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**STAMFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS MIDDLE SCHOOL
TRANSFORMATION**

STAMFORD, CT

**SUMMARY FINDINGS: COMMUNITY
CONVERSATION EVALUATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Stamford Public Schools recently announced its middle school transformation initiative. This initiative includes ensuring college preparatory curriculum for all students and phasing out academic ability grouping. As part of its commitment to keeping an open dialogue with the community about the initiative, the SPS central office organized a town hall meeting on June 2, 2009. The meeting was held in the evening: refreshments were offered at six o'clock and the event began at 7 p.m. The meeting was held at the Yerwood Center in Stamford, CT. The meeting opened with a video of parents who were interviewed about the effects of academic ability grouping. It was followed by a speech by Dr. Starr, Superintendent, Stamford Public Schools. The speech was followed by a panel discussion. The evening ended with a lengthy Question and Answer session.

METHOD

To evaluate the town hall meeting and help the SPS central office improve community engagement around middle school transformation, a brief paper-and-pencil self-administered survey was constructed (See Appendix A). To obtain feedback from Spanish-speaking audience, the survey was translated into Spanish. The survey was distributed to town hall meeting attendees. The respondents were asked to place the completed surveys in a designated box prior to leaving the meeting. According to the sign-in sheets, 240 members of the community attended the meeting. A total of 140 surveys were collected (N=140). A total of 114 respondents completed the English version of the questionnaire and 26 respondents completed the Spanish version of the questionnaire.

Summarized below are results of the survey. The sample sizes are provided in situations where data are reported on smaller size samples because of missing cases.

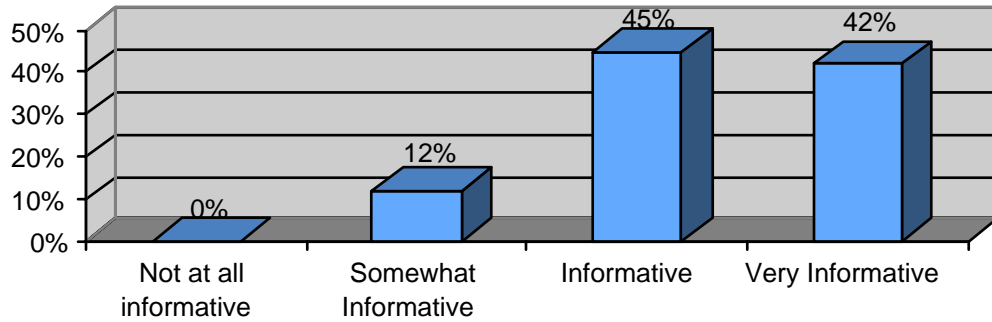
FINDINGS

The meeting was well-received by the attendees.

Overall, the overwhelming majority (87%) of respondents said that they found the community conversation informative, with 42% of respondents indicating that the meeting was “very informative” and 45% rating it as “informative.” Thirteen percent (13%) of respondents stated that the meeting was “somewhat informative.” (See Figure I).

Figure I

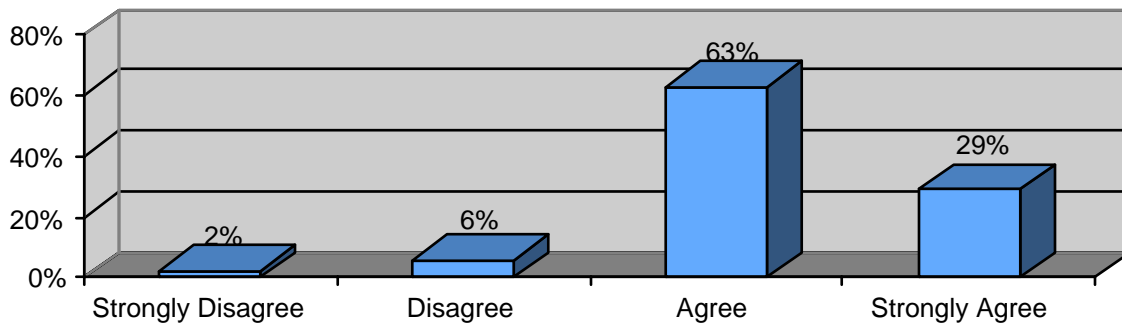
Overall, how informative did you find today's community conversation?



