

**2007-08 Parent Survey Report
Needham Public Schools
March 16, 2008**

Introduction

Last December, the Needham Public Schools conducted the fourth systemwide survey of its parent community. The purpose of the survey is to help school personnel better understand what is important to the parent community, to gather information about their opinions on certain issues, and to determine their level of satisfaction with the various aspects of the school system. The questionnaire was first developed and administered in 2001, and this administration is part of a plan to survey the parent community biennially. Since the first administration, a few changes were made to improve the clarity of a few questions, but an effort was made to keep the instrument as similar to the last one as possible in order to track trends reliably over time. With each administration, additional questions are asked about areas that are of particular interest at that time. In this questionnaire, a number of questions were asked about technology to help inform the development of a new technology plan for the district.

For the first time, the survey was conducted electronically. Parents received notices about the survey through electronic messages from the superintendent and the principals. Additional notices and reminders were included in school newsletters and bulletins. Parents were asked to complete only one questionnaire for each level (elementary, middle, or high school) at which they had a child or children. The questionnaire included a cover letter with an explanation and instructions.

Following each of the last surveys, school personnel spent considerable time analyzing the data, identifying areas of dissatisfaction, setting goals, and implementing response plans. Because this type of questionnaire is not constructed in a manner that readily identifies the reasons for dissatisfaction, it is often necessary to follow up on the survey results in order to gather more specific information. After the 2005 survey, mathematics was the area selected for further exploration. As a result, mathematics was chosen as the first subject area for assessment in the new curriculum review process.

Response Demographics

The response rate for the 2007 survey was 20.9% which is somewhat less than the 2005 survey (23.9%) and slightly more than 2003 (20.4%). The breakdown by schools is as follows:

School	# of Families	Survey Count	Percentage
Broadmeadow	390	65	16.7%
Eliot	298	51	17.1%
Hillside	278	51	18.3%
Mitchell	317	51	16.1%
Newman	554	68	12.3%
Pollard Middle School	978	216	22.1%
Needham High School	1168	332	28.4%
Total	3983	834	20.9%

Three cautions need to be made about the data:

- The return rate of 20.9% is good when compared to most surveys; however, the rate is not high enough to ensure that the results reflect the opinions of the general population. This is particularly true for the elementary level where the return rates were less than 20%.

- Surveys do not always produce reliable data. Studies have shown that respondents tend to be somewhat more interested, involved, and have stronger feelings than non-respondents. On the other hand, in most instances these results are very similar to the data gathered during the past three surveys; and consistency of results over time is considered a strong indicator of reliability.
- In many instances the percentages of respondents are not reflective of the general population (see the chart below). For this reason, the opinions of certain populations may be over- or underrepresented. For example, the percentage of respondents from the High School (40.3%) is much higher than its portion of the population (27.3%). Also, the parents of our children of color are underrepresented; whereas, special education parents are slightly overrepresented. These changes in demographics make interpretation of trend data particularly questionable. In past surveys, the High School typically represented about 20% of the respondents; this year this number has doubled to 40%. For this reason, the opinions of High School parents have twice the weight on overall trend rate numbers when compared to previous years.

Demographic Comparison – Respondents and Population

Student Demographics		% of Respondents	Actual % of Entire Student Population
Level	PreK-2	12.2	26.4
	3-5	21.3	24.9
	Middle School	26.2	21.3
	High School	40.3	27.3
Gender	Male	54.0	52.1
	Female	46.0	47.9
Race	White	90.2	86.2
	Black	0.5	3.2
	Hispanic	1.3	2.5
	Asian	5.0	7.4
	Other	3.0	0.1
Special Education	Special Education	13.2	12.4
	Regular Education	86.8	87.6
METCO	METCO	1.0	2.9
	Non-METCO	99.0	97.1

Results

In answering questions, respondents were given the option of picking “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree.” Because people have different measures for the strength of their opinions, the “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” have been combined, as have “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree.” Parents could also indicate that a question was not applicable to them or that they did not know about the area of questioning. For the purposes of this report, changes of five or more percentage points will be considered significant when analyzing trend or comparison data.

The survey covers a number of areas, and for ease of analysis responses have been grouped into categories for this report. They were not necessarily grouped in this manner on the questionnaire itself.

