schools now and in the future, and who will serve as future leaders here and across the world. This project has been funded by the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. Continued efforts will build on the input shared in this report and a summary from a Youth Voice Day held on December 16, 2014, under a new coalition—Milton Matters—to be launched in January 2015.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The conversations converged around three primary sets of findings, including:

1. Build a Community that Encourages Safety and Support for Youth

Participants expressed concern about youth's challenges around mental health, substance use, bullying, and poverty. Participants discussed the need for more support for students and their parents, both in and outside of school by providing access to services, transportation, and resources. There was an interest in building a community that helps youth to feel safe and supported in a variety of ways.

2. Improve Communication by Coordinating Existing Resources and Developing New Pathways for Information Sharing

Improving communication in Milton was seen as a way to help families and young people learn about and better understand available activities and opportunities as well as a way to increase community cohesion. In particular, communication between the town and the schools and between the schools and families was noted.

3. Foster Youth Engagement and Empowerment

Participants placed value on creating and growing opportunities for young people to participate in the Milton community in a variety of ways including through volunteerism, extracurricular activities, and school-related projects. There was a desire to help young people to take pride and ownership in Milton's close knit, small town community. Participants commented on the need for more centralized places for youth to convene and participate in community life. Participants wanted youth to feel that they had a valued voice in the community. There was an interest in helping young people to develop a sense of purpose in their lives. Participants discussed how to cultivate youth goals and aspirations and to help young people to be self-directed and take ownership in their future.

T H E M E S

meetings ages **communication** avenues sports board calendars
resources classes everyone department education **need** create **kids**

know facilities **community** engage place

connected lack feel conversation develop challenges events final good access
group help history important increase see involvement center leaders learn
students low make middle issues adults **Milton** opportunities change
ownership **parents** peer elementary programs rec role safe available

volunteer service families suicide **school** priorities
activities share expand **small** library support things together find coordinate

town fire use values young work **people** **youth**
information build population funding positive

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**Community Conversation
October 25, 2014**

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

- Appendix A: Discussion Guide**
- Appendix B: Small Group Notes**
- Appendix C: How NH Listens Collects and Reports Findings**

The Community Conversations

The Milton School District, along with a group of community members, teachers, and local civic leaders, worked with New Hampshire Listens to design a community conversation on the best way to support the young people of Milton to grow, thrive, and succeed. Outreach was done through posts to Facebook, school announcements, emails to parents, and an interactive booth at Milton Pride Day. The conversation was open to anyone who wanted to attend on the morning of Saturday, October 25th, 2014, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The participants in the conversation spent three hours in small group facilitated discussion about their concerns and suggestions for Milton's youth. Thirty-two people registered in advance to participate, and 42 people total attended the event.

Focus Questions

The Milton School District and NH Listens worked collaboratively to develop a set of focus questions to guide the discussion. The key questions asked of the participants were:

- What do you value most about the Milton community?
- What role do young people have in preserving what is best about Milton and Milton Mills?
- How can the values that are important to you be passed on to young people?
- What are the most important challenges facing our youth?
- What are the primary causes of those challenges?
- How can families, schools, businesses, town officials, and community leaders work together to create the most positive environment for young people?
- What changes could we make in our community, schools, recreation programs, health care practices, etc. to benefit young people?
- How can the adults in our community serve as mentors, role models, and resources for youth?
- How can we be sure our young people feel engaged and valued by our community?
- How can we engage the entire community, not just those here today, in our efforts to help young people feel safe, valued, and hopeful?

The information section of the discussion guide (Appendix A) was used to expose participants to a variety of data, but the focus of the conversation followed the participants' interests and concerns. Facilitators asked questions like "What do you notice about this information?" They often followed up with prompting questions such as "What stands out to you?" or "What is most important to you?"

