



## **Neary Building Project Survey Analysis**

Southborough Municipal Technology Committee (MTC)

September 2025

Special thanks to both Laura Kauffman and Al Hamilton for their partnership on the survey design and promotion.

# Executive Summary

## Overview

This report analyzes feedback from 707 Southborough residents following the defeat of the \$80 million Neary School Building Project in May 2025, identifying why it failed and pathways for future success.

## Why the Project Failed

- **Cost concerns** - 90% of opponents cited high cost and tax impact
- **Preference for alternatives** - 89% believed other options weren't fully considered
- **Closing Finn School** - 72% strongly opposed losing the neighborhood elementary
- **Trust issues** - 60% lacked confidence in the information or process

## Path Forward

**Community is persuadable:** While only 36% would support the same proposal today, **68% are open to a modified plan** that addresses concerns. Nearly half of original opponents would reconsider a revised approach.

**Alternative options preferred:** Plans reusing existing schools (especially keeping Finn open) have significantly higher community interest than new construction.

## Success Requirements

### Top voter priorities:

1. Cost and tax impact (76% rate as extremely influential)
2. Student safety and health (75%)
3. Educational benefits (67%)
4. State funding availability (60%)

### Communication improvements:

- Multi-channel outreach (email, website, local media)
- Proactive transparency and myth-busting
- Continuous engagement throughout planning

## Recommendations

1. **Focus on cost-effective alternatives** that preserve Finn School
2. **Rebuild trust** through early, transparent communication
3. **Engage residents** in shaping the plan, not just voting on it
4. **Address misinformation** proactively with facts
5. **Build coalitions** including former critics

## Bottom Line

The community supports school investment but wants the right project at the right cost through a trustworthy process. With clear guidance on priorities and 68% open to modifications, success is achievable if officials address cost concerns and dramatically improve engagement.

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1. Introduction

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of community feedback from the “Neary School Project” survey conducted after the May 2025 Town Meeting and Town Election. A total of **707 Southborough residents** responded to the survey, providing both quantitative ratings and open-ended comments. The goal of this analysis is to inform the Southborough Select Board and PreK–8 School Building Committee about public perceptions and to answer ten key strategic questions. Findings are broken down by demographic subgroups (e.g. age, parent status, meeting attendance) to identify which segments are **persuadable**, where **information gaps or misconceptions** exist, and how to improve **communication and engagement** going forward. Visualizations and statistics accompany each section, and sentiment from open-text responses is included to highlight the emotional drivers behind support or opposition.

2. Familiarity with the Project Details Prior to the Vote

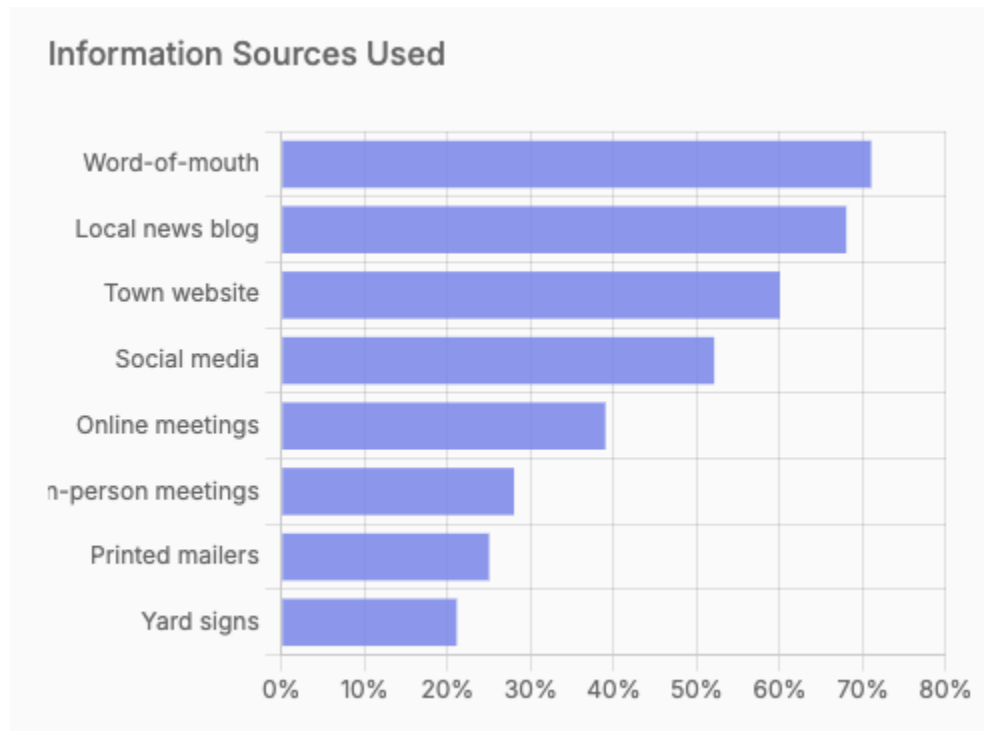
Most respondents reported being at least moderately familiar with the details of the original Neary school proposal. In fact, **88%** said they were “**moderately,**” “**mostly,**” or “**completely**” aware of the project’s details before/during the May 2025 votes, while only a small minority (about **12%**) admitted being only slightly aware or not aware at all. This suggests that the outreach efforts did reach a majority of residents at a basic level. Notably, those who attended the Special Town Meeting or voted in the election tended to report higher familiarity than those who did not.

- **Parents vs. Non-parents:** Respondents with K–8 children were somewhat more likely to be “completely” informed (many had closely followed the project), whereas some older residents without school-age children acknowledged lower familiarity. A few older residents admitted they “had heard very little about it” prior to the votes, reflecting an awareness gap in that segment.

- **Implication:** Overall awareness was relatively high, but the **degree of understanding** varied. This means while most people knew of the project, many still lacked detailed comprehension (explored next). Going forward, the Town needs to ensure not just awareness but true understanding across all groups, especially those less directly connected to the schools.

### 3. Information Sources Used and Their Reliability

Residents learned about the Neary project through a **wide range of information channels**, with informal networks playing a major role alongside official communications. The survey asked which sources people used to get information, and how reliable they found each source. The results reveal a mix of traditional and digital channels:



**Figure 1:** Top sources of information residents used to learn about the Neary project (multiple responses allowed). Word-of-mouth and local online news were the most commonly cited channels.

As Figure 1 shows, the **most-used information sources** were **word-of-mouth conversations (71% of respondents)** and the **local news blog (MySouthborough.com – ~68%)**, followed closely by the **Town’s official project website (60%)**. Over half (52%) reported using **social media** (Facebook community groups, Nextdoor, etc.), and many watched **recorded or live public meetings** online (39%) or attended meetings in person (28%). About one-quarter recalled **printed mailers/flyers from the Town**, and 21% noticed **yard signs or banners**. Only a negligible number (just 7 individuals) said they **did not seek any information** at all, indicating that nearly everyone was reached by at least one channel.

When asked to rate the **reliability/trustworthiness** of these sources, clear differences emerged:

- **Town Communications:** Official channels were highly trusted. A strong majority rated the **Town’s website** as “very reliable” or “extremely reliable” for project information, and an even larger share

trusted **in-person Town/Committee meetings** (over 80% rated those meetings very/extremely reliable). **Online meeting recordings** were likewise viewed as reliable by most. This suggests that the factual, formal presentations by Town officials were well-regarded by those who accessed them.

- **Local News Media:** The local blog MySouthborough.com was considered **reliable** by most readers (roughly 69% rated it very/extremely reliable), though about 22 respondents (under 5%) felt it was “not at all reliable.” **Local newspapers** had less reach (only ~17% used them) and were not a primary source for many.
- **Social Networks and Word-of-Mouth:** **Social media** was the least trusted source – a large number of respondents described it as only “slightly” or “**not reliable**” (over 50% gave social media low reliability scores). Open-ended comments frequently complained of “misinformation on Facebook” or contentious debates in community forums. Similarly, **friends and neighbors** as an info source were met with some skepticism; most called word-of-mouth only “somewhat reliable.” This implies that while many people heard about the project informally, they recognized that rumors and personal opinions might not be accurate.
- **Printed Mailers:** Mailed brochures from the Town were generally seen as **somewhat to very reliable** by those who read them. However, a number of respondents noted they either “never saw the flyer” or “glossed over it,” suggesting mailers may have been missed by part of the audience.

**Key Insight:** People overwhelmingly did seek information (virtually no one was completely in the dark), but they gravitated to informal channels as much as official ones. The **Town’s challenge** is that while official info was trusted, many residents first heard about the project through **neighbors or social media, where misinterpretations spread**. In their comments, some respondents admitted they were influenced by “the chatter around town” or posts in online groups that later turned out to be only partly accurate. This underscores a need for the Town to proactively **push information through the channels people actually use** (e.g. social networks, local blogs, conversations) to correct inaccuracies in those spaces.

In terms of preferred channels for future communication, respondents expressed a strong desire for **direct updates from the Town**. The most preferred ways to stay informed moving forward were **email newsletters/alerts from the Town (selected by 58% of respondents)** and updates on the **official Town/project website**. Posting updates to the **MySouthborough blog** was also highly favored (53%). Many want periodic **public forums** or info sessions (especially if recordings are available), and about one-third still value **social media updates** from official Town accounts. Interestingly, **mailed notices** remain important to a significant group (around one-third) – several older residents wrote that “old-fashioned postal mail” ensures everyone, even those not online, gets the news. Fewer people rely on regional newspapers or purely word-of-mouth for updates. **Takeaway:** To maximize reach and clarity, the Town should **use multiple channels in parallel** – especially Town emails, the Town website, local blog, and social media – to repeatedly convey consistent information.

