

Liminality

....on the threshold of change

10/30/2008

FR: Chris Samuels, Sam Yellin
TO: Ken Parker, Lucia Dolan, Shawn Fitzgibbons
RE: Parker Survey on Newton Education, 2008

The following pages contain the results of five open-ended questions from the recently published online survey. Fifty of the 140 responses received were chosen at random and coded to help those interested in the results to better understand the content of respondents' answers. In most cases, a sampling of real responses is provided for each of the top answers provided to illustrate the meaning of the data found in the charts.

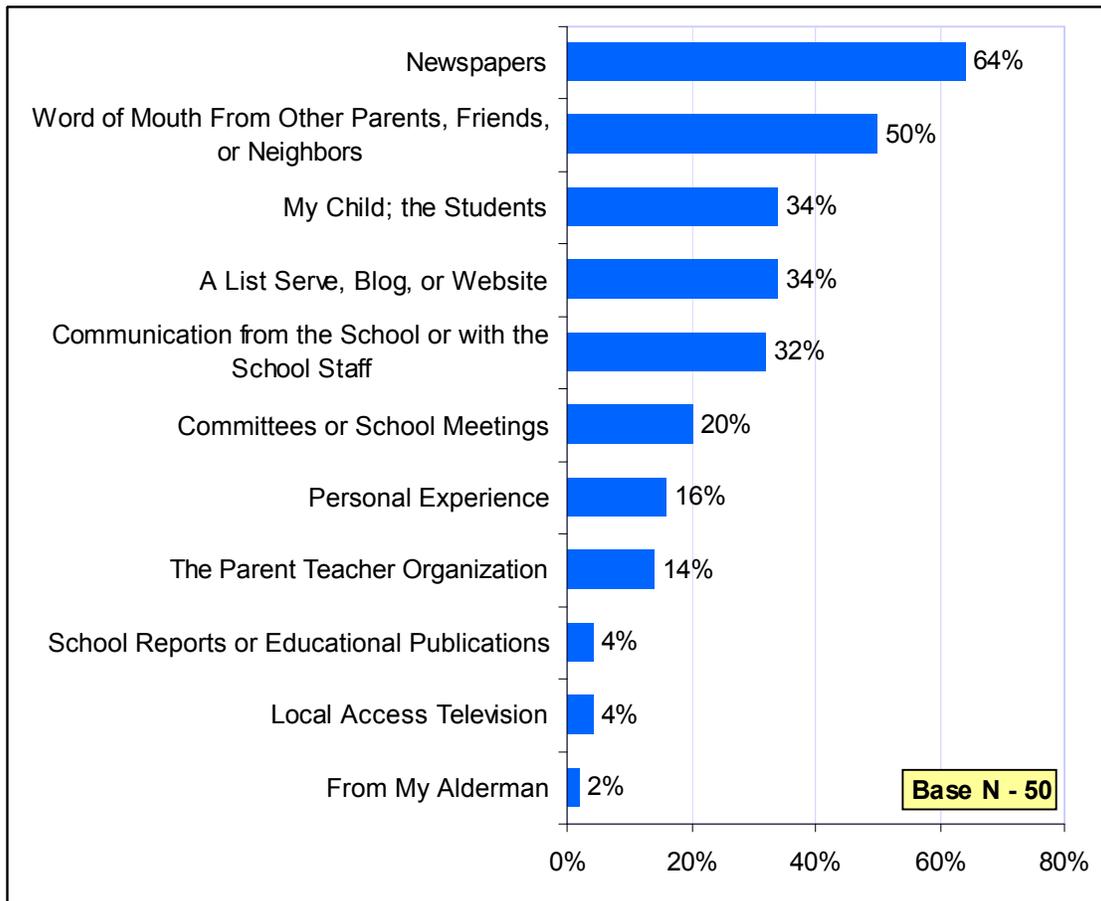
Sometimes, a broad category of responses can be broken down into more detailed answers. When this happens, a table labeled as "Close-up" follows the main chart. For example, in question 7, many respondents indicated that they would like to see improvements to curricula. A table follows that chart that lists the specific part of the curriculum respondents believe needs improvement.