Key Findings

Participants at the conversation expressed a range of perspectives, which were recorded by facilitators and are provided in Appendix B of this report. Some of the most commonly discussed topics include the following:

- **Build a Community that Encourages Safety and Support for Youth**
- **Improve Communication by Coordinating Existing Resources and Developing New Pathways for Information Sharing**
- **Foster Youth Engagement and Empowerment**

What follows is a compilation of outcomes of the conversation and an analysis of all small group notes as a way to identify areas for further consideration and action. The results of these conversations, as presented in this report, will be shared with all participants, the Milton School District, and the newly formed community coalition, Milton Matters.

Build a Community that Encourages Safety and Support for Youth

Mental Health, Bullying, and Poverty

All of the groups expressed concern about young people's safety and well-being. The majority of groups (3/4) expressed particular concern about youth's mental health such as depression and suicide. Most groups talked about substance use and abuse by youth and adults in the community. Greater conversation and openness among youth and with youth and adults was proposed, as well as increased access to mental health services in schools and out of schools (2/4). Two groups were concerned about bullying. Groups raised the issue that sadness and suicide might be caused by bullying and suggested a bullying prevention program. One of these groups also suggested an intervention based around empathy as a way to build support for students and combat bullying. Groups (2/4) also talked about the challenges of poverty in the community. There was an interest in more effectively publicizing existing resources as well as potentially developing new ones. For instance, the majority of groups commented on the need for more transportation opportunities within the community (3/4), and groups also discussed problems related to accessing services. For instance, an increased need for communication about welfare resources was suggested by one group. There was a suggestion to provide transportation to school events and sporting events, as well as increase public transportation around the town. Increased transportation was seen as a way to not only support families, but also connect youths to resources such as mentors and activities.

Support Youth by Supporting Families

There was a desire to strengthen resources for families in particular. It was suggested that parents were very busy, either due to transience, transportation issues, or long commutes (3/4). The idea of parenting resources or classes was raised, as well as inclusion for families through free food and child care at programs.

Increase Mentorship and Role Modeling

The need for positive influences, role models, and a positive culture at home was discussed (3/4) as well as the need to support families in order to achieve that (4/4). Groups suggested that adults could play an important role in representing positive behavior and being a positive influence.

Another group was concerned that youth did not have sufficient role models and positive influences among the adults in the town. A third group thought that a “purpose driven home life” was needed for youth, meaning that youth may need more direction and guidance. Another concern was that only a core group of individuals volunteered in the town and that greater diversity of volunteers was needed (3/4). The concern that “we are a small community that has stopped working together as a small community” was raised.

Improve Communication by Coordinating Existing Resources and Developing New Pathways for Information Sharing

A frequent theme that emerged across all groups (4/4) was the need to improve communication between several groups including the school and the town, the school and parents, and among community groups. All of the discussion groups highlighted this as a way to improve the ability of these constituencies to work together on behalf of youth. Groups identified gaps in communication and brainstormed the best way to make improvements. Two groups articulated that communication as a whole has improved recently between the school and parents, but that this should be expanded to the entire community. Another common theme was the desire not just for increased communication, but also for greater coordination and collaboration between the town and the school, as well as the town and other community organizations.

Need for Communication Between Schools and the Town

A majority of the groups (3/4) identified a lack of communication between the town and schools. There was a sense that there was limited information and communication shared between the two entities. Possible solutions included more information shared on websites, the coordination of town and school calendars (citing the example that budget meetings occurred on the same nights as open houses), and the possible development of a town/school ‘E-News.’ As another way to better align communication and coordinated initiatives and resources, it was suggested that the Board of Education and Selectmen work closely together.

Clearer Communication Between the Schools and Parents

Groups discussed a need for more effective communication and coordination between the schools and parents (3/4). They highlighted the fact that parents don’t have support groups or easily accessible resources in the schools, and that not all parents feel connected to the schools. One group suggested that the transition that students go through between middle school and high school was also a transition that parents experienced, specifically in the way in which communication lessened. While the need was recognized for parents to be

proactive about communication and seek out information, it was also pointed out that not all families in Milton have access to the Internet and therefore information needs to be dispersed in a variety of ways. One idea that was mentioned was a greater role for the library to serve as a connector between the town and schools.