## 4. Clarity of Project Details and Information Gaps

Despite fairly high self-reported awareness, many residents struggled with fully **understanding the project's details and implications**. When asked “How easy or difficult was it to understand the project based on available information?” only **37%** of respondents found it “**easy**” to understand the Neary proposal, while the rest had some degree of difficulty or uncertainty. About a quarter described it as “**difficult**” to grasp all the details. This indicates that the complexity of the project (and the way information was presented) left a substantial portion of the public without a clear picture. Several themes emerged regarding what was unclear or missing:

- **Tax Impact and Cost Explanation:** By far the most common complaint was confusion about the **financial impact**. In an open-ended prompt, many people said they wanted a clearer breakdown of “what it would actually cost me in taxes” and how those costs might change over time. There was also frustration about **comparative costs** – e.g. “We heard \$80M for the new school, but not enough about cheaper alternatives or long-term savings.” The word “cost” appeared in a large share of responses where people listed unanswered questions. For some, the tax impact wasn’t personalized: “I never saw a simple chart of tax increase per \$100k of home value – that would have helped” one resident noted.
- **Rationale for Closing Finn vs. Alternatives:** Another major point of confusion was **why the Finn School had to be closed** under the plan. Respondents felt the **educational and logistical reasoning** for a consolidated Grades 2–5 school at Neary (and closing Finn) was not clearly articulated. “It wasn’t clear why Finn couldn’t be renovated or kept for younger grades,” wrote one parent. Many opponents evidently misunderstood this aspect – some thought Finn’s closure was purely a cost-cutting measure or questioned if Finn was being “sacrificed unnecessarily.” The survey data later confirmed that **opposition to closing Finn** was a key driver of “No” votes . This indicates a communication gap: the project team may need to better explain **educational benefits** of the reconfiguration and what would become of Finn’s facility in any future scenario.
- **Details of Alternatives Studied:** A number of respondents said they felt information on **alternative options** was lacking. They wanted to know, for example, “Did the Town seriously consider renovating Finn or Neary instead of new construction? Why or why not?” or “What about adding onto Trottier?” The absence of detailed comparisons left some voters feeling unsure if the chosen plan was truly the best. One comment read, “I was never convinced we exhausted all other options – the info was one-sided.” (This perception likely fueled the high interest in exploring alternatives later seen in the survey.)
- **Environmental & Site Concerns:** Some were unclear about the **Neary site’s environmental status**. At least a few respondents mentioned they had questions about “the old landfill” near Neary and whether environmental studies had been done. They did not recall seeing answers, which led to lingering safety worries for some. In fact, **16%** of those who opposed cited site environmental concerns as an influential factor (though this was a smaller factor than others). Ensuring clear communication of any site studies (e.g. soil tests, mitigation plans) could address these fears.

- **Educational Benefits:** Interestingly, even some supporters noted that explaining the educational benefits better would have helped the community. As one respondent put it, “I believed in the educational vision, but it wasn’t clearly communicated to others – many still asked what exactly we gain academically from a new school.” Survey comments suggest that terms like “21st-century learning environment” were used but concrete examples (science labs, breakout rooms, special ed facilities, etc.) were not illustrated in a way the average voter could easily grasp.
- **Communication Format:** A few people pointed out that while information existed, it was not accessible. For example, detailed reports were on the website, but “hard to digest or too lengthy.” One person wrote that the public presentations “were thorough but overwhelming – there was a lot of data thrown at us in meetings.” This suggests the need for more **summaries, visuals, and plain-language explanations** to make complex data understandable.

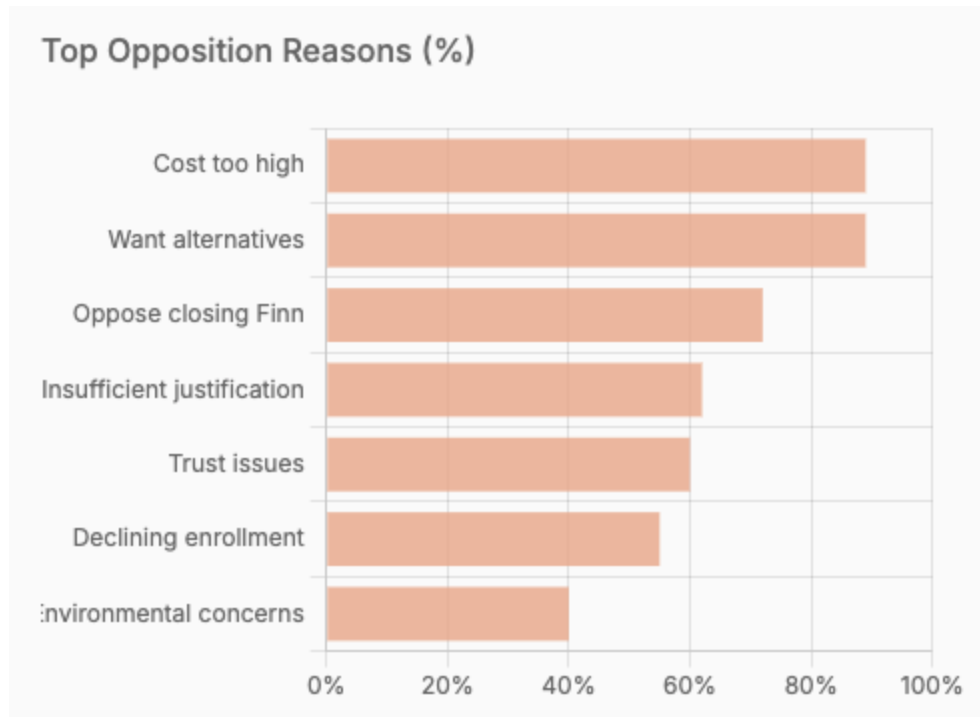
Overall, **16.6% of Town Meeting attendees** (and about 9% of ballot voters) admitted they did not feel they had all the info needed when voting. The qualitative feedback above explains why. For future project efforts, the Town should aim to **fill these gaps**: simplify the tax impact messaging (perhaps using personalized or interactive tax calculators), clearly explain why certain options are favored or ruled out (and document the analysis of alternatives), address specific site/environment questions head-on, and highlight tangible educational improvements a new facility would provide.

On a positive note, some respondents acknowledged the information improved over time. A few who initially felt in the dark said the post-vote public forums and surveys like this one were “a step in the right direction” to clarify issues. Going forward, maintaining that transparency and **actively asking “what questions do you have?”** can prevent misunderstandings from festering. By addressing the common questions above, the Town can help residents feel more informed and build trust in the planning process.

## 5. Key Reasons for Opposition and Support

The survey asked those who opposed or supported the project about the factors that influenced their vote or stance. The results paint a clear picture of the **top motivators on each side**, which can guide how to address concerns or reinforce support in the future.

**Opponents’ Reasons – Why did people vote “No”?** The dominant reasons for opposition were **cost, desire for alternatives, and the Finn School issue**, with a significant side current of mistrust or information concerns. Figure 2 highlights the percentage of opponents who rated each factor as a **“Very” or “Extremely” influential** reason for their no-vote:



**Figure 2:** Top reasons cited by opponents for voting against the Neary project. (Each bar shows the share of “No” respondents who said that factor influenced them “very much” or “extremely.”)

As shown in Figure 2, **nearly 90%** of project opponents indicated that the **“total cost and tax impact was too high”** was a major factor in their opposition. High cost was the single most universal concern. The **interest in exploring alternative solutions** was almost equally prevalent – **89%** said that feeling “a different plan (renovations, reusing existing schools) might be better and wasn’t fully considered” drove their No vote. In other words, most opponents were not against addressing school needs per se, but rather believed there were cheaper or different approaches than the one proposed.

The third top factor was **“closing Finn School.”** About **72%** of opponents strongly objected to the aspect of the plan that would close Margaret Neary’s sister elementary (Finn). Open-ended comments revealed emotional attachment to Finn as a neighborhood school and fear that its closure would harm the community feel for young families. This was encapsulated by one resident who wrote, “I grew up with neighborhood elementary schools – I didn’t want to see Finn shut down.” Clearly, the notion of closing a school was sensitive and, for many, negative.

Other notable factors among opponents included:

- **“Insufficient educational justification”** – ~62% felt the project’s educational benefits were not clearly demonstrated or convincing enough. This ties back to the communications issue: people weren’t sold on why the new school would be academically superior.
- **“Information or trust issues”** – ~60% said a lack of confidence in the information or process influenced their opposition. This is significant. It implies that beyond substantive issues, trust was lacking. Some opponents indicated they felt the process was “rushed” or not fully transparent, or they distrusted the data coming from officials. As one person bluntly put it, “I didn’t trust the numbers they