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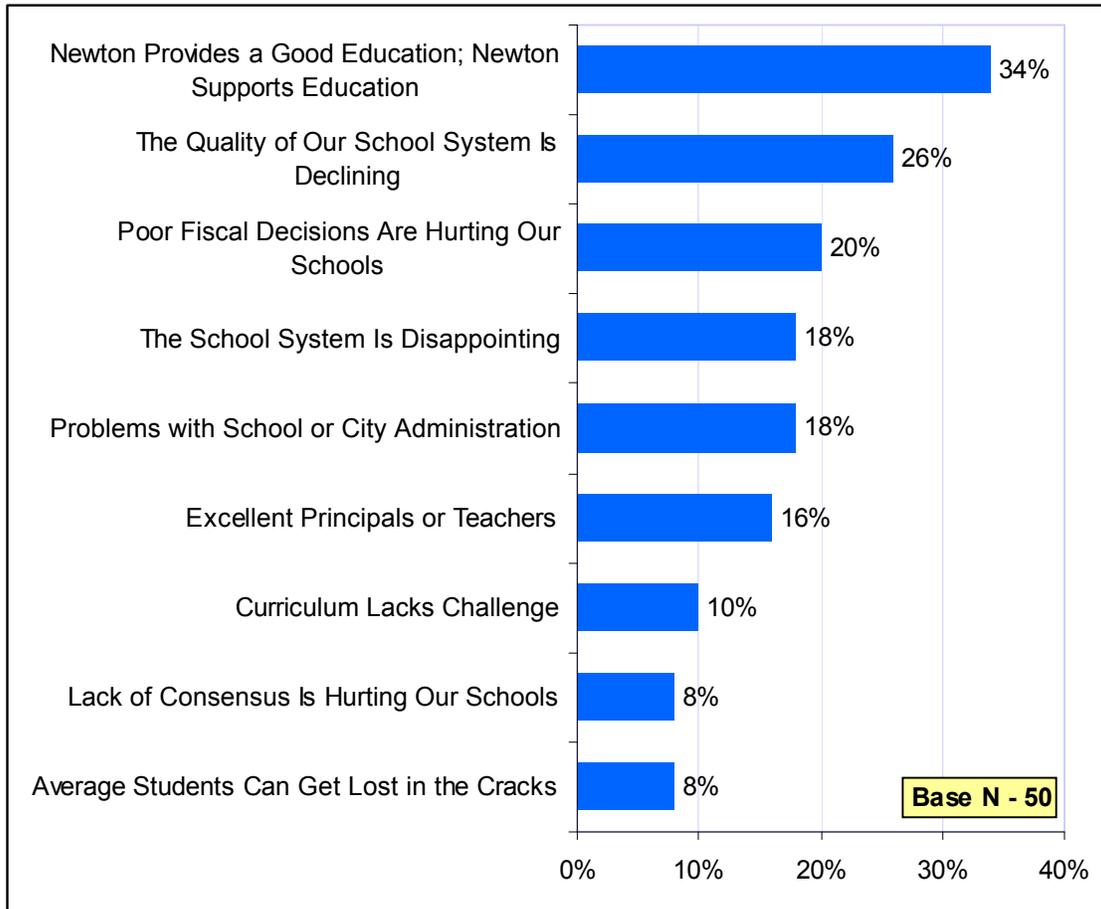
Q1: What are your main sources of information about Public School Education in Newton?



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Q2a: When you discuss Newton public education with others what do you tell them?