Academic Subjects

The questionnaires asked parents to indicate their levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with all of the major subject areas. The systemwide satisfaction average for all subjects was 83.4%. This represents a slight decrease from previous years:

2007	83.4%
2005	87.2%
2003	87.7%
2001	85.7%

The chart below indicates the percentages of parents who were satisfied in each of the major subject areas. For purposes of comparison, the 2001, 2003, and 2005 results are also included.

Percentage (%) of Satisfied Parents by Subject Area

Subject	2001	2003	2005	2007
English	92.6	93.5	89.7	86.6
Mathematics	81.4	82.8	76.8	74.1
Science	91.1	92.9	90.0	85.7
Social Studies	91.9	93.9	92.9	91.8
Foreign Language	71.1	73.0	79.4	77.4
Art	91.1	94.4	92.1	88.1
Music	88.7	89.9	91.0	82.2
Technology	74.5	80.2	86.8	84.7
Physical Education	89.1	90.8	86.3	80.5
Average	85.7	87.7	87.2	83.4

While there was a decrease in the satisfaction rate for all subjects, the decline is only considered significant in Music and Physical Education. There does seem to be a slight general trend downward from earlier results. It will be important to attempt to understand the reasons for this trend.

Support Services / Ancillary Programs

Parents also were asked to indicate their satisfaction with support programs. Again, the chart below compares services for the past three surveys.

Percentage (%) of Satisfied Parents by Service Area

Service Area	2001	2003	2005	2007
Guidance	78.0	79.3	81.4	71.2
Library/Media	85.1	89.1	90.7	92.6
Transportation	75.6	79.8	80.2	76.0
Lunch	79.9	80.5	82.1	78.6
Nursing	96.1	96.6	96.4	96.7
Athletics ¹	76.2	72.2	72.3	65.0
School Administration	93.2	93.4	92.4	89.5
Maintenance/Cleanliness	84.8	79.2	82.7	90.2
Average	83.9	85.4	86.0	83.0

¹High School only

Overall, parents indicate a high level of satisfaction with the service areas. Most of the service ratings are similar to previous years; however, a few did have significant changes. Guidance declined by more than 10 percentage points. This decline is primarily associated with the Middle School where there was a decline from 83.6% in 2005 to 72.5% in 2007 and with the High School where the rate dropped from 71.2% in 2005 to 62.2% in 2007. There was also a decline in Athletics by over 7 points. There was a significant improvement in maintenance and cleanliness. The improvement was driven by an increase at the High School level from 42.5% satisfaction in 2005 to 93.3% in 2007. Since 2005, the High School has opened new facilities and switched to a private cleaning service.

Educational Issues

Parents were asked about a number of issues which went beyond particular academic departments or service areas.

Academic Satisfaction

The chart below indicates the percentage of parents who were satisfied with certain areas related to our schools' academic programs. The satisfaction levels for the previous surveys are also given for comparison purposes.

Percentage (%) of Parents Satisfied

	Elementary				Middle School				High School			
	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007
High Academic Standards	90.7	95.1	90.1	88.6	89.0	94.0	89.9	89.4	95.2	96.3	95.4	93.3
Curriculum	89.5	92.5	88.4	82.9	85.1	87.6	85.0	78.0	90.6	90.4	85.9	83.2
Class Size	82.4	83.8	76.6	77.9	29.0	77.0	74.8	75.7	65.9	74.7	80.7	82.6
Academic Recognition	73.0	84.9	81.5	71.2	79.0	81.2	88.3	67.1	90.7	89.7	89.6	73.2

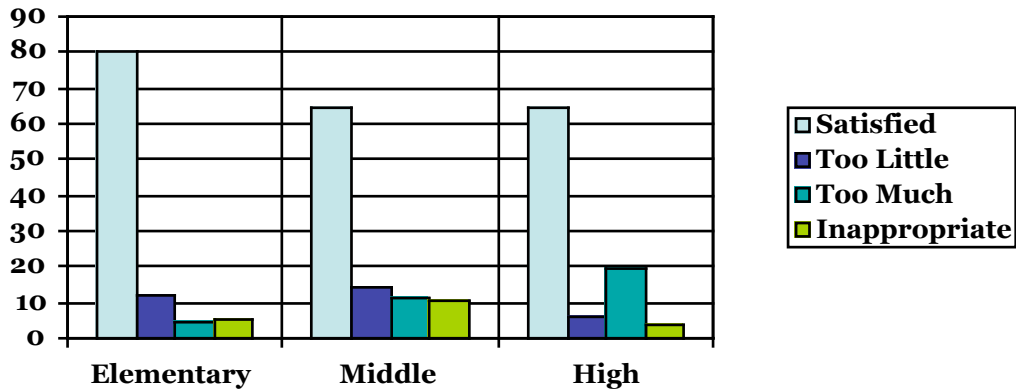
In general, parents rated all four of the areas very highly, but there is some variability among the areas as well as among the levels. Parents gave High Academic Standards the highest ratings with about 9 in 10 parents indicating satisfaction across the system. Although the ratings were slightly lower this year, the difference is not considered significant, except at the Elementary level where there has been a 6.5 percentage point decrease since 2003. The Curriculum ratings declined significantly at all levels, and this area should be explored more in depth in an attempt to gain a better understanding for the reasons behind this decline. Class Size scores do not reach the high ratings of some of the earlier surveys, but there was improvement over last year at all three levels. There were very significant declines in Academic Recognition scores at all levels.