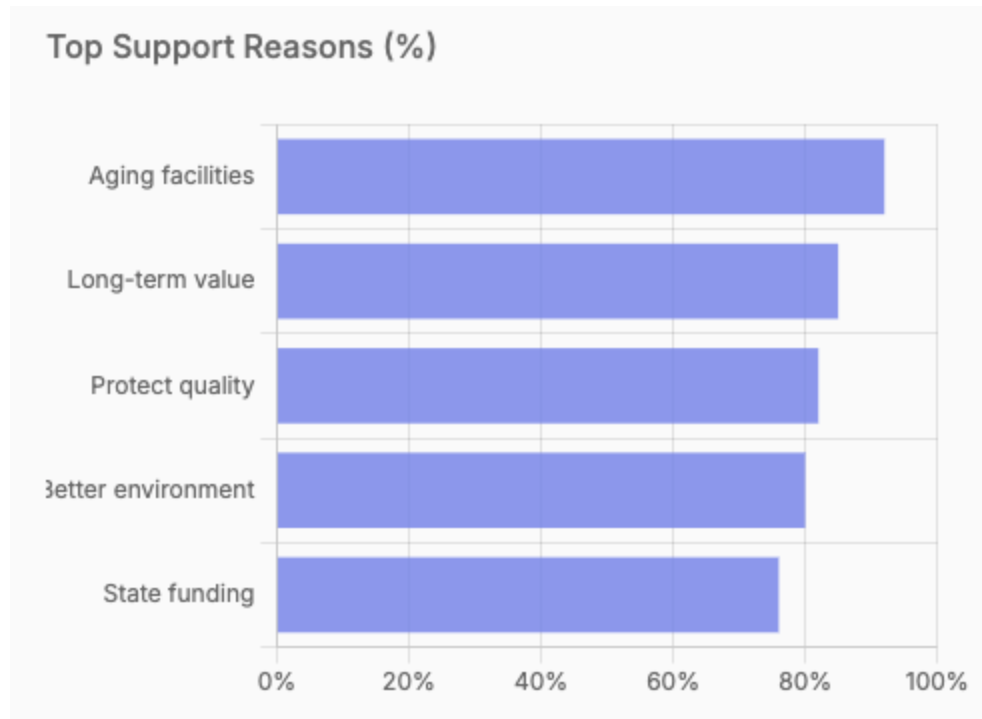


were giving us.” Misinformation circulating in town likely amplified this (for example, there were rumors about hidden costs, etc.). A Select Board member at the August meeting noted “the ugliness and the misinformation, both on the cost and the site, that was used to defeat the project” – the survey data backs up that a substantial segment of “No” voters indeed had doubts about the info and motives behind the project.

- **Declining Enrollment Concern** – ~55% of opponents cited declining student enrollment as making a new large school seem unnecessary. Southborough’s K–8 enrollment numbers have been leveling off or dropping slightly, and opponents seized on that to argue the project was overbuilt. “Why build for more capacity when our enrollment is down?” was a common refrain. This indicates any future proposal must account for enrollment trends with a clear explanation (for instance, replacing aging infrastructure even if capacity isn’t maxed, planning for long-term fluctuations, etc.).
- **Environmental/Site Concerns** – About 40% of opponents were very concerned about building on the Neary site near the old landfill. While this was the least-cited major factor, it’s still nearly half of the No voters who were at least moderately influenced by perceived site risks. This suggests any renewed project on that site must come with strong, visible environmental assurances (or alternatively, exploring a different site could alleviate this subset of concerns).

To summarize, the prototypical opponent was primarily motivated by **financial prudence and a preference for a different solution**, coupled with a sentiment that “we weren’t fully convinced this was the right plan or that it was worth the cost.” Emotionally, many opponents felt frustration (“town spending is out of control” was a sentiment among some retirees) and distrust. On the flip side, let’s examine supporters:

**Supporters’ Reasons – Why did people vote “Yes”?** Those in favor of the project overwhelmingly pointed to the **poor condition of the old school and the long-term benefits of investing now**. Figure 3 illustrates the top motivations for supporters (percent of “Yes” respondents who found each factor very/extremely important in their support):



**Figure 3:** Top reasons cited by supporters for voting in favor of the Neary project. (Bars show the share of “Yes” respondents who rated each reason as a very or extremely strong factor in their support.)

As shown, the **aging, deficient Neary facilities** was the number one driver – over **92%** of supporters said the need to replace the old, substandard school building was an extremely influential reason. Many supporters talked about how Neary’s infrastructure was “50 years old, not ADA-compliant, with outdated systems,” etc., and they genuinely felt it was reaching end-of-life. They believed a modern facility was needed to provide a safe, accessible environment.

The second strongest reason was the **long-term value of investing now**: ~85% of supporters noted that delaying would only increase costs later or prolong the use of an inadequate building. This reflects a forward-looking mindset – supporters saw the project as inevitable and thought it wiser to do it sooner with state reimbursement than later without. One respondent commented, “If we don’t pay \$80M now, we’ll pay \$120M in a few years – it’s only going to get more expensive.” This cost escalation argument resonated with the Yes side.

Other key supportive factors:

- **Protecting School/Town Quality:** ~82% said they supported the project to **protect the quality of Southborough’s schools and property values**. They were worried that not investing in new facilities would lead to declining educational quality, difficulty attracting good teachers, and ultimately erode what makes the town attractive. In their comments, supporters often mentioned pride in Southborough’s school system and fear that “standing still” would jeopardize it. For example, one wrote, “We have to invest in our schools if we want to maintain our reputation and home values – otherwise we’re penny wise, pound foolish.”

- **Better Learning Environment:** ~80% were strongly motivated by the prospect of a **modern learning environment and improved educational spaces** for children. Supporters tended to believe the new school would bring meaningful improvements – from updated science labs and technology to appropriate spaces for special education and collaborative learning. They often cited the inadequacies of the current Neary (e.g., “tiny classrooms, no air conditioning, makeshift modulars,” etc.) and felt students deserve better. The quote “It’s not just a building, it’s an investment in our children’s education” encapsulates this sentiment.
- **State Reimbursement:** ~76% noted the availability of **MSBA state funding** (roughly \$35 million) as a big reason to support the project. The idea of “leaving free money on the table” by missing the MSBA grant deadline bothered supporters. Many believed the project was the “most cost-effective option with the state paying part,” and as one supporter lamented in public comment, he realized he was “in a small minority for believing the proposal was the most cost-effective option” after it failed. In essence, supporters were motivated by leveraging the state grant to reduce burden on local taxpayers.

In short, supporters were driven by a mix of **urgent pragmatism and community values**: they saw a failing school that needed replacement, wanted to seize the funding opportunity, and felt doing so was critical to maintain Southborough’s educational excellence and town desirability. Emotionally, supporters expressed feelings like hope (for a new, better school), and also frustration or disappointment that these arguments did not win over the majority. Several supportive respondents wrote of being “heartbroken” or “extremely disappointed” that the project failed despite what they saw as clear long-term benefits.

**Persuadable Middle:** It’s worth noting there were also neutrals and “somewhat” supporters/opponents in the survey. About 15% fell into a neutral or unsure stance on the project. Their qualitative comments often showed mixed feelings – e.g., acknowledging the need for a new school but uncomfortable with the cost, or liking parts of the plan but not others. These individuals are the most persuadable moving forward, as they were neither ideologically opposed nor fully committed. The next section on openness to reconsidering the project addresses how these middle-ground residents might be swayed by changes.

## 6. Openness to Reconsidering the Project (Persuadability)

One of the most critical questions for the Select Board and Building Committee is: **If we tried again – either with the same project or a modified version – would people support it?** The survey asked respondents to rate their openness to **reconsidering the same proposal** and their openness to a **modified proposal addressing community concerns**, on a scale from 1 (“not at all open”) to 5 (“extremely open”).

The data shows a stark difference between the exact original project and a potentially revised plan:

- **Reconsidering the Same proposal:** Overall, a majority still indicated they would not support the unchanged plan if re-voted today. About **45%** of respondents were “not at all open” to the same project, and an additional ~11% “not likely open.” Only about **36%** were positively inclined (“likely” or “extremely” open to supporting it again), with ~13% undecided. In short, **nearly two-thirds** of respondents are currently unwilling to back the original Neary plan without changes. This aligns with the reality that it was defeated decisively in May.

- **Considering a Modified proposal:** Openness jumped significantly when asked about a modified version. A clear majority – **50%** – said they would likely support a modified plan, and another **18%** said they are “extremely open” to one. In total about **68%** indicated a positive openness to a revised proposal, with **20% undecided** and only around **12% firmly closed** to any modified plan. This is a very important finding: it suggests that if the project addresses key concerns, many voters are movable. In fact, many who voted “No” in May fall into this camp of being open to a better plan.

Looking specifically at those who originally opposed the project: about **46% of opponents** in the survey admit they would at least reconsider a modified proposal (rating 3 “undecided” or higher on openness). Only a hard core (~54% of opponents) ticked 1 or 2, effectively saying they’d likely never support even a changed plan. Notably, even among “No” voters, **1 in 6 opponents (17%) say they would now likely support a modified version** if it addressed their concerns. These are the persuadable segment that could swing a future vote.

By contrast, supporters were already on board – ~95% of original supporters are “open” to a modified project (many are presumably disappointed it failed and eager to vote yes again). Interestingly, supporters were almost as open to a modified project as to the original; some wrote that while they loved the original plan, they’re also willing to accept tweaks if that helps it pass. A few supporters cautioned against changes that “water down the educational benefits,” but generally they signaled flexibility.

The neutral/uncommitted group (those who were undecided or somewhat split in May) showed high openness to a modified plan – most gave a 4 or 5 rating. For instance, nearly all who answered neutral on the original project are now at least “undecided” if not likely to support a revised concept. This indicates that the neutral middle is quite persuadable with the right adjustments and information.

**What changes would persuade people?** The survey’s open-ended follow-up asked: “If you would consider supporting a modified proposal, what specific changes or improvements might make it more acceptable?” Common suggestions included:

- **Cost Reduction:** The number one theme was lower the cost. Many respondents said even a somewhat scaled-back project with a lower price tag would be easier to swallow. Ideas ranged from “find ways to trim the building size or bells-and-whistles to save money” to “delay or phase parts of the project” or “seek additional funding sources to reduce the taxpayer burden.” Clearly, demonstrating a good-faith effort to **reduce the total cost or tax impact** could win back some voters. However, people were not always specific on what to cut – this signals the Committee may need to identify visible cost concessions (e.g., perhaps a smaller gym or fewer new fields, etc.) that show responsiveness.
- **Finn School Retention/Use:** Many opponents said a plan that **does not permanently close Finn** would be more acceptable. Some suggested re-purposing Finn (for instance as a PreK or early childhood center) or at least leaving open the possibility of keeping it operational in some capacity. Even opponents who might accept eventually closing Finn wanted to see “a plan for Finn’s future” (e.g., how the building might be reused or how neighborhoods won’t lose out). Therefore, a modified proposal that **preserves Finn as an active school or community facility** (or clearly communicates a reuse plan) might convert a number of “No” votes.