Close-Up: Problems with School or City Administration	
Problems with School Administration	10%
Unhappy with Superintendent	8%
Unhappy with Mayor	4%
School Committee Needs to Be Restructured	2%
Base N	50

Other Responses	
Schools Provide a Safe and Supportive Environment	6%
Project for the New High School Has Been Mismanaged	6%
Problems with School Facilities	6%
Services for Special Needs Students Are Lacking	6%

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Other Responses	
Schools Are Too Crowded; Class Sizes Have Gone Up	6%
Problems with Teachers or Teachers Union	4%
Good Teachers Should Be Rewarded and Poor Teachers Fired	2%
Lack of Support from Community at Large	2%
Base N	50

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Newton Provides a Good Education; Newton Supports Education

- *think the schools in Newton did a great job with my kids and I tell people that one of the reasons everybody wants to live here is the great public schools. One of my children did go to private school for 2 years of high school but there were other issues that drove that decision. I am personally proud of the school system here.*
- *that it's a good system, with good teachers, but there are some issues that could be resolved better.*
- *That we have a solid system with high expectations.*
- *schools provide good education, administrators do a very poor job taking responsibility for their actions.
teachers do great job*

The Quality of Our School System Is Declining

- *It's good, but getting worse.*
- *I tell them that (1) Newton's teachers are very good but are probably not far better than teachers in surrounding communities - even those that are less wealthy; (2) the greatest value of the school system is the student body - children who come to school well prepared from families that generally value education; (3) Newton deserves its reputation for providing a solid education for students with special needs; (4) the education provided in Newton for students of above average ability is mediocre; (5) the education here lacks rigor. In general, Newton's school system rests on its laurels.*
- *Newton schools are still riding on their reputation from the 1970s, the quality of what they provide is greatly reduced.*
- *Schools are living off of their reputation from 10 years ago plus. In the 60's and 70's Newton had probably the best public education in the country. How long can one live on their past laurels?*

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Poor Fiscal Decisions Are Hurting Our Schools

- *Special education costs are escalating too fast at the expense of regular education.*
- *the city is struggling to find ways of supporting the schools; we're in danger of undermining the quality of schools with our fiscal decisions; people in Newton are more politically divided than I have ever seen about whether the schools should be goal 1.*
- *That it's not as good as its reputation and is a system on the decline.*

That one can get more value purchasing a home in other communities.

That Newton North will be adversely affecting the quality of our schools for decades.

That our community, in general, no longer has the strong support for education that it was once so famous for. There's a growing number of people who figure that if they don't have kids in the schools, it's not an important issue. More and more people are wealthy enough to "opt out" and go to private schools or are here for location and convenience, not education.

- *some very good aspects, I feel like the students are safe and with many good teachers. Conversely, Aspects that of Newton education that negatively affect teaching are*
 - 1) *that many teachers are too much into teaching their own particular politics and often ignore or condescend to more traditional aspects of teaching. For instance, I was shocked to learn from my student who is a senior at NNHS that there was NO mention or tribute to those who died on 9/11.*
 - 2) *the idea that teachers "know best" extends to the tremendous hold the teachers unions extends over decision within the school*
 - 3) *spending without true value for expenses*
- *It's good but like most cities and towns there are budget issues.*
- *The system is living off it's past reputation. Jeff Young and Mayor Cohen are wasting money on ego-driven projects at the expense if real teaching. The curriculum is driven by educational "trends" not what is proven to actually work.*

The first item of busniess for the new Mayor should be to sack Young!

At some point property prices will drop because taxes are too high and the quality of education is not good value for money.

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The School System Is Disappointing

- *disappointed with the unchallenging elementary curriculum, the poor condition of the physical facilities, the inequities among different schools, the top-down nature of district control, and the mistrust among different stakeholders (different groups of parents, teachers, administrators, School Committee). Fortunately, middle school has been an improvement in terms of a stronger curriculum.*
- *elementary schools are good but overcrowded, middle school is unorganized, the teachers take weeks to get back to you despite your constant emails, not much homework at all, unhealthy food, lack of student-teacher connection and caring.*
- *We were so displeased with my son's second grade experience at Bowen that we pulled him out and placed him in a private school in November of that year. We were told by his award winning first grade teacher that if we wanted best for our son that we should send him to a private school. We decided not to take the chance with our daughter and have kept her in private schools.*

We very much struggle to pay our children's tuition. Last year we visited Newton South to see if it might be a place for our son. My wife and I had a meeting with the head of advisors. After telling us several times to vote for the override. He told us that those at either end of the spectrum were served well but that those in the middle could/would get lost. I could go on but I'll get a second job before I send either of my children to NPS.

