



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

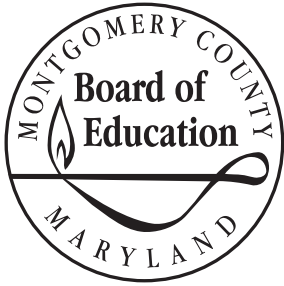
THE  
*Listen AND Learn*  
REPORT

December 2011

**Dr. Joshua P. Starr**

*Superintendent of Schools*





## VISION

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*A high-quality education is the fundamental right of every child. All children will receive the respect, encouragement, and opportunities they need to build the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be successful, contributing members of a global society.*

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# Introduction

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Dr. Joshua P. Starr began his tenure as superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) on July 1, 2011, and immediately began executing an entry plan that would allow him to interact with a wide array of stakeholders and hear their opinions and perspectives.

The major components of the entry plan are:

- Listen and Learn events
- The Superintendent's Book Club
- Student Town Halls
- School and facility visits
- Meeting with individuals and groups

This report will focus on the feedback gathered during 17 Listen and Learn events for staff and community, held in the fall. A brief overview of the two Student Town Hall events is also included in this report.

Nearly 1,800 people participated in these events and 560 more submitted written comments. The information and insights gathered during these events has been an important component in the development of Dr. Starr's Fiscal Year 2013 operating budget recommendation and in the setting of priorities for next school year and beyond.

Another important component was the report of Dr. Starr's Transition Team. Dr. Starr asked a team of outside experts and district staff to review the major components of MCPS—teaching and learning, operations, and culture/context. The Transition Team Report, released on September 19, 2011, helped Dr. Starr understand the district's strengths, and current and future challenges, as well as recommendations of areas for deeper review. The report is available for viewing on the MCPS website.

These two reports provide a comprehensive overview of the objective and subjective information Dr. Starr has gathered in his first five months, allowing him to gain a deeper understanding of this large, diverse district in a relatively short amount of time.

# Listen and Learn Events

## Overview

A major component of Dr. Starr’s entry plan was a series of “Listen and Learn” events held in September, October, and November at locations throughout the county. These events were an opportunity for Dr. Starr to introduce himself to the community and a chance for participants to offer their ideas, thoughts, and concerns regarding the performance and operations of MCPS.

Ten community Listen and Learn events were held—nine at high schools throughout the county and one at a community center in Silver Spring. Six staff Listen and Learn events were held at high schools throughout the county, and one was held at the Carver Educational Services Center. The dates, locations, and attendance for these events are listed below.

Location	Date	Attendance		Comment Cards
		Staff	Community	
Northwest High School	September 6, 2011	67	120	64
Springbrook High School	September 12, 2011	72	135	62
Albert Einstein High School	September 19, 2011	61	107	77
Watkins Mill High School	October 3, 2011	100	116	51
Long Branch Community Center	October 18, 2011	*	82	21
Thomas S. Wootton High School	October 19, 2011	81	110	49
Wheaton High School	November 7, 2011	*	175	26
Damascus High School	November 8, 2011	*	165	44
Bethesda–Chevy Chase High School	November 16, 2011	68	124	57
Sherwood High School	November 21, 2011	*	103	25
Carver Educational Services Center	November 28, 2011	112	**	19
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>561</b>	<b>1237</b>	<b>495</b>

\* A staff Listen and Learn session was not held at this location

\*\* A community Listen and Learn session was not held at this location

Interpretation in five languages—Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and French—was available at each community event, and child care services were provided.

The Listen and Learn events were well attended, with an average audience of 125 people at the community sessions and 80 at the staff events. It is important to note that in many instances staff members attended the community events, often in their dual role as MCPS employee and parent. Therefore the information summarized under the “Community Sessions” section that follows also reflects issues raised by MCPS employees. Issues that were a specific focus of employees are summarized in the “Staff Sessions” section.

The feedback on the events themselves was very positive, with a majority of post-event survey respondents saying they liked the format of the event and felt like they had an opportunity to be heard. A summary of the feedback data is included in the Appendix.