- **Alternate Configurations:** There were suggestions for different grade configurations that people might favor. For example, several people mentioned they'd support "a PreK–3 at Finn + 4–8 at Trottier/Woodward" type of solution (essentially keeping younger kids separate). Others floated two smaller schools instead of one big one. While the feasibility of these ideas varies, the perception is that the original one-school solution might not be the only approach – exploring **alternative configurations** could help persuade those who felt the original plan was one-dimensional. (Indeed, the next section on alternative options interest will detail how some alternatives garnered more interest than the original new Neary.)
- **Site and Design Tweaks:** A few respondents noted specific design/site changes that would help. For instance, addressing **traffic concerns** (ensure any new school doesn't create a traffic nightmare on Parkerville Rd), **environmental safety measures** at the Neary site (fully cap or remediate the old dump area), and making the project more "**green**" (eco-friendly design) were mentioned. Essentially, if a revised plan can say "we heard you on X concern and here's how we fixed it," those opponents might reconsider.
- **Better Communication & Transparency:** Interestingly, some said the improvement needed isn't just in the plan but in the **process**. For example, "I might support it if the Town does a better job communicating and engaging residents this time." People want to feel their concerns are genuinely addressed and not just superficially. By involving community members in shaping the modifications, the Committee could gain goodwill. (One idea from the feedback: form a **community advisory group** including some known project critics to give input on redesign – this could show inclusiveness and potentially neutralize opposition.)

In summary, **there is a path to win over a significant portion of previous "No" voters**, but it requires **visible changes** that address cost and the Finn/alternatives issue above all. Those who strongly opposed largely remain against an identical plan (average openness among strong opposers was only 1.2 out of 5), but more moderate opponents are willing to listen to a revamped proposal (their average openness was ~2.4, and many explicitly said they could be swayed). The neutral group is quite open (average ~3.7 out of 5). The survey shows persuadability: roughly half of the "No" side is not irrevocably entrenched and could support a modified project that they perceive as more fiscally responsible and better explained .

Politically, this suggests the Town should not attempt to re-submit the **exact same** plan in the same form. That would likely fail again. However, **a revised proposal with targeted adjustments** has a fighting chance – especially if combined with a strong communication campaign (see Section 10) to correct misinformation and build trust.

## 7. Special Town Meeting Attendance: Who Went, Who Didn't, and Why

The May 10, 2025 Special Town Meeting (STM) was a crucial decision point for the Neary project, and turnout and participation factors were closely examined in the survey. Out of our 707 respondents, **373 (53%) said they attended** that STM, while **274 (39%) did not attend** (the rest did not answer, likely indicating they did not participate). This sample suggests a relatively high engagement rate among survey takers (in reality, STM

attendance in May was around that number, meaning we captured a large share of actual attendees in the survey).

**Who attended?** Demographically, **parents of school-aged children were more likely to attend** STM than those without kids. Many parents expressed that they felt directly invested in the outcome and thus prioritized being there. However, older residents (including many seniors) also turned out in force, motivated by concern over taxes. In fact, multiple attendees over age 60 commented that they “never miss a Town Meeting when big spending is on the warrant.” The data show that among survey respondents:

- 62% of those with K–8 children at home attended STM.
- 50% of those without school children attended STM.

This indicates strong civic turnout across groups, but slightly higher among the stakeholder (parent) group. Notably, incomes did not vary much in attendance – high-income and moderate-income residents attended at similar rates (lower-income representation was very small in the survey, so hard to gauge).

**Why did people attend?** Those who came to the meeting cited a few primary motivations (this was a “select all that apply” question for attendees):

- The most common reason (from **80%** of attendees) was to vote in favor or against the project. In other words, they showed up specifically because of their position on the Neary article. **44%** said they wanted to support the project in person, and **36%** said they wanted to oppose it in person (some selected both motivations if they weren’t sure until hearing debate). This underscores that the issue itself drove turnout – people cared enough about it to spend a long evening voting.
- **“Civic duty”** was another big factor – about **60%** of attendees simply feel they generally should participate in Town Meetings for important decisions. This ethos was evident in comments like “I always go to Town Meeting, it’s our responsibility.” These individuals would have been there regardless of topic, but they still contributed to the vote outcome.
- **To learn more:** Roughly **50%** indicated they wanted to “hear the presentation and debate before deciding.” These tended to be people on the fence who used the meeting to get clarity (some noted that the meeting discussion did influence their final vote). It’s a reminder that Town Meeting serves as an information forum as well as a vote – and some neutrals came seeking answers (though if they left unsatisfied, that’s a problem).
- Some were **encouraged by others to attend** (about 14% said friends/neighbors or officials urged them to go). Indeed, there were community efforts on both sides to get out the vote at STM – e.g., school families mobilizing yes votes, and fiscal watchdogs mobilizing no votes. The data suggests word-of-mouth recruitment had a smaller effect than personal motivation, but still notable.

**Why did people NOT attend?** Understanding the barriers to attendance is critical, because STM votes draw only a fraction of voters. Among the 274 survey respondents who didn't go, the top reasons were:

- **Schedule or timing conflicts:** The number one reason by far. **43%** of non-attendees said they had another commitment or were out of town that night. Additionally, **27%** said the day/time or venue didn't work for them. Combined, scheduling issues (busy schedules, travel, late weeknight timing) were the biggest obstacle. Many working parents and those with prior engagements simply couldn't make a 7PM Monday meeting. For instance, one respondent wrote, "I had a work trip that week – otherwise I absolutely would have gone." Another said, "If it wasn't on a weeknight, I might have attended; the timing was inconvenient."
- **Family obligations / childcare:** About **25%** cited lack of childcare or needing to care for family as a reason. This was particularly an issue for parents of young kids. Some noted that Town Meeting's length and late hours make it very hard if you have children at home. (The meeting indeed ran late into the night.) A suggestion raised in comments was to offer **childcare services or a family-friendly format** to enable more parents to attend.
- **Discomfort with Town Meeting format:** ~19% said they feel uncomfortable with the traditional Town Meeting setting (standing up publicly, voice voting, large crowds, etc.). For example, one person admitted, "Public speaking intimidates me, so I avoid Town Meeting." Others referenced the long hours and lack of anonymity. This indicates some residents are effectively dissuaded by the format itself. It suggests exploring ways to make the experience less intimidating (perhaps encouraging questions in advance, or assuring people they need not speak to vote).
- **Lack of interest or perceived impact:** Only a small share (around 5%) said they "didn't feel strongly enough or usually don't attend" Town Meetings. And another ~5% "assumed their vote wouldn't make a difference" or that "the meeting outcome didn't matter since there was a ballot after." Notably, **19 people** (about 7% of non-attendees) specifically said they skipped STM because they knew there would be a ballot election where they preferred to cast their vote. This reveals a strategic choice by some to rely on the ballot and avoid the meeting. Unfortunately for the project, the Town Meeting failure meant the ballot was moot – something perhaps not all realized. This points to a communication issue: some voters thought the ballot was the "real" decision and thus didn't show up at STM, not realizing STM approval was required first.

It's encouraging that "**not being informed**" was a **minimal reason for not attending** (only 4% said they didn't attend because they didn't know enough about the issue). This means lack of information kept almost no one home – instead it was logistics and format. Also, only 5 people (under 2%) said they were unaware the meeting was happening – so the Town's outreach about the meeting date/time was largely successful.

**Improvements for Town Meeting:** Respondents had many suggestions for making Town Meetings more accessible and effective:

- **Alternate scheduling or format:** The most frequent suggestion was to consider a **weekend Town Meeting** or earlier start time. Several people felt a Saturday session or at least not a Monday night could

boost attendance (especially for those with weeknight work or kid activities). Others suggested allowing some form of **remote or hybrid participation** (e.g., a way to watch and vote online). While currently not allowed by bylaws, the desire is clearly there – one person wrote “I would have loved a Zoom option; I couldn’t get a sitter to go in person.”

- **Childcare services:** Many parents proposed providing **childcare on-site** at the meeting (perhaps supervised by vetted volunteers or high schoolers in another room). This could remove a key barrier for young families. Even a small play area in the lobby was mentioned. It might not solve late bedtime issues, but it could help some.
- **Streamline the meeting:** Some attendees and non-attendees alike commented on the **length and procedural delays**. Ideas included stricter time limits on speakers, more concise presentations, and “no redundant questions – have info sheets to answer FAQs so the meeting isn’t bogged down.” A few suggested **breaking a complex issue into multiple nights or sessions** so that one meeting isn’t so marathon. Overall, efficiency and consideration for attendees’ time were concerns – those who left early or heard about the long debate may have been discouraged from future meetings.
- **Better venue logistics:** There were notes on acoustics and comfort – e.g., ensure the PA system is clear (some elderly attendees had trouble hearing speakers), provide adequate seating (some had to stand at the back for lack of chairs), and climate control (the hall got hot and stuffy). While these are minor, comfort factors do influence whether people stick around to vote on later articles.
- **Education prior to meeting:** A suggestion tied to STM was having **pre-meeting informational forums** specifically to hash out Q&A, so that Town Meeting itself can focus on a shorter debate. The Building Committee did hold forums, but some felt more could be done in that gap between Town Meeting posting and the event. One neutral voter said, “If I had gotten answers to my questions beforehand, I might have felt better at the meeting.”

