

Portsmouth Listens Middle School Study Circles

Summary Report

June 14, 2007

In April of this year, it became apparent to School Board and City Council members that Study Circles could help resolve an increasingly polarized question Portsmouth faced: where to build a new middle school.

A steering committee comprised of representatives of Portsmouth Listens, the school board, the council and school staff organized Portsmouth Middle School Study Circles to run through four weeks in May. They framed the question for citizen input as:

What criteria should be incorporated into our city's plans to improve the educational facilities for our 6th, 7th and 8th graders?

Attached are reports from the 16 study circles which convened in May. These citizens have worked a cumulative 1,200 or more hours to answer the questions. 107 adults and 20 high school students participated in 16 circles. Recruiting was our broadest ever: every household in Portsmouth and Newington. From an initial 171 responses, 107 made it through the entire process. Most of the attrition occurred prior to the start, due to subsequent schedule conflicts, health, travel or an inability to participate in the crucial first meeting. Demographically, participants were representative of the city with notable exceptions:

- With a median income of \$106,175, participants were wealthier than average.
- With a median years of education of 16.8 (53% with graduate degrees), better educated.
- Parents of schoolchildren were overrepresented. 40.2% of participants had children in the Portsmouth schools. In the 2000 Census, only 17% of city households had children in the schools. Recruiting through school email lists, layered on top of the mail piece, insured we “double recruited” the school parents, who were the key community of interest for the question.

The study circles engaged in wide and deep dialogue. First they brainstormed criteria. Central topics that emerged were the educational narrative/educational quality, environmental impact and stewardship, schools' connection to the town, safety, the city Master Plan as a guide for this decision, sustainability and cost. The groups then prioritized their criteria by dot voting and applied them to the two sites.

The groups all did substantial research. Of the 107 participants, 84% used the online archive of city documents relating to the new middle school *twice or more*; 50% went back *four times or more*. We are grateful to all the city officials and staff who made

this resource possible; it was well used. In addition, 92% of participants did at least two independent searches for relevant information, and participants spent at least 165 hours of time studying and researching outside of the discussion process – a big commitment of citizen time and work! (See complete survey data of participants which is attached.)

Here are the criteria that emerged as most important in the reports that follow:

Criteria	Named by groups...
Environmental impact	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, N, High School 1, High School 2
Community connection	A, B, D, E, F, G, H, L, N
Educational narrative	B, C, D, G, H, I, J, K, L
Cost	A, C, F, G, J, K, M
Safety/health	HS1, J, K, H, N
Master Plan	D, F, I, K (mentioned by many more in reports)
Easy access	A, HS1, C, G
Quality design	B, HS1, HS2
Sustainability	B, E, I
Grade configuration	E, I
Avoid sprawl	L, M
Walkability	F
Reuse of city buildings	H
Flexibility for future	C

When applied to the two sites, 13 of 16 study circles felt renovation of the Parrott Avenue property was the best match with their criteria. Two groups did not achieve full consensus, but the majority in each favored Parrott Avenue. A student group felt Sagamore Creek met their criteria best.

Data from our evaluation form also shows this was a true deliberation, not a balloting. Thirty-four participants (32%) said they changed their mind during the process. Thus, the final reports are the result of dialogue and discussion. Another 75.5% said they came to understand the other person's point of view better than at the start and 56% felt they came to understand their own point of view better.

We urge all elected officials to read all the reports. They state more eloquently and powerfully than we can how these citizens feel about the issue.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to our facilitators, whose names are on the next page. We also thank the city for having the open-mindedness to give citizens a deliberative role in such a major decision.

Portsmouth Listens