The format for both the staff and community Listen and Learn events was the same in each location. Dr. Starr gave brief introductory remarks—in which he discussed his professional experience and general thoughts about MCPS—followed by a lengthy “question and answer” period. Dr. Starr made it clear that he was at the events mainly to listen and may not be able to provide immediate answers to the concerns and issues raised. Notes were taken at each event and the specific issues were recorded on wall charts. Attendees also could submit their comments on cards at the events and leave them with staff or could submit them via e-mail using the “Listen and Learn” form on the MCPS website. In total, Dr. Starr received 495 comment cards and 69 Listen and Learn e-mails.

MCPS is a large, diverse system and the comments received reflected as such—some of the issues raised were specific to the school or cluster where the Listen and Learn event was being held. However, there were common themes that emerged at each session and in submitted comments.

This report will summarize the broad themes heard at the events. For the sake of clarity and brevity, this report will not capture every issue that was raised and will deal with very few specifics. However, most of the community Listen and Learn events were video recorded and are available for viewing on the MCPS website. The staff events were not filmed.

## **Community Sessions**

Attendees of the community Listen and Learn sessions used the opportunity to learn more about Dr. Starr’s educational philosophy and ask specific questions about a number of issues. Some of the issues were specific to their school and, in some cases, the experiences of their child. However, most of the issues and comments discussed at the events, on comment forms, and in e-mail correspondence fell into five main categories: student performance and expectations; programs and opportunities; special education; curriculum and instruction; and facilities and technology. Some issues will fall under more than one category, but for the sake of clarity will be mentioned only once. Concerns about budget reductions and the overall state of the economy were underlying in all areas. While not raised as a separate issue, it was clear that the MCPS community is concerned about the impact that recent budget reductions, paired with continued enrollment growth, are having on the day-to-day operations of our schools.



## **Student Performance and Expectations**

Student performance and expectations encompasses a wide range of issues that were raised by parents and staff regarding the academic performance of students, especially those in racial, ethnic, or socio-economic subgroups, as well as concerns about the pressure students feel to succeed and the amount of homework required.

There was general consensus that MCPS is a high-performing district, but at nearly every event, Dr. Starr was asked about the overall lower academic performance of racial minorities and student groups receiving services such as Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMS) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Many of the community members questioned whether the district's resources and high-quality teachers were dispersed "fairly" so that students in schools that serve a large percentage of poor and minority children have the same opportunities as students in schools that serve mainly White and wealthier children. Dr. Starr said he was concerned about the gaps and would be looking into the issue of variance from school to school.

Many parents and some students raised the issue of whether there was too much pressure on students to succeed. To many, the amount of homework given to students—especially in middle and high school—was symbolic of an unhealthy, competitive environment. Others questioned whether this environment was forcing students into advanced classes—including Advanced Placement and accelerated mathematics—even though they were not ready. Dr. Starr said it was important that students had a life that was in balance and that schools focused on developing students who were not only high achieving, but also socially and emotionally competent. He said he would be exploring this issue more in the coming months.

## **Programs and Opportunities**

MCPS has a wide variety of programs that provide opportunities for students to not only receive an outstanding core education, but to explore areas of interest or develop important skills, such as mastery of a foreign language and the arts. At every event, concern was raised about the continued availability of these programs, given recent budget cuts, and whether these opportunities are available to enough students.

The greatest number of comments in this category concerned the availability of arts programs at all grade levels. There is a concern that budget cuts and federal testing policy has taken resources away from the arts. Many community members made it clear that the arts are important to students and often provide the motivation needed to succeed in other school subjects.

There was also broad support for expanding foreign language offerings at all grade levels, including language immersion programs. Currently, partial or full immersion programs are offered at seven MCPS elementary schools and four middle schools in Chinese, French, or Spanish.

Issues concerning magnet schools and programs, as well as the Northeast and Downcounty consortia, were raised a number of times during the events. Some parents expressed concerns about how students are chosen for magnet programs and where they are available. Other community members wondered if the consortia school selection process put some schools at a disadvantage. Several people advocated for the expansion of International Baccalaureate (IB) programs beyond the 14 schools in which they are currently offered.

Dr. Starr said he supported giving students and parents more options within MCPS, including magnet, IB, consortia, foreign language, and arts programs. However, he said that budgetary restrictions made expansion of these programs a challenge.

## Special Education

About 12 percent of MCPS students are in special education programs—a percentage that has remained fairly consistent over the years. At every event, parents and community members shared their thoughts and concerns about special education programs in MCPS.