The overwhelming majority (92%) of the respondents also indicated that the meeting helped them better understand the proposed middle school transformation. More specifically, 29% “strongly agreed” and 63% “agreed” with the statement, “As result of today’s town hall meeting, I have a better understanding of the proposed changes in the way grade six students will be taught in the middle school next school year.” (See Figure 2).

Figure II

Improved understanding of proposed changes under middle school transformation (N=138)

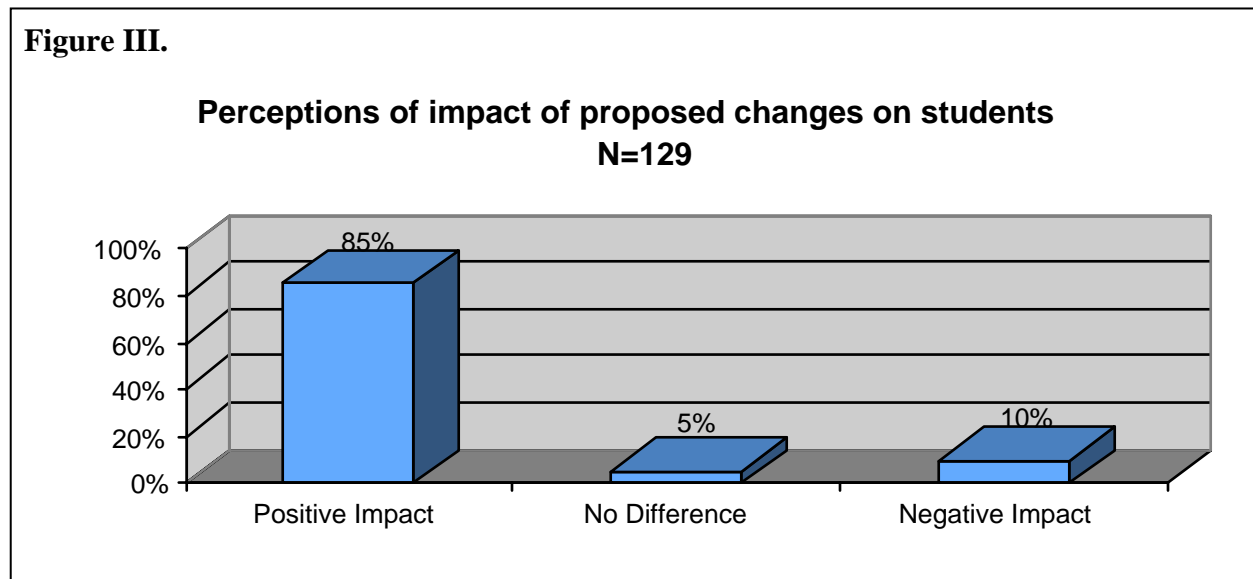


The respondents viewed proposed changes favorably.

The majority (85%) of the respondents indicated that they believe that the proposed changes to the way grade six students will be taught in the middle school next year will “make a positive impact on students.” Approximately 5% of the respondents said the proposed changes will “make no difference” and 10% of the respondents said that the proposed changes will “make a negative impact on students.” (See Figure III). A number of respondents commented that it was “too early to tell” or they were “unsure” of the impact of the proposed changes. For example, one respondent offered the following comment,

“[I’m] unsure of the proposed changes, maybe in a year the outcome will be more clear. Thank you for your efforts and I look forward to seeing how it works. I don't have your confidence that it will work so smoothly, but please continue to strive for what's best for our city and children.”