Need for a Community Communication Network

One common theme among all the groups (4/4) was the need for a communication network, which included developing new strategies for communication. The current problems that all groups identified were a lack of communication to families, the fact that some community activities were identified by word of mouth only, the need to increase communication surrounding what activities are available to do in the community, the necessity of increased communication about available welfare programs such as fuel assistance, and that communication should be available in a number of ways, including email, Facebook, and the *Milton Gazette*. Solutions to these problems included an easy-to-use directory with contact information; a link between the PTA, Sports Clubs, and other community organizations; and the development of a coordinated community calendar.

Need for Greater Collaboration and Cooperation

A number of challenges to the success of such communication and collaboration were identified (3/4). One group pointed out that only a small group of people in Milton are typically active, and increased time spent communicating could exhaust their capacity to remain involved. While increased communication was frequently mentioned, so too was the desire for greater collaboration and coordination between various resources that support youth. There was also a suggestion that the town create volunteer and community service options for youth. This collaboration was also echoed in greater coordination of community calendars so that parents had a clearer idea of what was happening when, and so that activities did not overlap. Some groups discussed the need for a leader, be it a volunteer or paid employee, to be responsible for coordinating various resources and initiatives in the town and publicizing this information effectively to others. This was seen as a way to increase community cohesion and engagement.

Foster Youth Engagement and Empowerment

All groups (4/4) identified the need to engage with youth, encourage them to feel that they have purpose in their life, help them foster a sense of pride and ownership in their school and town, increase their ability to have an open dialogue, and help them develop a sense of empowerment through meaningful active involvement. All groups identified gaps in current offerings and activities for youth and offered suggestions that would promote youth empowerment and involvement.

Gap in Activities Currently Available to Youth

All groups (4/4) identified ways in which youth are “bored,” or the current offerings in Milton do not reach as many youth as they could. The need for after-school activities was recognized (3/4), as well as events that

engaged youth beyond sports and those already in the National Honor Society (2/4). Three groups identified engaging youth and capturing their ideas and voices as a way to empower them in the process of creating more opportunities. One group articulated the fact that there is a mentor-type program in place, but it is not effective as it is too informal and roles are neither identified nor currently supported. Groups also felt that existing resources and opportunities for youth could be better coordinated and publicized, as discussed in the *Communication* section of this report.

A Need for a Community Gathering Place

All of the groups (4/4) recognized a need for a physical location for youth to gather, and specifically a place that is separate from the schools. Three groups identified existing places—the rec department, public library, the fire station, Emma Ramsey Center, Lochart field, the town beach, etc.—as either ideas of where a community center could be located, or where it could be combined with an existing entity. The idea of building a youth center, a rec center, or a community center was mentioned by all four groups.

Ideas for Activities

All groups (4/4) made suggestions for ways to connect the school, town, and community in offering increased opportunities to youth. The idea of increased community service was raised by two groups. Also suggested (3/4) was the involvement of youth in local civic engagement, either with increased civic classes, holding selectman meetings at the school, inviting youth to town meetings, or having students serve as selectmen. Two of the groups suggested linking youth and the fire department. The idea of benefits or incentives to youths were also discussed (2/4) with internships or high school credit available. Another idea was linking youth with other youth, with older students serving as volunteers and leaders, or running activities for younger kids (2/4). One group highlighted the need for music, arts, and sports, and another group echoed the desire for year-round physical activities. Finally, one group suggested that youth could offer classes to adults on technology use such as smart phones, Kindles, or iPads, and that they could attend senior luncheons to do so. One group pointed out that, within the activities that are currently offered, there is a large gap in winter activities offerings. Two groups also pointed to Extended Learning Opportunities as a resource that could be further developed and provide civic activities for youth. The majority of groups (3/4) also expressed pride in Milton's history and a desire to involve young people in restoration projects or other history-related initiatives to help cultivate an interest in Milton's past.