Problems with School or City Administration

- *Newton as a whole supports education and understands the importance.*
 - *Teachers and school staff (principals) are great.*
 - *Mayor and his direct reports (unfortunately by inheritance) are not so great.*
- *Newton Public School administration has a very high opinion of itself. But that opinion is really not very justified. Newton spends way too much time congratulating itself for the achievement of its students and far too little time actually doing anything innovative or different.*

And when you suggest something new you get all the reasons why you can't do something - Newton has a "can't do" attitude.

- *That SpED is broken and needs to be completely redone. That Jeff Young needs to go, the school committee needs to be revamped, toxic teachers need to be fired despite tenure, and merit pay for good teachers should be given.*

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Excellent Principals or Teachers

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- *I tell them that (1) Newton's teachers are very good but are probably not far better than teachers in surrounding communities - even those that are less wealthy; (2) the greatest value of the school system is the student body - children who come to school well prepared from families that generally value education; (3) Newton deserves its reputation for providing a solid education for students with special needs; (4) the education provided in Newton for students of above average ability is mediocre; (5) the education here lacks rigor. In general, Newton's school system rests on its laurels.*

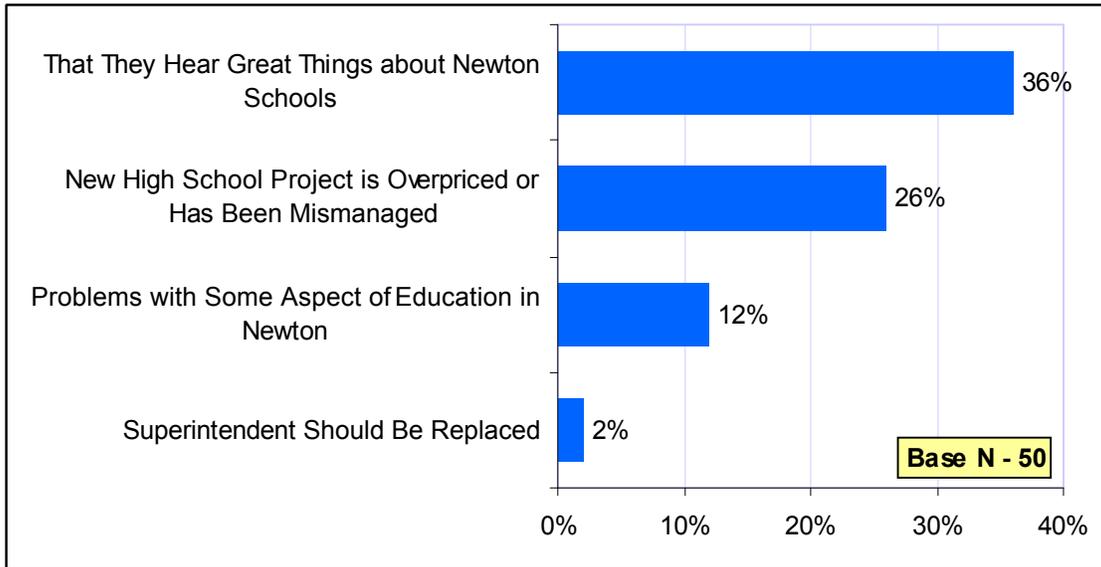
Curriculum Lacks Challenge

- *Depends on who they are & what the context is. A familiar theme, though, is that we moved here 5 years ago for the schools and were quite disappointed with the unchallenging elementary curriculum, the poor condition of the physical facilities, the inequities among different schools, the top-down nature of district control, and the mistrust among different stakeholders (different groups of parents, teachers, administrators, School Committee). Fortunately, middle school has been an improvement in terms of a stronger curriculum.*
- *elementary schools are good but overcrowded, middle school is unorganized, the teachers take weeks to get back to you despite your constant emails, not much homework at all, unhealthy food, lack of student-teacher connection and caring.*

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Q2b: When you discuss Newton public education with others what are they likely to tell you?