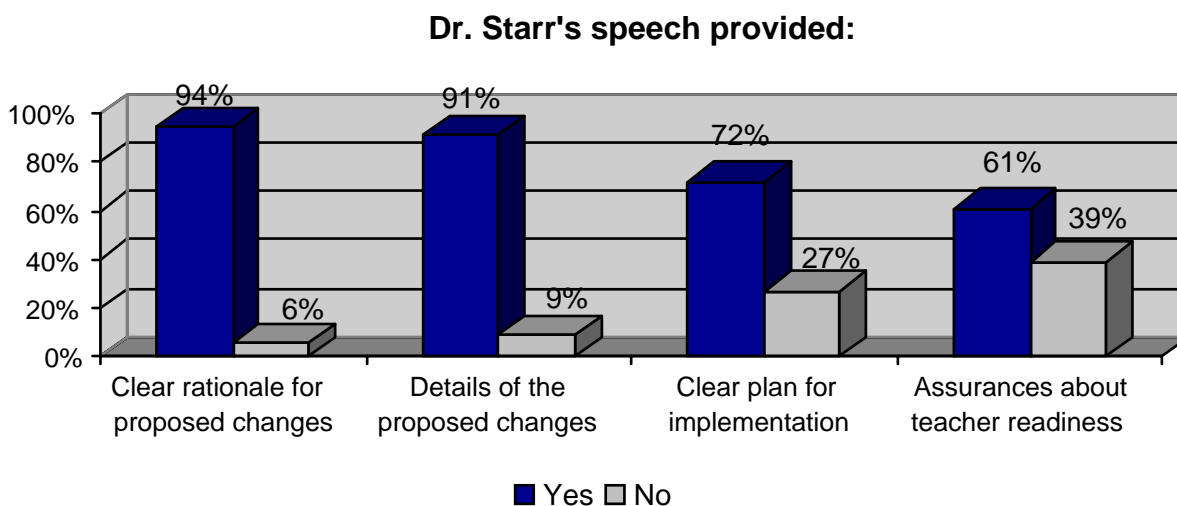
Figure III.



Dr. Starr’s speech was perceived as informative.

Overall, the respondents thought that Dr. Starr’s speech provided: clear rationale for the proposed changes (N=124, 94%), details (N=120, 91%), clear implementation plan (N=115, 72%) and assurances about teacher readiness (N=115, 61%). (See Figure IV).

Figure IV.



As evidenced by the comments provided by the respondents, teacher preparedness is a concern for some community members. They offered the following comments:

“I would like to receive information about actual changes in the classroom to achieve the goal. System will still be dependent on teachers. Teachers’ drive will prove system. Some may improve, some may not. Overall, even if some improve, system is a success.”

“The reform will make a positive impact on students if teachers are motivated.”

“You have good intentions, but reality is the budget has been cut, teachers lost and class size increased. What is being done to compensate for this to help teach teachers and give attention to kids that is needed.”

“[I would like to receive the following information about the initiative:] 1. How proposed curriculum changes will be successful with 30+ students in a class! 2. How teachers will be prepared to meet diverse needs with such minimal training (2-3 days); 3. How teachers will be held accountable for creating a quality.”

“[Transformation can have] potentially negative [impact], given there is no concrete substantive data on preparation of teachers. Amount of time shown for PD is insufficient to change teacher attitudes.”

Parents also had some additional questions regarding program implementation. Some sample comments included:

“There are too many students in special ed programs, will this program help eliminate/decrease the number of children tied to this label?”

“More detail about how parents can get children moved up to honors level.”

“More data about test results that will be used to place students in one of two groups.”

“Why academic enrichment period everyday for 6th graders? Why not foreign language? Will in the 7th grade AE leave and Spanish come in? Will middle school teachers be held accountable if they do not differentiate (or at least make a good effort to try next year?) Next year grade 6 is two groups, when will all middle schools go to the Scofield Model?”

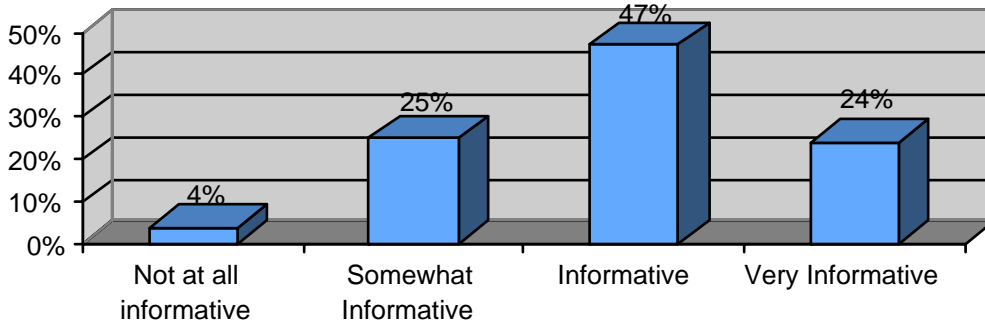
“How will middle school reform affect current 6th & 7th graders (next years' 7th & 8th graders)? What have we learned from the IB test at Rippowam and are we applying that knowledge? AE is not truly enrichment but instead remediation or repetition. Truly gifted children are not being challenged in the IB Program Math & Language Art.”