Need for Greater Resources

One concern over increasing the offerings and opportunities for youths was that funding presented a major challenge (2/4). One group suggested that if funding was found, restoration projects around town would be a good opportunity for youth volunteers. This same group identified the fact that sports areas are deteriorating and are not maintained or repaired. This, along with the lack of funding for after-school programs, was echoed by a second group which discussed the reality of available resources in implementing changes in Milton.

A second concern raised by all groups (4/4) was that there is not a large volunteer pool available in Milton. Only a small group of parents run most activities, and it was articulated that there is only so much they can do. The cost in time and money to coordinate volunteers and organizers was discussed. Participants also mentioned the difficulties in implementing changes during the school day, due to lack of time. A structure to help facilitate parent volunteers as a way to increase their engagement was suggested. The fact that parents commute to work was also brought up as a reason parents might not have sufficient capacity to volunteer or stay engaged.

Empowering Youth to Have Their Own Voice and Purpose

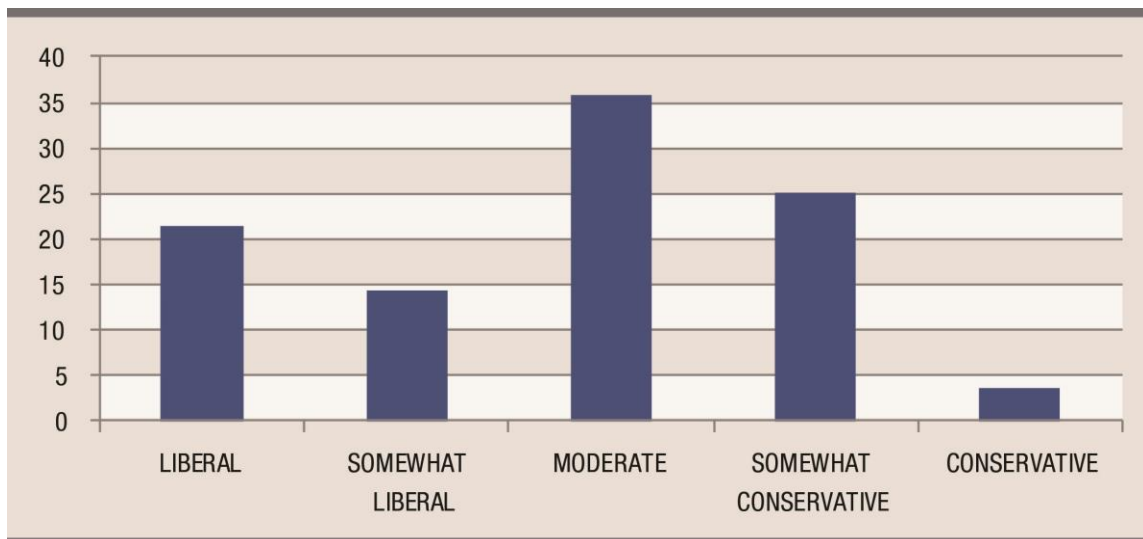
All of the groups (4/4) expressed a value in helping youth to have a voice in the community. There was also a desire to support youth in finding a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Groups talked about surveying students or asking them what they need so that the community could better address youth concerns and values (*Note: a conversation engaging all students was held on December 16th at NMHS*). All groups (4/4) raised the fact that strong and consistent leadership was needed in order to achieve the goal of youth empowerment and engagement across schools and the community. It was suggested that bringing in individuals with specialized expertise might be necessary, as well as potentially creating paid positions. Overall, there was a sense that young people matter to Milton, and that the community should develop ways to indicate this to youth in a variety of ways.