In many instances, parents were concerned about the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, how it is conducted, and whether parents have an adequate voice. In some cases, parents wanted to see their children included in general education programs more often, while others advocated for more specialized and separate instruction.

There were general concerns raised about the quality and breadth of special education programs offered and a belief that there is a wide variance in the quality of programs from school to school.

Dr. Starr emphasized that this was an issue of concern for every school district in the nation and believes that MCPS is doing a better job with special education than most other districts. However, he recognized that there were improvements that could be made and said he would continue to look into issues surrounding special education in the coming months.

It should be noted that Dr. Starr met with the Special Education Advisory Committee on November 15, 2011, and is planning to hold a districtwide forum on the issue of special education in the spring.

## Curriculum and Instruction

Comments and questions regarding curriculum and instruction covered a wide range of issues across the district.

The implementation of Curriculum 2.0 was raised at a number of community Listen and Learn events. Curriculum 2.0 is an upgrade of the current MCPS curriculum in elementary school, which is aimed at developing students' critical thinking and academic skills. It has been fully implemented in kindergarten and first grade and is voluntarily being implemented in most second grade classes.

Overall, the community and staff were supportive of the ideas and concepts behind Curriculum 2.0, but raised concerns about uneven implementation from school to school. Some parents said they did not fully understand how it “worked” in the classroom. Dr. Starr said he believes Curriculum 2.0 is the right direction for the district, but he emphasized the importance of professional development and training if it is going to have the desired impact on student learning.

The issue of acceleration and gifted education was raised at a number of events, with many parents concerned that ability grouping would be eliminated in the future. Dr. Starr indicated that he did not oppose gifted programs, but felt it was important that teachers had the ability to challenge all students in the classroom through differentiation.

Several participants asked questions and raised concerns about the amount of testing that occurs in MCPS. Many parents and staff members said they were concerned that too much instructional time is lost to preparing and practicing for standardized tests, such as the Maryland School Assessments (MSA) and the state High School Assessments (HSA), as well as other local and national tests. Concerns were also raised about how schools are held accountable under the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) law and whether that has led to a narrowing of the curriculum. Parents and staff



expressed concern that mathematics and reading—which are the subjects used to determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB—have received more attention at the expense of other subjects, such as science, social studies, and the arts.

Dr. Starr made it clear he believes that *No Child Left Behind* is deeply flawed and that standardized tests, alone, are not an effective method for assessing the success of schools. But he acknowledged that standardized testing is not going away and schools must make sure their students are prepared by delivering the curriculum and providing adequate supports and interventions.

Questions about recess and physical activity were raised at several of the Listen and Learn sessions. Many parents believe there are not enough opportunities for students to move around and get physical activity during the school week. Some advocated for more structured physical education classes, while others expressed concern about recess policies. Some parents felt that school principals automatically turn to “indoor recess” when the weather gets cold, denying students an important opportunity to get outside and exercise. Also, many participants objected to recess being taken away as a form of punishment. Dr. Starr made it clear that he does not feel it is appropriate to take recess away as a form of punishment. He said he would look into the matter of recess policies regarding cold weather, but acknowledged that principals must make decisions based on the safety of students, the needs of the whole school community, and the availability of staff.



### **Facilities and Technology**

The issue of adequate facilities and access to technology was raised at nearly every Listen and Learn event for the community and staff.

Many parents, community members, and MCPS employees expressed concern about overutilization and crowding. Many MCPS facilities are well above capacity, and while several construction projects are pending, the county’s capital building program cannot keep up with the rapid growth that MCPS has experienced over the past several years. There are 350 relocatable classrooms at MCPS schools in 2011–2012, with 90 percent of these in elementary schools.

Several questions were asked about the speed with which the district is able to modernize or replace its aging facilities. This became a frequent topic of conversation at the Listen and Learn sessions after Dr. Starr released his Capital Improvements Program (CIP) on October 28, 2011, and proposed delaying six secondary school modernization projects to focus on compliance, capacity, and maintenance needs across the district. Many parents and students expressed concerns about physical plant issues at older facilities, including leaky roofs and inadequate infrastructure for modern technology and instruction.

Dr. Starr said he shared their concerns and that the district was trying to expand and upgrade facilities as quickly as possible. However, he said ongoing budgetary concerns made it unlikely that the timeline for these projects could be greatly accelerated. He promised transparency in how these decisions are being made now and in the future.

