

**Educational Values and Interests**  
**Executive Summary**  
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With the support of the Superintendent of Schools, the School Committees, parents and staff, a study group was commissioned in the Spring of 2008 to examine some emerging perceptions regarding changes in expectations, and/or competing goals. The study group was created to identify the values and educational goals of the community and its implications for curricular changes and budget.

Tying in the views from the Summer 2009 Leadership Institute, the study group built on those initiatives and had several thought provoking discussions about values, common ground, differences, and disagreements with respect to another's perspective, etc. Race and ethnicity were important factors to discuss and catapulted discussions with many of the readings, including, "The New White Flight". (Hwang, Suein. "The New White Flight." The Wall Street Journal 19 Nov 2005 A1.)

Surveys in the community and schools were done. We recognized that most of us who participated on this task force were not statisticians, but educators. Our emphasis was on dialogue and trying to reach consensus by respecting differences and finding common ground.

Hypotheses were examined as they emerged from the data. Did people in our community have a different cultural experience and different value system? Were those factors impacted by being educated outside of the United States? Or were those factors primarily due to professional career choice and therefore, like most parents, they wanted and expected to have their children follow a similar standard of high expectations?

The majority of parents agree that standardized testing is important with greater variation in responses that international comparisons are important. 47% of parent/guardian respondents believe that standards at Acton and Acton-Boxborough are getting too high. Over 60% of respondents were concerned about their child being competitive in being admitted to a top tier college. Yet, 70% of our parents/guardians were concerned about the mental health of our students. 95% of parents want to be sure that our students emerge as critical thinkers. Athletics, performing and fine arts and extracurricular programs play a role in shaping the student's overall potential, a result from almost 80% of parents.

For the purposes of this first public presentation, study group members chose some data points that are cause for thought and disaggregated the data from this perspective: type of educational system experienced, race and ethnicity, and length of residency in Acton or Boxborough. Many discussions have been held about the data. It appears that if parents received their training outside the US and were not residents of the Town for an extended period of time, their levels of expectations were different from those who had been trained in the US or were residents for a longer period of time in Acton. This area is rich for discussion.

Faculty input and its comparison to parent and guardian input are presently being studied and will yield complementary yet vital discussions around expectations, high standards, extra curricular, and homework assignments.

From the results of our surveys and interactive processes, there is a lot of useful information. To some, it may be frustrating not to have "answers", or "solutions". The study group needs time and patience to grapple with additional data points and hopes for school committee representation in the study group going forward.

Naming the challenges that emerge from this report are important. These include:

- Navigating change
- The natural tendency to stereotype
- Varied perspectives
- Moving beyond stereotypes to enhance conversation

The primary question for all interested parties to grapple with is how do we move beyond these challenges and make them pragmatic for the schools? We respond by prioritizing our objectives and breaking down barriers through continued conversation, developing a common vocabulary for future discussions, identifying data points for further study, considering student input through the survey process, and preparing for a longitudinal study of the data. Study group members believe that the opportunity to talk in constructive ways about educational values and interests – in the context of race and ethnicity - is a gift. Regardless of the survey, people often talk about this topic behind closed doors. The study group highlights the importance of providing structured opportunities to talk about multiple perspectives and promoting understanding by sharing commonalities in open forums.

We would be remiss if we did not make mention of the numerous comments stating strong satisfaction with our schools. Even where suggestions for improvement were offered, comments shared spoke to the expansion of programs and services for students (going from “great” to “even better than great”) rather than eliminating current practices. Because of this recognition, it is acknowledged that there is no sense of urgency at this time.

In conclusion, this dialogue is the beginning of a multi-dimensional, multi-year project of increasing awareness and facilitating dialogue on the following:

- What are the opportunities and challenges that are emerging with our community’s demographic shifts?
- What are the effects of the values and interests expressed by respondents on how we examine the practices in our schools?
- How do we engage and facilitate in constructive dialogue for deeper understanding of varying perspectives?

As we move forward with benchmarks every six months, we anticipate sharing summaries of our discussion themes, how they connect with the data, how our themes and data influence change and consensus, what recommendations emerge from them, and how our vision is enhanced with diligence towards our fiduciary responsibilities.

Thank you.