Note that of the 36% of respondents who reported that others tell them they hear great things about Newton schools, about one third indicated that these positive reports were untrue.

Close-Up: They Hear Great Things about Newton Schools	
They Hear It Is Great	24%
People Have Positive Misconceptions About Newton Schools	12%
Base N	50

Many respondents mentioned problems with Newton's schools, however there was little consensus regarding what these problems were, as the following table demonstrates.

Close-Up: Problems with Some Aspect of Education in Newton	
Overcrowded Classes	4%
Concerns About the Quality of Schools	2%
Poor Quality Food	2%
Not Enough Homework	2%
Kindergarten Programs Don't Cover Many Hours	2%
After school Programs Are Often Expensive, Full and Hard to Get Into	2%
Poor Quality Teachers	2%
Special Ed Is Broken	2%
Education Is Sacrificed for a Liberal Philosophy	2%
Base N	50

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They Hear Great Things about Newton Schools

- *that they heard it was good (newton's overall reputation), without knowing any details.*
- *that they'd love to have their kids in newton's schools.*
- *Newton has good schools.*

People Have Positive Misconceptions About Newton Schools

- *People that I work with that don't live in Newton think that our school system is so much better than theirs. When I tell them about cut programs and services they're so surprised.*
- *Oh, gee Newton has such a great reputation. But what's going on with that high school thing? You guys must be really rich to be able to afford to do that.*

They often ask if Newton has a gifted program, elementary world language program, magnet school, etc. They are shocked to learn we have none of that.

- *Frankly most folks that I know that live outside of Newton are "jealous" or "envious" of our location, schools, homes, etc. I put those words in quotations to suggest that while not totally accurate to describe the situation they do convey what I mean to say.*

New High School Project is Overpriced or Has Been Mismanaged:

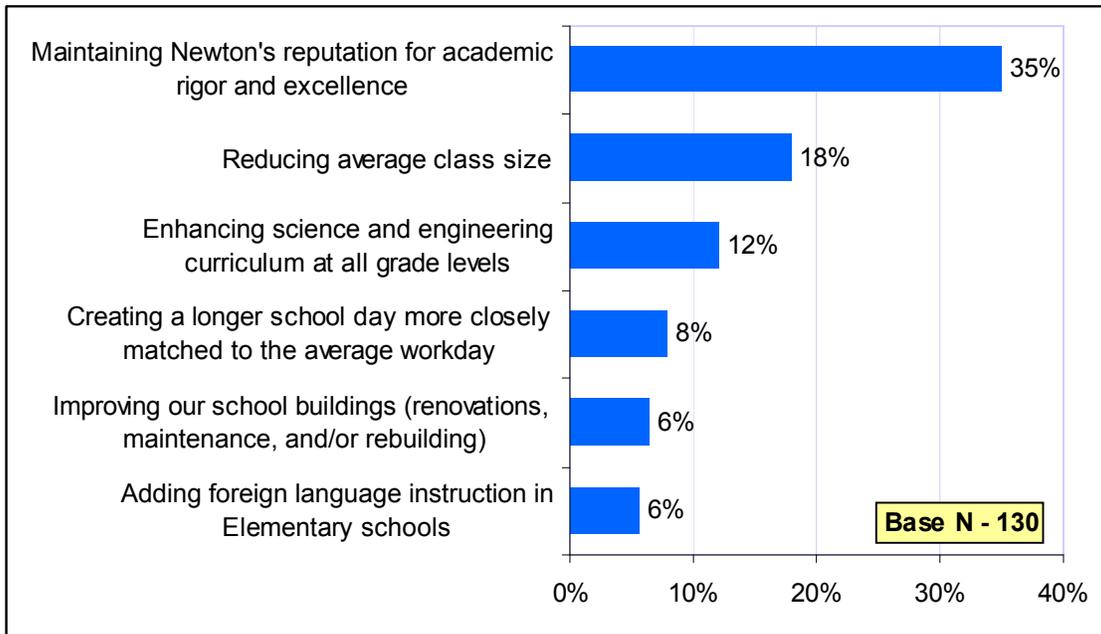
- *The New High School project is mismanaged.*
- *The new Newton North is ridiculous. Graham Gund did exactly what one should have expected.*
- *\$200million dollar Taj Mahal.*
- *How about that 200 million dollar school? I have been at the beach or skiing in Northern NH and the first thing everyone asks about is our "Taj Mahal"*
- *Our High school costs too much.*
- *got a good reputation, high school costs to much*
- *Oh, aren't you the folks building that \$200M high school?*