In conclusion, **attendance at STM was driven by strong feelings on the project**, and improving attendance means reducing barriers for those who wanted to go but couldn’t. The survey indicates that many non-attendees were not apathetic – they were **constrained by time, family, or discomfort**. Addressing those issues (through scheduling, childcare, possibly modernizing the format) could yield higher turnout in the future, which is crucial for a true gauge of community support. Also, ensuring that those who can’t attend (for legitimate reasons) still have their voices heard – possibly by input ahead of time, or by making the ballot vote count – is something for the Town to consider in its governance process.

## 8. Town Election Voting: Turnout and Barriers at the Ballot

Following Town Meeting, a Town-wide **ballot election** on May 13, 2025 was to be the final approval (for the debt exclusion). While the ballot question ultimately failed due to the project dying at STM, it’s instructive to look at who voted in the election and why some did not.



In our survey, **516 respondents (73%) said they voted** in the May 2025 town election on the Neary question – a very high self-reported turnout, likely reflecting civic-minded individuals drawn to take the survey. **116 (16%) did not vote** in that election, and the remaining ~11% did not answer (some might not have been eligible). For context, the actual town election turnout was much lower (around 2,500 voters town-wide, ~30% of registered voters). This means our survey over-represents voters, but we can still glean differences within this group.

**Who voted?** Across demographics, **older residents (50+) were highly likely to vote** – many of them vote in every local election. Among parents of young children, voting rates were also fairly high in our sample, though anecdotally it's known that some younger residents skip local elections. The survey found that nearly all who attended Town Meeting went on to vote at the ballot (makes sense, they were very engaged). There is evidence that a number of opponents who lost at Town Meeting still turned out at the ballot, perhaps in protest or hoping to send a message, even though legally the ballot was moot. One respondent who supported the project noted, “The ballot results were symbolic since STM failed, but I voted Yes anyway to show support.” Conversely, one opponent wrote, “I actually didn't bother voting Tuesday because we already won at Town Meeting.” – highlighting confusion about the process.

**Why did non-voters abstain?** For the **116 who did not vote**, their reasons were as follows (multiple answers allowed):

- The largest group, **30 people (26%)**, said they were not eligible or not registered at the time. Some may have been new movers or 18-year-olds who missed registration, etc. This is a reminder to keep pushing voter registration, but it's an external factor.
- **35 people (30%)** couldn't vote due to being away or unable to get to the polls (travel, work, illness). Despite absentee ballot options existing, clearly some did not utilize them. Comments included folks being on vacation or having work travel on Election Day. A couple mentioned they forgot to request an absentee in time.
- **“Town Meeting decided it”** – Interestingly, **19 non-voters (16%)** said they skipped the ballot because the project had already failed at Town Meeting. In other words, they thought the ballot was moot or their vote wasn't needed after STM. This group mostly consisted of project opponents who felt their objective was achieved. While logically understandable, it does highlight that the two-step process confused some citizens – some didn't realize a ballot was still happening or felt it was pointless. This is important because if a future project goes to ballot, ensuring people know their vote is critical is key.
- **Too busy / forgot:** 11 people (9%) simply were too busy on Election Day or it slipped their mind.
- **Unaware of the election:** Only 5 people (4%) said they didn't know there was an election or ballot question. So lack of publicity was a minor issue – most knew it was happening.
- **Lack of interest:** Only 4 people (~3%) admitted they didn't care strongly or typically don't vote in local elections. This suggests that the Neary question was indeed salient – it wasn't apathy, but other barriers that kept people from voting.

- **Lack of information:** 6 people (5%) said they didn't vote because they didn't feel informed enough about the question. While a very small number, these were perhaps individuals who did not follow the issue and so chose not to weigh in. Ideally, in a well-informed electorate, no one should feel they have to abstain due to confusion.

From these responses, the biggest actionable barriers were **logistical (getting to polls)** and the **perception that the ballot was secondary after Town Meeting**. The latter is unique to our Town's two-step approval process and suggests a need to better communicate the importance of each vote.

**Experience of Voting:** Among those who did vote, the survey asked if they had all the info needed before voting: encouragingly, **90.7%** of voters said yes, they felt informed when voting on the ballot. Only ~9% wished they had more information prior to the ballot vote. This is a slightly smaller info-gap than at Town Meeting, possibly because by Election Day voters had additional days to digest information or read coverage after Town Meeting. It may also be that by the time of the ballot, minds were largely made up.

When asked how the voting process or experience could be improved, several themes emerged:

- **Clarify the ballot question wording:** A few respondents found the wording of the debt exclusion question confusing. They suggested using **simpler language** on the ballot or providing an explanatory note. One person said, "Neighbors asked me what a YES vote meant vs NO vote – it should be clearer on the ballot itself." Simplifying referendum language (within legal limits) or publicizing a plain-English translation might help.
- **Increase early/mail voting awareness:** Some who almost missed voting noted they would have used **early voting or absentee** if they realized it was available or easy. Promoting mail-in ballot options for local elections (especially after pandemic changes) could capture those out-of-town or too busy on the day. For example, an idea was to send a mailer or email well ahead with instructions on how to request an absentee ballot for the town election.
- **Publicize the election more:** While few said they were unaware, some voters commented that turnout among their neighbors was low and perhaps more **publicity** (signs, social media reminders, etc.) could have helped. In particular, ensuring that those not at Town Meeting still know there's a ballot vote is crucial. Some supporters felt the opposition mobilized well for STM but then "people thought it was over and didn't show up Tuesday."
- **Voting logistics:** Generally the voting at the polls went smoothly (no major issues reported at precincts). However, one or two people mentioned the desire for **extended polling hours** or more convenient polling location – e.g., "maybe also allow voting at a second location or on a weekend." Another suggestion was **combining the ballot with the regular election** (in this case it was the Annual Town Election, so it was combined – but if a future special ballot is separate, turnout might be improved if it coincides with a higher-turnout election).

In summary, **most people who cared about the issue did cast a ballot**, and those who didn't were primarily prevented by circumstances or the (mistaken) belief that their ballot vote was unnecessary post-STM. To

improve ballot participation next time, the Town can focus on **making voting as accessible as possible** (promoting absentee ballots, ensuring clarity of the question) and hammering home that **both Town Meeting and the ballot are essential** – one does not render the other moot. The survey suggests there wasn't a large group of disengaged citizens who ignored the vote; rather, it was engaged citizens sometimes stymied by scheduling or procedural nuances.

(As a side note: in open comments, a few residents argued the **two-step approval process itself was a problem** – with some calling it “confusing” or suggesting moving to a single-step process like some other towns. While that's beyond the scope of this survey, it's notable feedback on the governance process affecting outcomes.)

## 9. Factors Influencing Future School Project Decisions (Voter Priorities)

When considering any **future K–8 school building plans**, what factors will voters care about most? The survey asked residents to rate how much certain considerations influence their decision process on prospective options. The results highlight which aspects the Town must address to win support for a new plan.

The factors (rated on a 5-point scale from “Not at all influential” to “Extremely influential”) and the share who said each is **“very” or “extremely” influential** in their decision are as follows:

- **Total Cost & Tax Impact – 76%:** This is the top concern. Over three-quarters of respondents said the affordability and tax implications are a very or extremely influential factor for them. In fact, more than half rated it “Extremely influential.” It's clear that **cost remains king** – any future proposal must be fiscally prudent and convincingly so. Even many supporters are also taxpayers who care about cost effectiveness. As one person put it, “I'll support something we truly need, but the price has to make sense.”
- **Student Safety & Health – 75%:** Nearly equal to cost, the safety of children in school facilities (including structural safety, up-to-code buildings, and environmental health of the site) is paramount. Three-quarters said this factor would strongly influence their choice of an option. This likely reflects concerns about old buildings (e.g., Neary's aging infrastructure, ADA non-compliance, possible environmental hazards). Emphasizing how a plan improves student safety (or conversely, if an option might pose safety issues) will sway many voters.
- **Educational Benefits – 67%:** About two-thirds place heavy weight on the educational quality improvements an option offers. People want to know: will this plan tangibly improve learning environments and outcomes? If an option is seen as providing modern classrooms, better program space, etc., it gains support; if it's seen as compromising education, it loses support. So the **academic merit** of any plan must be clearly demonstrated.
- **State Funding Availability – 60%:** The availability of **outside funding (MSBA reimbursements)** is a very influential factor for 60%. Many residents do factor in whether the state will chip in – presumably preferring options that attract reimbursement. An option that doesn't qualify for MSBA money might face tougher scrutiny unless it's significantly cheaper. The past project had ~\$35M on the line from MSBA; losing that was painful to supporters and even some opponents. Thus, if a new plan can regain

state funding, that's a big plus in voters' minds.

- **Preservation of Existing Schools/Assets – 56%:** A majority also care about whether an option preserves existing school buildings or other town assets (like keeping Finn open or reusing vs. demolishing facilities). This ties into the emotional/community value of schools. Plans that repurpose or save beloved buildings might get a boost, whereas ones involving closing or abandoning buildings need to justify that clearly.
- **Timeline/Urgency – 52%:** Just over half are strongly influenced by how urgent the need is and the timing. If an option addresses the problem sooner (versus deferring it), that matters to them – though some may conversely prefer a phased or delayed approach if it buys time. The 52% indicates that while timing is important, it's not as universally top-of-mind as cost or safety. Still, emphasizing urgency ("roofs are leaking, each year costs rise") is persuasive to about half the electorate.
- **Grade Configuration/School Assignment – 50%:** This was the lowest of the listed factors, but still half said it's very influential. This refers to how grades are divided among schools (neighborhood vs consolidated schools). The relatively lower ranking might suggest people are somewhat flexible on configuration if other factors (like cost, quality) are met. However, it's clearly still significant for many – especially those passionate about neighborhood school models. Indeed, the earlier finding on Finn closure being a big deal ties in here. So while configuration might not be everyone's top priority, **it will matter a great deal to a vocal subset** (families with strong feelings about school community structure).