Participant Attendance and Evaluation Summary

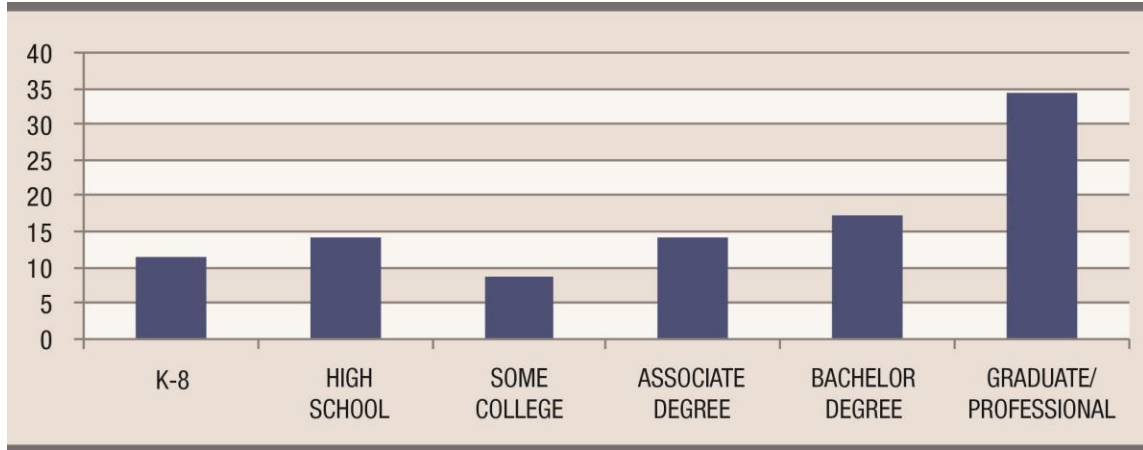
NH Listens gathers basic demographic data to provide information on who was interested and able to attend this event. It is important to note that the content of this report has been generated from the people who attended the event and, consequently, does not represent all the voices or viewpoints in Milton or Milton Mills. The demographic information presented here indicates a healthy mix of backgrounds and experiences, ensuring that the conversations summarized in this report have great value.

Of the 42 people who attended the conversation, 37 people total completed the evaluations. The following information is generated from those 37 responses.

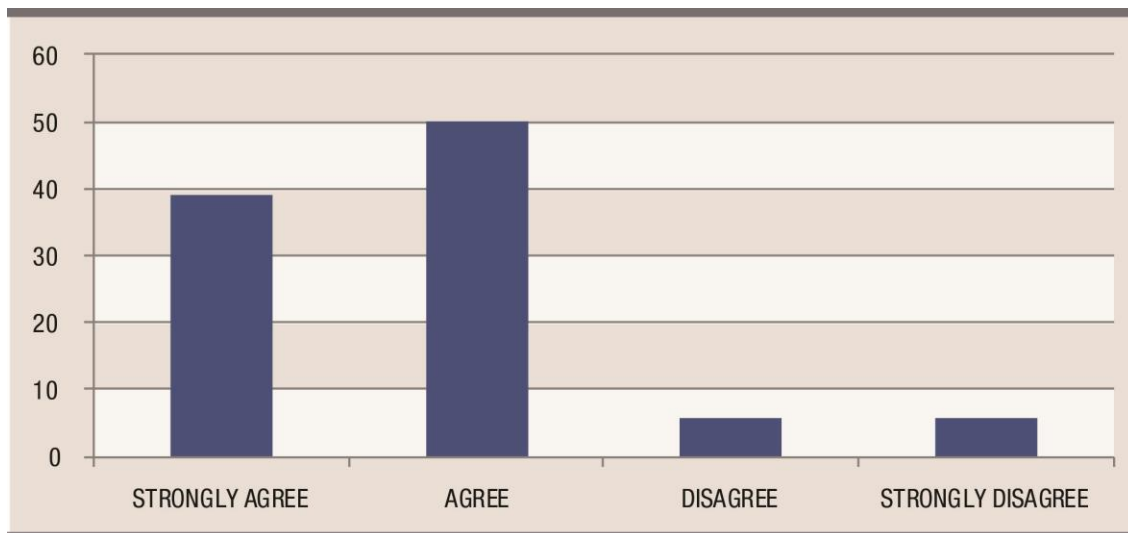
- The average age of participants was 41.7 years old.
- Slightly more women (63.6%) than men (36.4%) attended the conversation.
- The majority of participants identified as political moderates (37 percent). There were slightly more participants who identified as liberal or somewhat liberal (35.7 percent) than participants who identified as conservative or somewhat conservative (28.6 percent). *See Figure 1.*