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Q6: Please tell us about why your "number #1" priority is ranked first:

Question 6 asked respondents why they ranked their highest priority for Newton Schools the way they did (question 5). The following chart summarizes the first place rankings from question 5.



Because of the high level of detail provided in responses to this question, we feel that the most useful way of looking at results in this scenario is to read through some of the responses provided by the different groups (that is, respondents broken down by their first place choice in question number 5). A selection of these responses is provided below.

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Academic Reputation Ranked First

- *Mandated education for special needs is taking a lot out of the budget. I don't begrudge this line item in the least. But the \$\$ is coming out of regular education and is not getting replaced. 20 years ago there were many innovative programs for gifted and talented kids. A lot more resources went to the "top" as opposed to aiming at the middle. If you aim too low for too long, expectations shrink. The reputation for excellence and academic rigor has deteriorated and it is a well-deserved and justified criticism of the NPS.*
- *Without academic rigor, education is little more than day care. We moved to Newton for the school system. We expect the school system to train our children to think.*
- *Rigor and reputation will last a heck of a lot longer than any of the other things you are talking about. You can achieve rigor and reputation in schools with no athletic facilities, with lousy buildings etc. as long as the students and teachers are dedicated to learning. We are spoiled by all the things we think we need to succeed. I assure you that in the new economy that will emerge from this current fiscal mess we will all have to do with a lot less.*
- *It's why we moved to Newton. It's important that our teachers continue to be motivated and engaged, with subject matter that engages and motivates the kids, giving them the challenge to do their best and excel--as they do now--nationally.*
- *Good schools must be the cornerstone of an affluent community, not just high property values. Look at Brookline...*
- *I hesitated about choosing this as my highest priority because I don't think it's accurate to talk about "maintaining" Newton's reputation for academic rigor & excellence--I think what's needed is to REGAIN rigor and excellence. I think expectations are too low, & too many parents are supplementing the public schools with private tutoring and outside enrichment programs.*
- *The reputation is a result of the success our students have had. Current students deserve the same opportunities.*
- *We need our schools to be academically challenging and successful first and foremost. School is for learning first and "growing" second.*
- *Sadly, schools here are only as good as it's academic record. In this competitive world that we live in, it is more important than ever that we prepare our children to compete not only in our own country but the ever growing powers in what use to be the third world countries.*
- *why else have schools if academic excellence not #1 priority - need to prepare kids for challenges ahead*

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"Reducing Average Class" Size Ranked First

- *I did not send my child to public school because I didn't want her to be 1 of 27 kids with 1 teacher in Kindergarten*
- *the kids do not get the attention they deserve w/ such huge class sizes, they need smaller class sizes so the teachers can get to know them and their needs better*
- *It is difficult to teach a large class and fully know and understand the student. Each student learns in a different way and should receive some amount of individual attention.*
- *One does not need a PhD to know that one teacher and 28 kids in elementary school is not optimal. Kids need more attention.*
- *I believe that ratio of adult to kids is extremely relevant in how much impact a teacher can have on his/her students' learning.*
- *Class size seems to be a growing problem and is the one that directly affects the students.*

"Science and Engineering Curriculum" Ranked First

- *This nation needs to compete.*
- *I think math in science programs don't get the time and money that reading does. I think these programs are weak and the elementary math program is horrible for most kids.*
- *Students do not get availability of honors type math programs till 9th grade. Talented middle school children in math are not pushed. Thus the Russian math school*
- *So we can compete with other countries like China and India.*
- *This survey needs to be tweaked - I couldn't read the options in the drop-down menu in the previous page.*

But I chose the science option because science is important!