Parents were asked a series of questions about homework.

Systemwide, seven in ten parents (69.9%) reported that they believed that their children were receiving an age-appropriate amount of homework. This percentage had been somewhat consistent during the previous three administrations of the survey (81.8% in 2001, 83.3% in 2003, and 82.5% in 2005.)

The percentage of dissatisfied parents varied significantly by level: 20.0% at the elementary level, 35.4% of middle school parents, and 35.2% of high school respondents. It is interesting to see why the dissatisfied parents were dissatisfied. They were given three options, and the results are as follows. (Note: The numbers add up to more than 100% because some parents chose more than one option.)

Homework Responses (% of Parents)

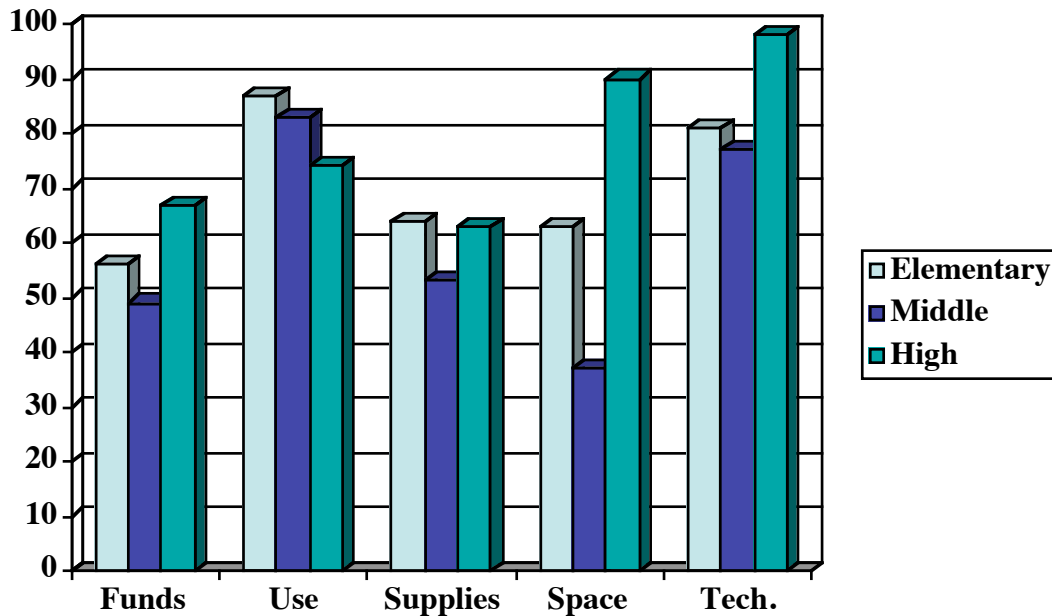


While most parents appear to be satisfied with their child’s homework, the reasons for dissatisfaction seems to vary by level: Dissatisfied elementary parents want more homework for their child, while parents of high school students are more likely to feel that their children have too much homework. Middle school parents were split on the issue.