In addition to these structured factors, respondents wrote in other considerations, such as **traffic impact**, **location convenience**, and **long-term town growth or decline**. For instance, a few mentioned factoring in "enrollment projections" (weighing if we might need more/less capacity). Others note intangible factors like community support/cohesion – i.e., they want an option that unites rather than divides the town.

**Implication:** To build a winning proposal, the Town should probably choose an option (from the seven under study, or another) that **performs well on the top three criteria: cost, safety, and educational value**. For example, an option that is lower cost and addresses building safety issues and offers clear educational benefits will hit the sweet spot. Conversely, an option that might excel on educational benefit but at very high cost could struggle, as could a cheap option that doesn't solve safety problems.

This also suggests how to **frame** the chosen plan: communications must emphasize how it meets these voter priorities. For instance, if a renovated option is chosen to save cost, it should be highlighted that it still addresses safety and improves learning spaces (so people don't think it's a half measure that compromises quality). If a more expensive plan is chosen, there must be a rock-solid case for why it's worth the cost in terms of safety and education (and even then, cost mitigation via state aid or phasing will help).

Finally, while state funding (60%) and preserving existing assets (56%) are slightly secondary, they can tip the balance. Securing MSBA support again would convince some skeptics that "at least we're not bearing it alone." And handling existing buildings tactfully (e.g., finding a use for Finn or preserving some part of the old school's legacy) can alleviate community hesitations.

In summary, the path forward is to design an option that **maximizes safety and educational improvements while minimizing tax impact**, and to clearly show the community that this balance has been achieved. The survey makes it plain that any neglect of cost will doom a proposal, and any neglect of educational/safety justification will sap enthusiasm. Both sides of that equation must be addressed.

## 10. Community Interest in Alternative Options for the K–8 Project

The failed Neary proposal is not the only way to address the town’s school infrastructure needs – several **alternative options** have been discussed (ranging from renovating existing schools to building a different configuration of a new school). The survey presented **seven potential options** currently under evaluation by the new School Building Committee, labeled A through G, and asked respondents to rate their level of interest in the Town **exploring each option** (on a 1 to 5 scale from “Not at all interested” to “Strongly interested”).

The seven options were:

- **A.** Configure Trottier Middle School to serve Grades 3–6 and Woodward school to serve Grades 7–8 (implying a reconfiguration using existing schools, and presumably Finn for PreK-2 and Neary possibly repurposed).
- **B.** Configure Finn to serve Pre-K to 2, Woodward 3–4, and Trottier 5–8 (again using existing schools with different grade splits).
- **C.** Do a **Minimal renovation of Neary** – essentially only deferred maintenance, no major addition (this keeps Neary going in a limited way).
- **D.** **Expand or renovate Finn** to serve four grades (Pre-K to 3) – presumably building an addition at Finn, and then (though not stated, likely) use Woodward/Trottier for 4–8.
- **E.** A **Full renovation of Neary** (to current code, ADA compliance, etc.) as an alternative to new construction.
- **F.** Build a **New four-grade school at Neary** (this was basically the original proposal: a new Grades 2–5 school on the Neary site).
- **G.** Build a **New Pre-K to 5 school at a suitable location** (including possibly at the Finn site). This would be a larger new school combining PreK/K with elementary grades.

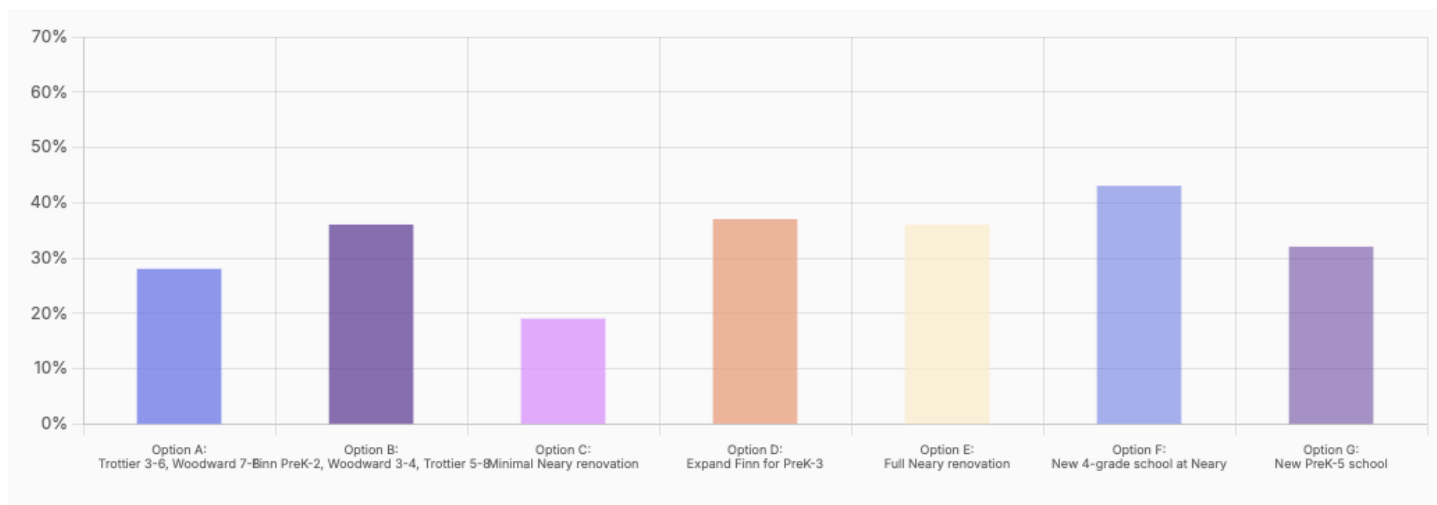
**Overall Community Interest Levels:** Some clear patterns emerged. On average, **Option B (Finn PreK–2, Woodward 3–4, Trottier 5–8)** garnered the highest interest among respondents, and **Option C (minimal Neary fix)** had the lowest. Here is a summary of the community’s interest (combining all respondents):

- **Most Popular:** Option B was the most positively viewed on average, with many respondents “quite” or “strongly” interested in exploring it. This option keeps **Finn open for youngest students** and reuses existing schools in a neighborhood model. It appears to appeal particularly to those who opposed the

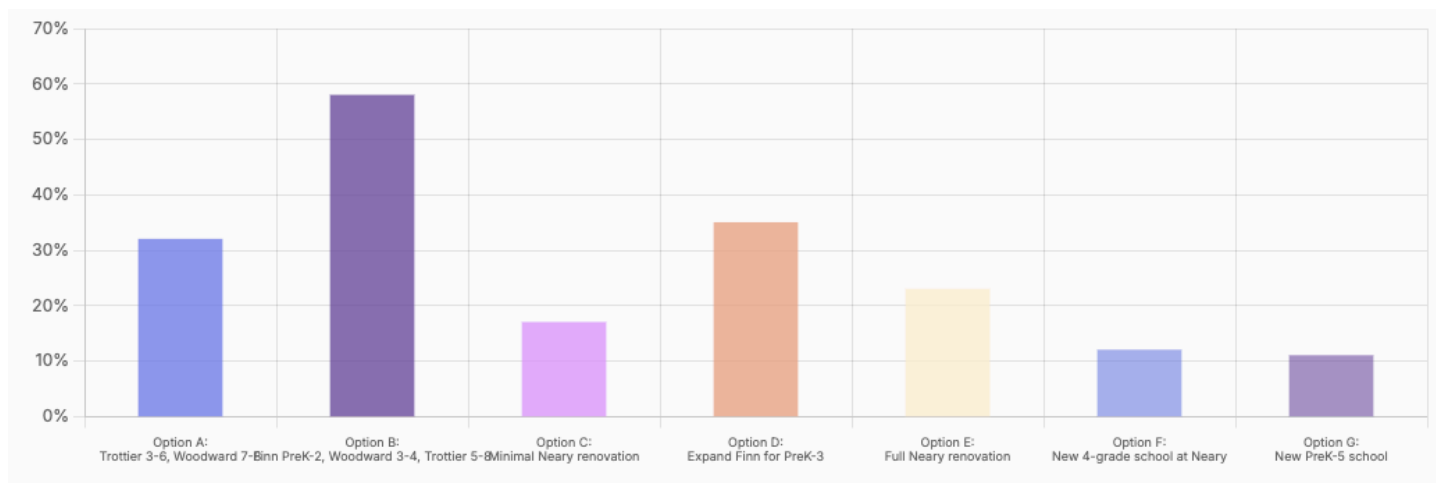
original plan; they likely see it as a way to avoid closing Finn and potentially avoid new construction cost. However, it's not just opponents – even neutrals rated B fairly high. The interest stems from it being a seemingly lower-cost, incremental approach using what we have.