- *We have exceptional children in our school system. They should be pushed to succeed and then lead in the future.*
- *The country must increase its investment in science and technology education at the high school level in order to provide the bright, trained minds necessary to keep the country competitive.*

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"Longer School Day" Ranked First

- *Makes economical, academic, and psychological sense.*
- *Whenever you ask teachers what their biggest problem is, they tell you there is far too much to fit into the school day. Massachusetts is providing grants for extending the school day of up to \$1,300 per student. Lastly, the data shows that lengthening the school day increases achievement. It is a measurable and proven result.*
- *as long as students have time to "decompress" and enjoy free time, there is no reason why they can't stay in school until 4 or 5. most go home and run around. might as well do that at school (eg longer recesses for younger students, study halls for high school) and have them learn something.*
- *There's no reason that school can't be longer, maybe that would alleviate the odd need to give 6-8 hours worth of homework. Homework should be used to teach responsibility not keep kids up until all hours of the night adding stress to the already stressful atmosphere in Newton. It also keeps kids busy.*
- *If you lengthen the day you give the kids a chance to learn in creative and alternative ways. Teachers who aren't rushed have more time for creative lesson plans. Giving kids more breaks for movement will help them learn better. More hands-on instructional time alleviates need for rote "homework," which is already controversial.*

Reducing class sizes allows teachers to better provide individuated instruction.

Foreign language helps with English language skills as well.

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"Improving our School Buildings" Ranked First

- *That is where Newton could save the most money by investing in preventive maintenance.*
- *The complete failure to fund school maintenance for the last thirty years or more has left us in dire straits. Schools such as Cabot are simply not fixable any longer, and asking teachers to cope in such decrepit surroundings is not a long-term option. The content of public education rests on the assumption that there are actual physical facilities adequate to housing students and teachers. Newton's are not--or soon won't be.*
- *overdue maintenance creates problems which interfere with learning, may solve problems of large classes, afterschool programs, and should be an ongoing budget concern*
- *Our school buildings are in decay. Mayor Cohen, the BOA and SC have allowed this to happen over the last decade.*
- *The building is abysmal, and the technology and laboratories are terrible. However as we are building a new high school this will solve those problems. Learning needs to take place in a good environment.*

"Foreign Language Instruction" Ranked First

- *Humans are programmed to learn language best at the earliest ages. It's stupid to start teaching languages just when their ability to learn is lower and is on a downward slide. Get'em early! Kids should start a foreign language in 1st grade in a fun program with games and songs.*
- *My daughter started kindergarten in Cambridge, and began learning Italian then. We came to Newton in 1st grade, and there was no language. All her friends in Cambridge are speaking conversationally in Italian now, in 5th grade, and so I see how much can be gained by starting early.*

My children have attended Hebrew school for 4 years now, so they are getting a language exposure, as well as a new alphabet. It helps them learn so much about linguistics, critical thinking skills, and about a different culture.