Resources

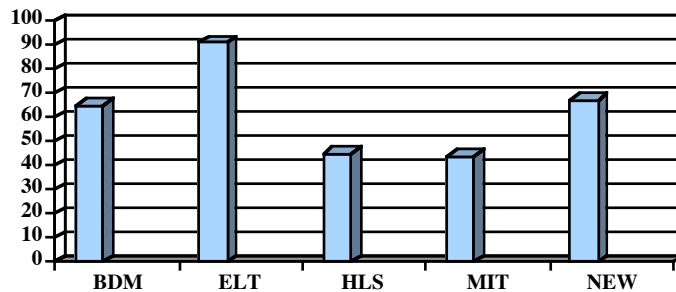
Several questions were asked about school resources. The chart below indicates the percentage of people with positive responses to each of five issues (adequacy of funding, efficient use of funding, provision of required supplies, adequate space, and adequate technological resources):

Percentage (%) of Parents Satisfied with School Resources



As in previous surveys, the percentage of satisfied parents were fewer in the funding area than in any other section of the questionnaire. For the entire school system, only 58.2% of the respondents said that they were satisfied with school funding. A relatively high percentage believes that the schools use their funds efficiently, and very high percentages of parents think that the schools have the technological resources that they need. About 6 of 10 parents said that the schools provide their children with the necessary school supplies. The satisfaction rates regarding space vary widely. With a new high school, a very high percentage (89.9) of parents were happy with the space provided for their children. At the Middle School, this number falls to 37.4%. While the elementary average is 63.1%, there is great variability among the schools. (See the chart below).

% of Parents Satisfied the Space at their School



At Eliot, 90.7% of the parents indicate satisfaction, while the number is 44.4% at Mitchell and 45.2% at Hillside.

Safety, Discipline, and Citizenship

There were several questions relating to safety in our schools.

% Indicating Satisfaction

Statement	Elementary				Middle				High			
	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007
The school maintains high standards for student behavior.	96.6	96.3	94.6	91.1	88.8	93.5	92.7	88.8	91.3	86.6	83.4	86.9
There are places in the school where my child feels unsafe.	8.8	4.6	4.7	10.3	14.3	12.0	9.7	17.3	12.8	14.9	23.7	13.6
Student discipline issues are handled fairly.	92.1	94.2	92.7	89.6	83.0	87.5	92.9	85.2	85.8	88.3	84.5	77.5
Students are encouraged to be responsible citizens.	97.8	99.6	98.6	95.7	96.1	95.8	96.8	91.2	96.4	95.7	94.2	93.3

Approximately 9 in 10 parents believe that their child’s school sets high standards for student behavior. These numbers, while slightly lower, have remained very high for all 4 administrations of the survey. Similarly, parents reported that their children are encouraged to be responsible citizens with an overall 93.7% satisfaction rate. The

rise in parents' concerns about safety at the elementary and middle schools is noteworthy. While there has been a significant improvement with this issue at the High School, the numbers have almost doubled at the other two levels. Parent comments indicate that one reason for the rise is concern over internet safety and cyber bullying.

Parents have a high level of satisfaction with discipline at the elementary level, and this number has remained somewhat stable over time. At the Middle School, the percentage of satisfied parents declined this year after a significant improvement in the last survey. The number also declined at the High School.

Communication

A number of questions had to do with communication and relationships between the home and school.

% Indicating Satisfaction

Statement	Elementary				Middle				High			
	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007
School personnel are respectful, receptive, and responsive to input from parents.	93.9	95.2	95.4	90.4	88.4	92.3	89.4	82.4	88.5	94.1	82.0	80.8
School personnel are respectful, receptive, and responsive to input from students.	95.2	94.1	94.9	92.1	86.3	87.9	87.2	76.7	87.2	87.3	77.1	77.3
Teachers help me understand the strengths and needs of my child.	94.7	94.9	93.8	91.5	63.5	68.8	56.7	57.2	55.9	52.2	41.9	37.6
I am involved in decision-making about the education of my child.	72.9	78.2	76.8	72.4	60.3	67.9	68.2	52.3	76.7	80.0	74.2	73.2
I am provided opportunities to volunteer at my child's school.	96.0	96.6	96.2	95.4	84.2	80.1	66.5	73.8	75.8	78.8	66.5	64.3
I feel welcome at my child's school.	96.9	96.6	96.4	92.0	87.5	83.3	87.0	73.0	90.7	87.0	86.9	81.6
My child's school effectively communicates information to me.	91.3	93.3	93.0	90.4	75.6	80.8	78.2	86.1	71.8	78.6	81.1	84.8
My child's school website provides me with useful information.	-	-	-	86.4	-	-	-	92.3	-	-	-	96.2

At the elementary level, parents tended to rate all areas of communications and relationships very highly, with over 9 in 10 parents indicating satisfaction. The one area somewhat lower than the others has to do with involvement in decision-making where 72.4% reported that they felt adequately involved.