- Option D (Expand/Reno Finn for PreK–3) also scored well, essentially tied for second-highest interest. This similarly involves investing in Finn and not abandoning it. It indicates many are open to a solution that revolves around **Finn School upgrades**.
- Option A (Trottier 3–6, Woodward 7–8) and Option E (Full Reno of Neary) were middle-of-the-pack – moderate interest. A reconfiguration like A is somewhat appealing (no new build), but some may have concerns about putting 3rd graders in a middle school setting or the logistics. A full Neary renovation (E) got a neutral-to-positive response from many: people like that it addresses building issues without new construction cost, but others worry it might be nearly as expensive as new with fewer benefits.
- Option F (the original new 4-5 school at Neary) and Option G (an even larger PreK–5 new school) ranked lower in interest overall. The **new construction options had a lot of “not interested” responses**, presumably from the same faction that defeated the original plan. Option G in particular, being an even bigger single school, raised concerns among many (reflected in comments calling it “too big, too much change”).
- Option C (minimal fix) was the least favored on average. Even many opponents who balked at \$80M don't see “do nothing (except Band-Aids)” as a good solution – they know the problems remain. And supporters absolutely dislike C because it fails to solve educational/programmatic needs. The survey comments show a common sentiment: “Option C (minimal) is the worst of all worlds – we spend money but gain nothing long-term.”

To illustrate differences, it's useful to break it down by **household type (parents vs. non-parents)**, since that was a major divider in earlier analysis. Figures 4 and 5 show the percentage of each group who are “interested” (rated 4 or 5) in exploring each option:



**Figure 4:** Interest in exploring each school building option, for households **with** K–8 children



**Figure 5:** Interest in exploring each school building option, for households **without** K–8 children.

Non-parent households strongly favor options that reuse Finn (Option B) and have low interest in building new (Options F, G), whereas parent households show the opposite pattern.

Figures 4 vs 5 reveals a striking divergence:

- Among **non-parents (figure 5)** – which includes many seniors and voters without young kids – the **highest interest by far is in Option B** (58% of non-parents are quite/strongly interested in B). This group also shows above-average interest in Option D (35%) and Option A (32%). These three options all focus on reusing or modestly expanding existing schools (and crucially, keep Finn in use). On the contrary, non-parents are overwhelmingly not interested in new school options: only **12%** are interested in the original new Neary (F) and **just 11% for a PreK–5 new school (G)**. Essentially, a large majority of non-parent voters do not want a big new construction – aligning with the cost-sensitive, status-quo sentiment we saw among many no voters. They also weren’t keen on a full high-cost Neary reno (only ~23% interest in E) – possibly seeing it as expensive as well.
- Among **households with K–8 children (figure 4)** – mostly younger families – the pattern is different. Their highest interest was actually in **Option F (new 4-grade school)** – about **43% of parents** are interested in exploring re-submitting a new Neary project (or very similar). They also had considerable interest in Option D (37%) and E (36%). Option B, while still of interest to 36% of parents, was not as overwhelmingly popular with them as it was with non-parents. In fact, parents show openness to multiple approaches (their interest levels cluster in the 30–43% range for A, B, D, E, F). The least popular with parents was Option C (only 19% interest) – no surprise as that does nothing for their kids’ schools – and Option G (32% interest) was middling, perhaps because combining all grades PreK–5 into one huge school might concern them about school size or transitions.

This divergence suggests a **tension**: older residents want minimal spending and to use existing schools (especially keep Finn open), whereas school parents are more inclined to invest in a new or fully renovated facility (and some see downsides in splitting into many small schools). **Neutrals** (not shown explicitly above)

tended to mirror non-parents more than parents in these preferences – likely because many neutrals are older folks who didn’t feel strongly but lean conservative fiscally.

The survey also asked people in open-ended questions which single option they think is **best** and which is **worst** for the town, and why:

- **“Best option” choices:** Option B (Finn PreK–2 etc.) was the most frequently named “potential best option” in the comments. Dozens of respondents, especially opponents of the failed project, wrote that they favor keeping Finn and reconfiguring grades among existing schools. Typical reasoning: “Option B uses our existing schools efficiently and avoids building a costly new school.” Some also cited educational reasons like keeping younger kids separate from older ones as a benefit. A fair number of people also argued in favor of **Option D (Finn expanded for K–3)** as the best, saying an addition at Finn might be a good compromise (invest in one new wing rather than an entire new school). A smaller group (mainly original supporters) argued **Option F (new Neary)** was still the best long-term solution, citing modern school benefits and state funding – but they were outnumbered in comments by those now preferring an alternative. There was also notable support in comments for **Option E (full Neary reno)** by some who see it as addressing infrastructure without the optics of “new construction.”
  - Interestingly, **Option G (new PreK–5)** got mixed “best” mentions – a few people thought consolidating all elementary grades in one brand-new school (perhaps at Finn site) could be best for synergy and one-and-done construction, but many others did not like the idea of such a large school.
- **“Worst option” choices:** By far, **Option C (minimal renovation)** was most commonly labeled the “worst option” in open responses. Residents across the spectrum said that doing the bare minimum at Neary would be a mistake – it “kicks the can down the road” and likely wastes money on patchwork fixes without solving capacity or educational needs. This aligns with our quantitative finding that C had the lowest support. The next most frequently criticized was **Option F (the original new Neary)** – many opponents wrote that “repeating the same project” would be the worst move, given the community division and cost. **Option G (new PreK–5)** was also cited as a worst-case by a number of people, often because of its scale: concerns about having an enormous PreK–5 campus or building on the Finn site (traffic, environmental constraints) made them dislike G. A small number said Option B was worst – presumably those who think splitting into three schools is inefficient or who worry Woodward can’t handle 3–4, etc., but these were few.

In sum, **the community is split on the best path**, but there is a clear mandate on what they don’t want: a do-nothing minimal approach is unpopular, and simply resurrecting the same Neary project will face the same opposition unless perceptions change. **Option B** emerges as a leading compromise from one side, while **Option F/E/D** have support from the other side. Bridging this gap might involve a hybrid approach or phasing: for example, one could imagine a plan to renovate/expand Finn (to appease one side) and renovate Neary or build a smaller addition (to address facility needs) – essentially some combination of B/D/E.

We should note that the **Building Committee’s charge is to evaluate these options objectively**, and they will provide cost/feasibility data. This survey indicates how the public might receive each:



- Options leveraging **existing schools (Finn, Woodward, Trottier)** have a reservoir of public support especially among cost-conscious voters. However, we must investigate if those truly solve the problems or if they create other issues (capacity, disruption, lack of MSBA funding, etc.). If the Committee can find a financially and educationally sound version of these, it could be a politically winning strategy.
- Options involving a **new building** face skepticism, but if that new building's scope aligns more with what people want (e.g., maybe a **smaller new school** than originally proposed, or at a more palatable cost), some opponents could be won over. For instance, a new PreK–5 (Option G) was not loved, but some opponents might prefer one new school at Finn site over at Neary site, for example – it depends on what concerns it addresses (like keeping it on a different site, etc.).
- **Communication** will again be key: whichever option is advanced, the community's interest can change with more information. Some opposition to new construction might soften if, say, a clear case is made that renovation won't actually save much money. Conversely, if analysis shows certain reconfiguration options are impractical, that needs to be explained to those who favor them, or they won't understand why their preferred option was dropped.

The takeaway is the Town should **proceed with careful evaluation of all options but pay particular attention to those with high community interest (Options B and D)**, and be prepared to manage the messaging around whichever is chosen. There is a chance to find an option that a majority can rally around, but it will require incorporating what people liked (keeping some neighborhood schools, reducing cost) and avoiding what they hated (huge price tag, losing beloved school communities).

## 11. Communication and Engagement Strategies Going Forward

Finally, the survey sought input on how the Town can **better communicate project information and engage residents** as it moves forward with any school building plans. Given the divisiveness and misinformation that plagued the last project, this is a crucial area for improvement. Residents offered a number of constructive ideas:

**Preferred Information Channels:** When asked “What are the best ways for the Town to keep you informed about the project and other important projects?” the top choices were:

- **Email Newsletters/Alerts from the Town – 58%** of respondents. People overwhelmingly want direct email communication. Many commented that they appreciated the emails that do come (e.g., from Town or School Department) and would like more frequent updates on the building project via email. Email is convenient, can be read at leisure, and can include detailed info or links.
- **Town Website Project Page – 51%.** Over half indicated that posting regular updates on the official website is important to them. However, some caveated that the website must be kept up-to-date and user-friendly. The current project page should be maintained with latest documents, FAQs, timelines, etc., and perhaps a more prominent “Latest Update” summary for those who don't wade through minutes.

- **Local News Blog (MySouthborough) – 53%.** The community still heavily relies on this independent local blog for news. Ensuring that the Town works with local media (blog and any newspaper) to disseminate accurate information is key. Many suggested providing the blog with press releases or guest posts about the project to get info out widely. The blog reaches a broad audience, including those not on official channels.
- **Social Media – 35%.** About a third want the Town to push updates on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor). Notably, social media was a double-edged sword: people don't trust the rumor mill there, but they still want official accounts to post factual updates in those same forums to counteract rumors. Several respondents said something like, "I'd love to see the Town post project facts on the Southborough community Facebook page to squash misinformation." Being present where the conversations are happening is likely necessary.
- **Public Forums/Info Sessions – 40%.** Many value face-to-face (or Zoom) forums where officials explain the project and answer questions. They want these **throughout the process**, not just at the end. One suggestion was to hold "quarterly info sessions" to keep people apprised of progress and allow Q&A. Another idea was targeted small-group forums (for example, at the Senior Center for seniors, at PTO meetings for parents, etc.) to address specific concerns. This kind of outreach could improve understanding in different subgroups.
- **Printed Mailers/Flyers – 34%.** A significant chunk still find value in receiving something in the mail. In fact, in open comments, quite a few seniors and even some busy parents said a "simple postcard with key facts and website link" would catch their attention. Mailed notices ensure even those not plugged in digitally get info. The previous project did have a mailer; apparently it wasn't enough to sway opinion, but it did reach many homes. Respondents call for continuing that practice, perhaps improving the design (clear, concise, visually engaging).
- **Local Newspapers – 17%.** Fewer people rely on regional newspapers now, but some (especially older) do. While not as critical as the blog or email, it wouldn't hurt to engage the few news outlets (Metrowest Daily News, Community Advocate) with press releases or op-eds to ensure coverage.
- **Word of Mouth – only 14% consider it a preferred method**, which is interesting given how many actually heard info via friends. This likely means people don't want to rely on hearsay; they'd prefer official info. That said, harnessing word of mouth in a positive way (by arming community leaders with correct info) could help.