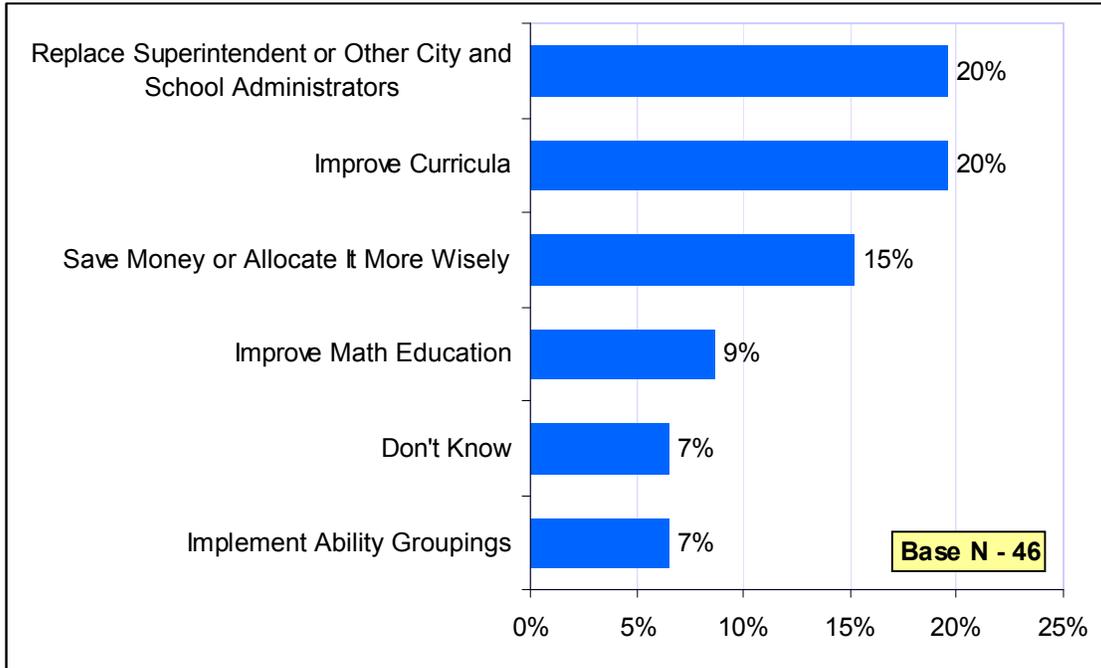
My daughter will also take Spanish or French next year in middle school, thus adding a 3rd language and cultural exposure. I think it should be required at the elementary level nationally!

- *i'm running out of time.. kids cannot compete in a global world without languages, and its much much easier to learn when you're younger.*

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Q7: If you could recommend something practical and realistic that would improve public education in Newton, what would you recommend?



Close-Up: Replace Superintendent or Other City and School Administrators

Replace Superintendent	13%
Replace Ineffective City or School Administrators	7%
Base N	46

Close-Up: Improve Curricula

Focus on the Core Subjects	4%
Accelerated Reading Program	2%
Line Up Curriculum to MCAS	2%
Implement the BRIM Initiative	2%
More Individualized Training Via Computers	2%
Redesign Science Curriculum	2%
Program for Gifted or Advanced Students	2%
Encourage Non-Academic Programs Such As Art	2%
Encourage Feedback on Curriculum	2%
Base N	46

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Close-Up: Save Money or Allocate It More Wisely	
Spend Schools' Money More Wisely	9%
Reduce Spending or Save Money	4%
Regular Tax Overrides to Try to Compensate for Expenses	2%
Base N	46

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Replace Superintendent or Other City and School Administrators

- *- new superintendent who has both vision and management skills*
- *- push a lot of management down to principles*
- *- seriously update our curriculum selection process (every 6 years, by committee, doesn't cut it)*
- *- take advantage of on-line, open-source courseware*
- *FIRE all of the overpaid people who surround the superintendent and replace them with people like Shelly Chamberlain who actually get things done.*
- *New Superintendent of Schools*
- *get an educator in charge instead of an administrator*

Save Money or Allocate It More Wisely

- *I'd like to see less money going towards the construction of Newton North and more money going to basic maintenance and repairs of existing elementary schools. I also think some redistricting, particularly around Bowen, is vital as the huge new apartment complexes on Route 9 are straining Bowen school capacity.*
- *I would hire an outside cost containment consultant to look at everything the schools do to find ways to save money without impacting the classroom experience. it could be as simple as switching off lights and computers, or buying used textbooks.*
- *better assignment of priorities, tighter control over spending, new superintendent*

Improve Math Education

- *Replace Everyday Math (elementary school) and Impact Math (middle school) with text books that ensure proficiency with math facts, standard algorithms, and algebraic skills.*

Implement more meaningful ability grouping in all academic subjects - especially math.

New math curricula would require teacher training but would not be a substantial cost over an extended time period. Ability grouping could save on resources because teachers can more efficiently teach a class with children who are at a similar level of understanding in a subject.

- *Replace "Everyday Math".*
Overhaul the budget and expenses to (hopefully) free up funding to allow investment in some new initiatives.
- *Full support for math literacy*