Several attendees raised concerns about boundary and articulation patterns. For instance, several parents who live near Oak View Elementary were championing for it to become a K–5 school instead of a grade 3–5 school. Also, several questions were asked about boundary changes that were proposed—and eventually passed by the Board of the Education—to alleviate overcrowding in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster.

The issue of access to technology was raised frequently at the events and in written comments. Many community and staff members want to see more technology—such as Promethean Boards—at their school, while others wondered if the investment in technology was worth it in a time of budget reductions.

Dr. Starr said he understands the transformative power of technology when it is used by an outstanding, well-trained educator. However, he said educators must be adequately trained to use the technology and that it must be seen as a tool for a great teacher, not a replacement for one.

## **Staff Sessions**

As mentioned above, many who attended the community Listen and Learn events were MCPS staff members, some of whom are also parents in the district. As a result, many of the issues listed in the community section of this report reflect the input of staff members. However, there were issues raised in the seven staff Listen and Learn events that were of particular interest to MCPS employees.

It should be noted that the issue of salary and raises came up very infrequently in these events, even though MCPS employees have not received a cost-of-living adjustment for the past three years and have not received step/longevity increases for two years. However, Dr. Starr and the Board of Education are well aware that this is an important issue that is on the minds of MCPS staff.

Overall, the message from employees was that MCPS is a good place to work and they are appreciative of the opportunities afforded them in the district. However, there is a general feeling that the district is trying to do too much and staff members feel pulled in many different directions.

Dr. Starr said it was important for MCPS to focus its efforts around teaching and learning and everything that is done to support it.

### **Professional Development**

The need to improve and expand professional development came up at all of the staff Listen and Learn events and was frequently the subject of multiple questions. Staff members are extremely interested in increasing professional development opportunities for all employees, including teachers, administrators, and support staff.

Some employees expressed concern that the implementation timeline for Curriculum 2.0 was too aggressive and did not allow for adequate professional development. The staff that commented said they believed the new curriculum would, ultimately, benefit MCPS students, but only if teachers received adequate time, training, and support to deliver it. Staff members are also seeking opportunities to collaborate and share best practices with their colleagues in all areas, including Curriculum 2.0.

It was stressed that in order to keep up with its growing enrollment and changing demographics, teachers and staff must receive adequate training in educating students with varying needs and differentiating instruction for students at multiple academic levels.

Dr. Starr generally agreed with the concerns raised and felt that MCPS could better coordinate its professional development efforts. He said this would be an area he would directly address in the coming months to make sure the district was getting the most for the resources that were invested in professional development.

## Staff Reductions and Class Sizes

While budgetary concerns were brought up in general terms at community events, staff brought up very specific concerns related to budget reductions.

Many employees are worried about reductions to staff positions that provide valuable support, including media assistants, school-based technology specialists, paraprofessionals, and staff development teachers. Participants commented that these positions directly support excellent teaching and learning every day and the elimination or reduction in the hours of these positions has a direct impact on instruction.

Several employees raised concerns about increased class sizes caused by budgetary reductions and continued enrollment growth. Several teachers commented that increased class sizes made it more challenging to differentiate instruction and manage classroom behavior.

Dr. Starr said he was generally concerned about class sizes, but felt it was more important to make sure the district hired, retained, and trained excellent teachers. However, he did say he was not in favor of class sizes getting bigger than they are now and would consider reducing class sizes where appropriate.

## Technology

Several employees raised issues surrounding the use of technology and how the district can bridge the “digital divide” for all students.

Overall, staff seemed to believe technology was a good investment for MCPS and encouraged Dr. Starr to expand its use in the classroom. However, there were concerns that budget cuts did not allow for adequate repair and maintenance of technology and did not provide enough in-school support.

Dr. Starr made it clear that he supports the use of technology in schools but does not believe it should be something that is a “mandate” from central office. He also said that staff and leadership at MCPS could learn the best way to use and engage technology in education from the people who use it most: the students.

# Student Town Halls

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In order to engage students directly in his entry plan, Dr. Starr held two student town halls that were broadcast live on the MCPS website and on MCPS TV. The first town hall was held at James Hubert Blake High School on October 12, 2011, and the second was held November 9, 2011, at Quince Orchard High School. Both events were held during lunch periods and were moderated by Alan Xie, a senior at Richard Montgomery High School and the current Student Member of the Board of Education.