**Improving Communication Content:** Beyond channels, respondents gave qualitative feedback on how to improve the messaging:

- **More Transparency and Honesty:** This point came up frequently. People want the Town to "communicate everything – the good, bad, and ugly". If there are downsides or trade-offs to a plan, state them upfront rather than letting skeptics fill the void. Transparency builds trust. For example, if an alternative was studied and deemed unfeasible, publish the analysis openly.

- **Address Misinformation Proactively:** Many are aware that rumors took hold last time (e.g., exaggerated cost figures, false claims about the project). They urge the Town to **debunk myths** in real-time. For instance, one suggestion was to maintain a **“Myth vs Fact” section on the project page or in communications**. If on social media or at meetings a false claim surfaces (“this project will force us to rebuild Trottier next”), the Town should publicly clarify the truth. A respondent wrote, “Nip misinformation in the bud – don’t let false narratives spread unchecked.” This might require monitoring community discourse and responding through official channels or FAQs.
- **Targeted Outreach to Under-informed Groups:** Survey results showed older residents, non-parents, and those not closely following School Committee news were more likely to misunderstand aspects. The Town should consider targeted communications for those audiences. For example, homeowner associations, senior groups, and civic clubs could be visited or sent tailored info. One person said, “There should have been a special info session for seniors about the tax impact and exemptions – many of my neighbors had wrong information on that.” Indeed, ensuring accurate info about tax impact, especially highlighting any senior tax relief programs, could alleviate opposition in that key demographic.
- **Clarity and Simplicity:** Many respondents plead for communications that are **easy to understand**. Avoid jargon, use visuals (charts, infographics), and break information into digestible pieces. For instance, instead of a 50-page report, create a one-page summary or a short video explaining the plan. The Town might engage skilled communicators or even volunteer parents who work in communications to help craft messages. One commenter recommended “short explainer videos on each major question – like 2-minute videos on why we need this, how it will affect taxes, etc.” This approach could engage those who won’t read a dense report.
- **Engage Two-Way, Not Just Broadcast:** Engagement means listening, not just telling. Many suggested mechanisms to get feedback and **make residents feel heard**. In addition to big forums, consider surveys (like this one, which many appreciated), suggestion boxes, or interactive workshops when formulating the plan. If people feel they have input in shaping the project, they are more likely to support it. A tangible idea: hold a **“community design charrette”** where citizens can express preferences on features of the school or priorities – this could build a sense of shared ownership of the solution.
- **Regular Updates to Avoid Information Void:** Several noted that during the last project’s multi-year development, there were long gaps where the public didn’t hear much until big votes were looming. They advise providing **regular status updates** – even if nothing major has changed, a monthly brief (“This month the committee narrowed options...next month we’ll evaluate costs...”) keeps people in the loop and prevents the perception of “decisions being made behind closed doors.” Regular communication also maintains momentum and interest.
- **Use Positive, Unifying Framing:** Some respondents emphasized the need to **“change the narrative”** from adversarial to collaborative. For example, rather than framing it as “the school project” vs taxpayer interests, frame it as a Town-wide investment and address how it benefits everyone (or how concerns are mitigated). Highlighting common ground – everyone wants good schools and reasonable taxes – can set a tone of problem-solving together. Also, acknowledge the previous vote results respectfully: e.g., “We

understand many voted No due to legitimate concerns; we are working to address those.” This tone can bring skeptics to the table.

- **Leverage Trusted Messengers:** People suggested that having respected community members (not just officials) communicate about the project can help. For example, doctors or safety officials talking about the old building’s safety issues, or beloved teachers/principals describing educational needs, or finance committee members attesting to the cost analysis – these voices can lend credibility. Even opponents from last time who have come around could be powerful spokespersons to sway peers (“Former critic now supports new plan because X, Y, Z were fixed”).

Several respondents also expressed **appreciation** for the survey itself and the post-mortem analysis. This act of soliciting feedback has, in a small way, rebuilt some trust. As one person wrote, “Thank you for asking for our input – it makes me more confident that the next plan will reflect what the town wants.” Continuing this transparent, inclusive approach will be crucial.

**Emotional Drivers to Address:** On the engagement front, sentiment analysis of comments indicates two big emotional narratives: **fear/anger about taxes** on one side, and **hope/urgency for school investment** on the other. To engage residents, the Town’s communications should acknowledge both:

- Acknowledge the **tax burden fear**: e.g., “We know many residents, especially those on fixed incomes, worry about tax increases. We are committed to finding a solution that is financially responsible.” Perhaps highlight efforts to minimize impact, or existing tax relief for seniors. This shows opponents that their concern is heard and valid.
- Acknowledge the **passion for good schools**: e.g., “We also hear from many parents and educators about the critical needs in our schools. Our children’s safety and education are at stake, and doing nothing is not an option.” This underscores the stakes in a way that even those without kids can empathize with (after all, property values and town vitality are linked to school quality).
- Emphasize a **unified vision**: remind folks that ultimately everyone wants what’s best for Southborough’s future. Using an inclusive tone – “our town,” “our schools” – invites people to be part of the solution rather than adversaries.

In addition, personal **testimonials** could be a powerful communication tool. For example, a senior citizen explaining why they ultimately support a school project (perhaps their own children benefited, or they see it as giving back to the community) might resonate with peers. Or a young family explaining how the school conditions affect their kids can humanize the issue beyond dollars.

**In summary**, the Town should deploy a **multi-channel communications strategy** with regular, transparent updates, actively combat misinformation, and genuinely involve residents in the planning process. The survey results highlight that failures in communication last time led to mistrust and a feeling among some that the project was sprung on them. By correcting that – keeping people informed every step of the way and making adjustments based on feedback – the Town can rebuild credibility. This will be as important as the technical aspects of the new plan itself in securing public support. The motto going forward could be: “**No surprises.**” If

every voter feels they understand the project and had ample opportunity to ask questions or give input, the Town will have done its due diligence in engagement.

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## 12. Actionable Takeaways

The Neary School Project survey provides a clear roadmap of public sentiment. It shows why the last project failed – chiefly cost concerns, preference for alternatives, and emotional attachment to neighborhood schools – and it illuminates how the Town can turn things around. By addressing the community’s top concerns (especially cost), considering alternative solutions that residents find more palatable, and dramatically improving the communication and outreach process, there is a path forward to a school building project that a majority of Southborough can support.

The data suggest the town is not opposed to investing in its schools; rather, people want to ensure it’s the right investment, at the right cost, arrived at by a process that they trust. Many segments of the population are indeed persuadable with a modified plan – nearly 70% overall openness. There is also a shared recognition that something must be done for the aging facilities (very few argue to do nothing). This common ground is promising.

For the Select Board and School Building Committee, the following **actionable takeaways** emerge:

- **Refine the Plan:** Focus on an option (or hybrid) that visibly reduces cost and preserves community values (e.g. Finn’s role), because that will sway a large bloc of former opponents. Yet ensure it still meets safety and educational needs to maintain support enthusiasm.
- **Rebuild Trust through Transparency:** Release information early and often. Show your work on cost estimates and option evaluations. Admit past shortcomings and how you’re fixing them. This will win back those who cited “trust issues.”
- **Engage the Community Continuously:** Don’t wait until a final plan is baked to get input. Engage residents now in discussions about trade-offs (cost vs. scope, etc.). Consider forming advisory groups or holding informal listening sessions. Conduct surveys (like this one) **early in the process** to collect sentiment. When people see their feedback reflected in the plan, they’re more likely to vote Yes.
- **Communicate in Every Lane:** Launch a communications blitz using email, website, social media, local news, mailers, and meetings to educate the public. Start with clear, compelling messaging on why something needs to be done (the risk of doing nothing) and what the leading options are, and then update as decisions are made. Ensure messages address both head (facts/figures) and heart (values/emotions).
- **Target Misconceptions:** Identify the top misconceptions from last time (e.g., “enrollment is plummeting so no new school needed,” or “tax impact will force seniors out”) and proactively counter them with evidence and assurances. Use FAQs, myth-busting posts, and credible spokespeople to do this. Don’t let misinformation set the narrative.

- **Build a Coalition:** Encourage supporters, teachers, respected community members, and even open-minded former critics to speak up in favor of the new direction. The survey suggests there's a sizable middle that can be convinced – hearing from peers can be effective. Personal outreach (neighbor to neighbor) combined with official info can turn the tide.
- **Make Voting Easier and Emphasize Its Importance:** Work with Town Clerk to promote absentee ballots and maybe explore extended hours or rides to polls, etc. Closer to the votes, repeatedly communicate the dates and importance of attending Town Meeting and voting in the election – explicitly state both steps are needed. The data shows a few percent lost here and there can change an outcome.

By following these steps, the Southborough officials can better inform and persuade the public, bridging the gaps identified in this survey. As one respondent optimistically wrote, ***“I really hope we come together as a town... honest discussion and compassion will get us to a solution.”*** If the communication improves and the plan is responsive to community input, Southborough stands a much better chance of achieving a broadly supported school project that meets the town's needs for decades to come.