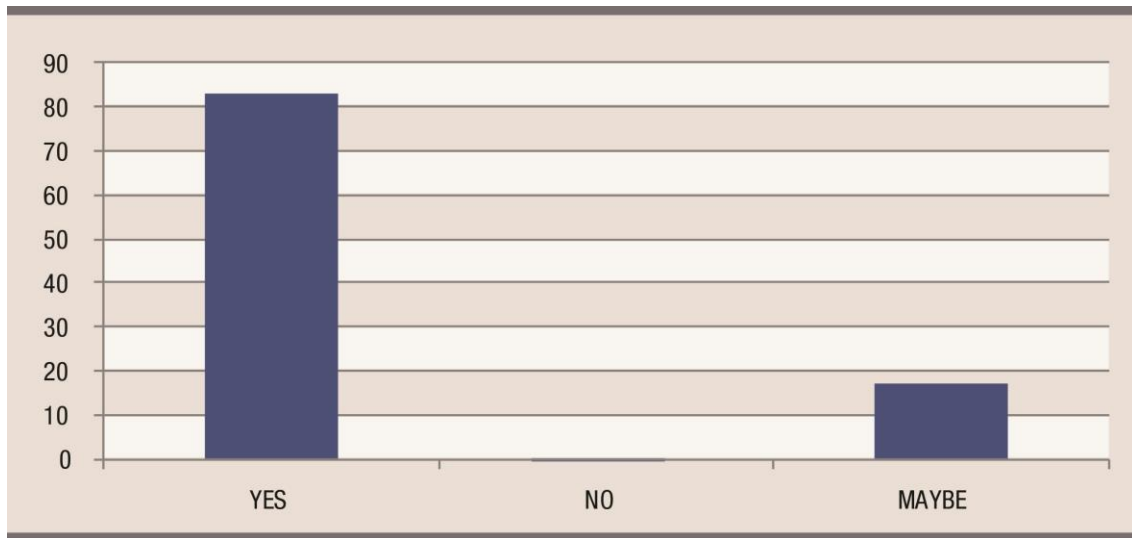
- Participants' education level ranged from grade school through graduate or professional training. The largest group was those with advanced degrees (34.3 percent), and 74.3 percent of participants had attended at least some college. 14.3 percent of participants had completed high school, while 11.4 percent were currently enrolled in middle or elementary school. See Figure 2.



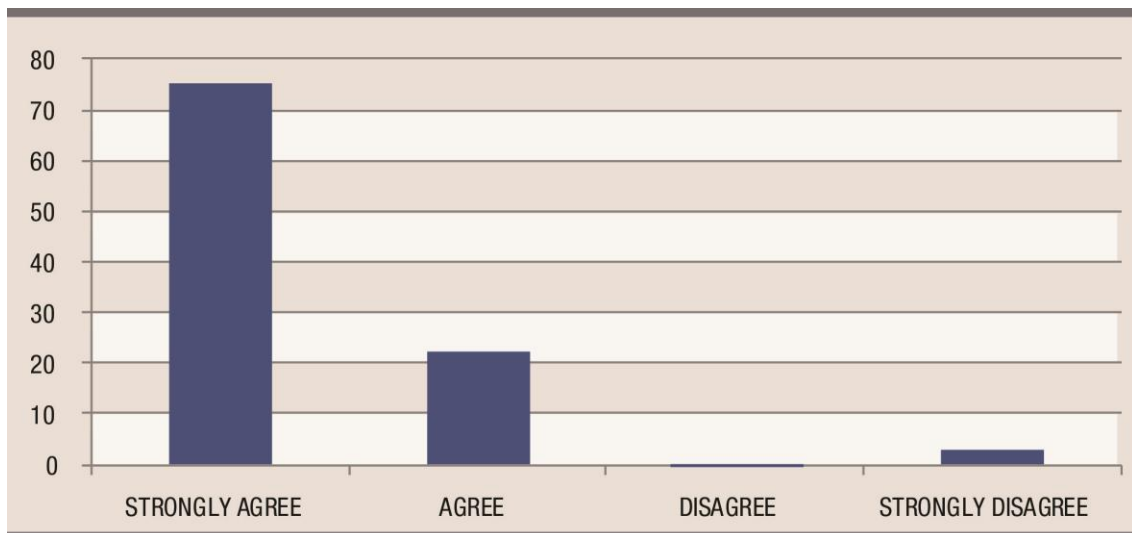
- 88.9 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they understood how their results of the discussion would be used to inform next steps. See Figure 3.