The respondents indicated that the panel discussion was well-received and the idea of future panels was welcomed.

The majority of the respondents (71%) indicated that the panel discussion was either “very informative” (24%) or “informative” (47%). Approximately a quarter (25%) of the respondents thought that the panel was “somewhat informative” and 4% indicated that the panel was not at all informative. A number of respondents commented that they found the information shared by Delia Garrity about Rockville Centre School District helpful. (See Figure V).

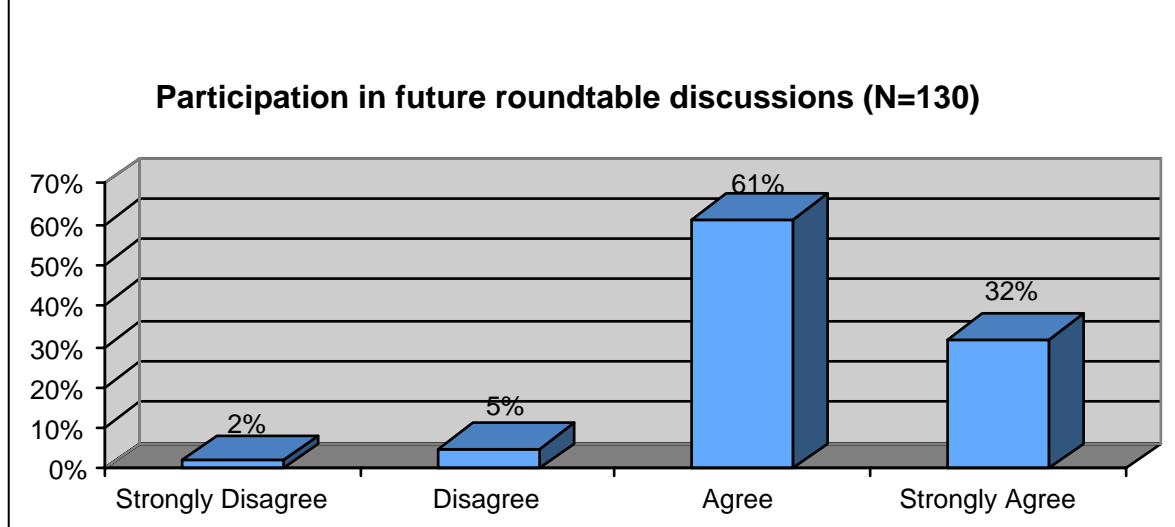
Figure V.

**Overall, how informative did you find today's panel discussion?
(N=138)**



Consistent with the finding presented above, the majority of the respondents (93%) either “strongly agreed” (32%) or “agreed” (61%) with the following statement, “Participating in a future roundtable discussion with principals, superintendents and academicians who have implemented and studied similar initiatives in other parts of the country would help me formulate my opinion about middle school transformation.” (See Figure VI).

Figure VI.



Other findings

At the end of the survey, the respondents were asked an open-ended question, “What additional information about this initiative would you like to receive?” A number of respondents commented that they would like to continue to receive updates about the progress of the initiative; some comments included:

“Posted data as we move forward through the year -- common assessments; direct admin, alert when problems arise.”

“Feedback on results as program goes forward. Great start!”

“Updates during the 2009-2010 year.”

Some respondents also used the space to comment about Central Office’s communication efforts. For example,

“Good job communicating.”

“I like the booklet and panel. Great improvement in communication.”

“Great communication/reaching out like you are doing. Please, keep it up! This is critical.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue community dialogue through town hall meetings that offer specific, detailed information about the proposed changes and allow for Question and Answer sessions.
- Continue to offer panel and roundtable discussions with administrators and academicians who have implemented and studied similar initiatives in the other parts of the country.
- Carefully and transparently monitor implementation of the proposed changes and broadly disseminate findings.
- Consider dedicating a town hall meeting to the topic of “teacher readiness” and consider offering “differentiated instruction” workshops.
- Identify teachers who can act as ambassadors/champions of the initiative and display them and their views prominently.