The Middle School ratings are somewhat lower than the elementary level; however, some areas of the middle school improved (volunteer opportunities and effective communication) while others declined (openness to input from parents, openness to input from students, involvement in decision making, and feeling welcome at the school).

At the High School, most of the areas remained similar to the previous survey. The only area of significant change had to do with feeling welcome at the school where the rating declined from 86.9% to 81.6%. The rating of 37.6% for "Teachers help me understand the strengths and needs of my child." was the lowest single question on the entire survey.

After-School/Co-curricular Activities

Responses from High school parents indicated that 65.0% were satisfied with the athletic program, a number that declined somewhat after being stable in the past three surveys (76.2% in 2001, 72.2% in 2003, and 72.3% in 2005). The survey also asked parents at all levels about other extended day opportunities for their children.

% Indicating Satisfaction

Statement	Elementary				Middle School				High School			
	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007	2001	2003	2005	2007
Teachers are available beyond the school day.	83.2	85.7	81.2	79.7	95.8	96.3	96.8	94.4	93.2	95.7	91.5	87.5
My child is provided with ample after school opportunities.	54.9	66.0	59.8	61.0	58.1	80.8	70.9	67.7	86.6	85.1	79.2	77.4
After school programs meet the needs of my child.	58.9	74.2	61.5	70.2	57.7	79.4	72.6	67.6	79.1	77.8	71.9	72.8

Although there is a slight decline in the parents who are satisfied with teacher availability after school, this change is not considered significant except at the High School where there has been a drop of over 8 percentage points since 2003. About 6 in 10 parents at the elementary level say that their children have ample after-school opportunities, and 7 in 10 indicate that the programs meet the needs of their children. Two-thirds of middle school parents believe that there are ample programs and that they meet the needs of their children. A greater percentage of high school parents seem satisfied with the amount (77.4%) of opportunities as well as with their meeting the needs of their children (72.8%).

District Initiatives

A number of questions related to district level initiatives follows:

Percentage (%) of Parents Giving a Positive Response

Question	2005	2007
Are you aware of the district goals?	60.2%	78.8%
Are you aware of progress being made to achieve these goals?	49.9%	68.5%
Did you look at the 2003 Performance Report?	94.9%	95.4%
Did you find the Performance Report informative?	93.8%	89.0%
Are you satisfied with systemwide administrative services?	91.5%	90.1%
Do handbooks clearly convey school policies?	97.0%	96.3%

New district goals were developed this year, and many more parents seem aware of the goals as well as of the progress being made to achieve them. A very high majority of people continue to look at the annual performance report and to find the information useful. Parents remain satisfied with systemwide administrative services as well as with school handbooks.

Opinion of Subgroups

In addition to looking at results by level, the answers of two particular groups - parents of Black and Hispanic students and special education students - were analyzed. It is important to make sure that the feelings of smaller subgroups do not get lost in the overall averages. One must be very circumspect in interpreting the data associated with both groups of parents because of the limited number of returns. Only 15 parents or 4.8% of the Black and Hispanic families returned their questionnaires, as compared to 20.9% for the general population. The 96 responses from parents of special education students represent 14.1% of their population.

The satisfaction rates for both of these subgroups were very similar in most areas to the overall results. Similar to the previous survey responses, there were no significant differences with regard to the specific departments or the support services. Some of the other questions did generate some differences.

% Indicating Agreement

Statement	System	SPED	Black/Hispanic
The school has high academic standards.	90.7	90.3	93.3
The school maintains high standards for student behavior.	88.8	89.1	86.7
Student discipline issues are handled fairly.	84.1	82.9	93.3
My child's school seems adequately funded.	58.2	77.5	80.0
Teachers help me understand the strengths and needs of my child.	61.5	79.0	86.7
I am involved in decision making about the education of my child.	67.9	80.6	80.0
There are places where my child feels unsafe.	13.8	22.7	26.7
The school fosters an appreciation of student diversity.	88.4	84.1	53.3
Instructional materials are representative of diverse cultures.	86.9	76.6	46.7

Parents of special education and Black and Hispanic students were very similar to the general population in believing that their schools had high standards for academics as well as behavior. About 9 in 10 of the respondents in each of these areas indicated satisfaction. Although all groups believe that there are high standards for behavior, the parents of Black and Hispanic as well as special education students are somewhat less likely to believe disciplinary issues are handled fairly. The parents of both these groups are also much more likely to be satisfied with the funding for their schools than the general population.