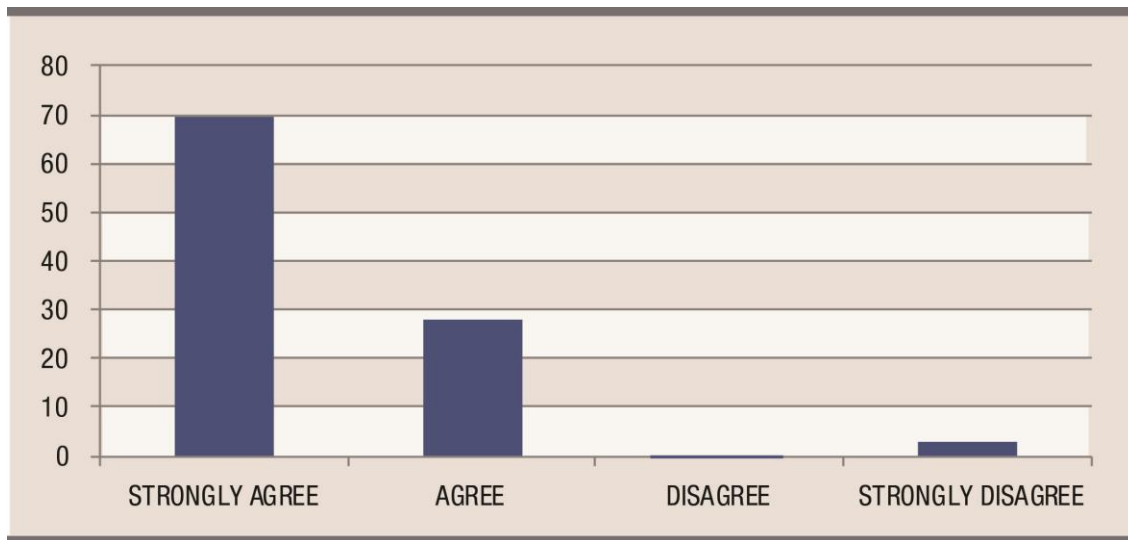
- 100 percent of participants indicated that they would or would consider attending another community conversation on Milton or another topic. *See Figure 4.*



- 97.2 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that everyone had an equal chance to express his/her views, indicating that most participants felt they had a chance to be heard during the conversation. *See Figure 5.*



- 97.2 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they felt their perspective was represented in the conversation. See Figure 6.



Conclusion

The organizers of this community conversation see this opportunity as a way to hear from new and old voices in the community and to build connections in Milton through a new coalition called Milton Matters. On October 25th, 42 people from the Milton community participated in the conversation centered on how to help youth in Milton and how to make the town a healthy place for young people to live, learn, work, and play. A range of genders, age, and political perspectives were represented at the event. Attendees' final recommendations described in this report—1) to build a community that encourages safety and support for youth, 2) to improve communication by coordinating existing resources and developing new pathways for information sharing, and 3) to foster youth engagement and empowerment—will be used to guide next steps by Milton Matters and the Milton School District.

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