Both minority and special education parents are more likely to believe that teachers are helpful to them in understanding the needs of their children. They also feel more involved in decision-making. More parents in both populations report that their children are more likely to feel unsafe in school, and they are less satisfied with the school's approaches towards multiculturalism. This dissatisfaction is particularly significant with Black and Hispanic parents where about half of parents indicated disapproval of system efforts.

Technology

In addition to issues of satisfaction, each of the parent surveys has been used to gather information about a particular issue. For the second time, this survey asked questions about technology. The system is currently conducting a curriculum review in the area of technology in order to develop a new five-year plan. The information gathered included the following:

Do you have a home computer?	Yes - 99.6%	No – 0.4%	
Which computer platform do you have at home?	Macintosh – 10.5%	Windows – 71.9%	Both – 17.6%
Does your child have access to a computer at home for schoolwork?	Yes – 98.2%	No – 1.8%	
Is your computer connected to the Internet?	Yes – 99.3%	No – 0.4%	
Which type of Internet connection do you have?	Dial-up – 0.7%	High-Speed/DSL Broadband – 99.3%	
For parents of children in grades 7, 8, or 9, would you be interested in your child having access to a laptop to use for school-related projects both in school and at home?	Yes – 76.2%	No – 23.8%	
For parents of children in grades 7, 8, or 9, would you be interested in participating in a program that would enable you to purchase a laptop at a reduced rate over a period of 3 to 4 years?	Yes – 68.0%	No – 32.0%	
I regularly access PowerSchool to check my child’s school progress.	Yes – 59.9%	No – 29.1%	N.A. – 11.0%
It is convenient for me to electronically update demographic information about my child.	Yes – 70.8	No – 6.8%	N.A. – 22.4%
My children have sufficient time on the computer at home to complete homework assignments.	Yes – 82.7%	No – 5.7%	N.A. – 11.6%
I have regular conversations with my child about internet safety.	Yes – 80.1%	No – 13.2%	N.A. – 6.7%
I would pay school-related fees online if that option were available.	Yes – 75.3%	No – 16.0%	N.A. – 8.7%

Summary and Conclusion

Overall, the parental satisfaction ratings continue to be very positive. As with past surveys, the highest ratings are given for the academic areas, with approximately 7 out of 8 parents indicating approval. Similarly, school support services received high satisfaction rates. While there was some variability depending upon the area, 84% of parents were satisfied with the services. A significant majority of parents also believed that the schools have high academic (90.7%) as well as behavior (88.8%) standards.

The School System has recently gone through a process of establishing new goals and objectives. It is obvious from the parents’ response that they were much more aware of system goals this year than in past years. Almost 8 in 10 parents said that they were aware of the goals as compared to 6 in 10 in 2005. In addition, 69% said that they were aware of progress towards meeting the goals, as compared to 50% in 2005.

While most of the results are very positive, the survey results raise a number of questions and concerns for further study or consideration:

- 1) There was a general decline with satisfaction in the subject areas. Most of the declines are not considered statistically significant; however, the downward trend is still concerning. While in depth data is generated during the various curriculum review processes, it may be useful to gather more information about parent opinions before the reviews since a number of them will be several years off. Subject specific questionnaires or focus groups might help us understand why these satisfaction levels seem to be trending downward.

- 2) Homework is an issue of much debate, in Needham and nationally. This year more parents indicated dissatisfaction than in previous survey administrations (30.1% as compared to 17.5% in 2005). The reasons for dissatisfaction seem to vary from level to level; however, the topic is obviously one that should be further studied and analyzed by the schools.
- 3) Extended day services and athletics declined in satisfaction this year. Again, reasons for this decline are unclear but warrant further study. There is no way to tell from this survey whether the dissatisfaction has to do with the quality of services, their paucity, or even whether parents are talking about school services or private services.
- 4) Safety, particularly internet safety, seems to be a rising concern for parents. This is an issue that will require the partnership of schools and parents to educate students about the internet, to take advantages of resources to protect them from potential dangers, and to monitor their activities.
- 5) Most parents are happy with the general communication from their schools; however, they tend to be less satisfied with the quality of information about their particular child. One of the new systemwide objectives has to do with improving reporting to parents and students about academic and social progress. It will be interesting to see if new reporting systems improve the satisfaction of parents in this area. The schools should also consider other ways of communicating with parents as well as of involving them in decision-making.
- 6) The dissatisfaction among Special Education and Black and Hispanic parents about safety and attention to diversity is an ongoing concern. Efforts to address these issues should be revisited.