Students in the audience were able to ask questions live during the town hall; others submitted questions in advance via e-mail and the MCPS Twitter account (@MCPS).

In many instances, the questions and comments from students were similar to those raised by staff and community members during the Listen and Learn sessions. However, there were areas of emphasis for the students, including:

- **School Culture:** Many students asked Dr. Starr about reducing bullying and creating a more positive environment in schools. Dr. Starr said he believed school culture was important and would continue to work with principals to make sure bullying and harassment are reduced and dealt with quickly when they occur.

- **“Race to Nowhere:”** Many students had seen the movie “Race to Nowhere,” which documents the pressure on students to overachieve. Students commented on the competitive pressure they feel to take more advanced classes and the burden of several hours of homework. Dr. Starr encouraged students to find the right balance in their lives and said it was something that schools must consider. However, he also said the pressure was not only from the school, but from parents and peers.
- **Arts and Extracurricular Activities:** Several students commented on the importance of the arts and extracurricular activities to their school experiences and expressed concern that these opportunities were being lost due to budget cuts. Dr. Starr agreed and said he did not want to cut the arts or any extracurricular activities, although the economic conditions in the county and state would require difficult decisions.
- **Attendance Policies:** Students asked Dr. Starr for his views on the MCPS attendance policies and loss of credit for students who are habitually absent from class. Dr. Starr said a balance must be struck between making sure students are in school and in class and making sure that they are engaged in a meaningful way. He said attendance should not be the only way students show they are interested in a class, but that it was important. He promised further discussion on the issue.



The two student town halls are archived on the MCPS website and can be viewed in their entirety. Dr. Starr intends to hold additional student town hall events in the coming months.

## Conclusion

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The robust participation in the Listen and Learn events and Student Town Halls has provided Dr. Starr with invaluable insights and has allowed him to quickly gain a broad understanding of MCPS. After the new year, Dr. Starr will hold additional Listen and Learn sessions focused on specific topics—special education, gifted education, English language learners, and social and emotional competencies. The dates, times, and locations of these events will be announced shortly.

Dr. Starr also will continue to meet with community members and groups, visit schools, and will hold additional events to engage students, staff, and parents.

For more information on Dr. Starr’s schedule of events, visit the superintendent’s website at [www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/) or follow Dr. Starr on Twitter (@MCPSSuper).

**Listen and Learn information and archive:**

[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/listen/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/listen/)

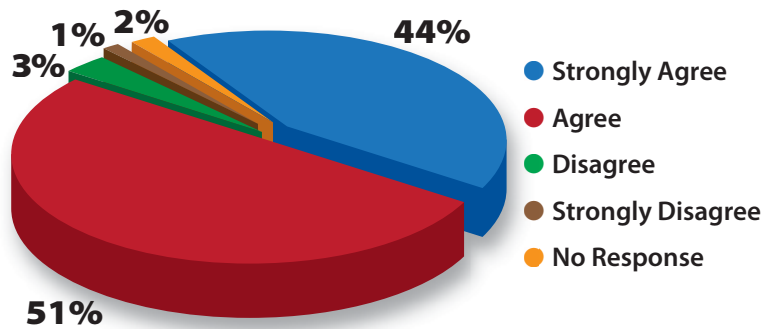
**Student Town Hall information and archive:**

[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/student-townhall/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/student-townhall/)

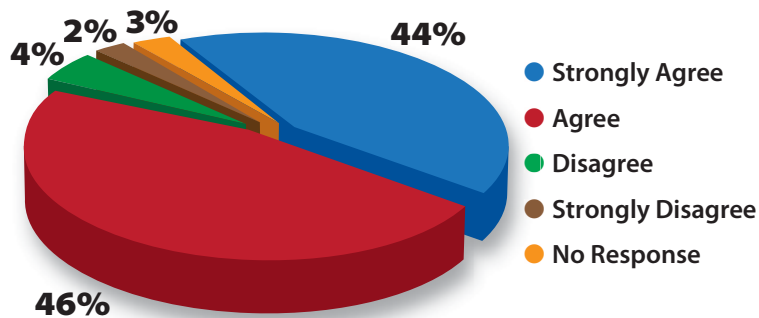
# Appendix

## Feedback from the Community Sessions Total of 577 Responses

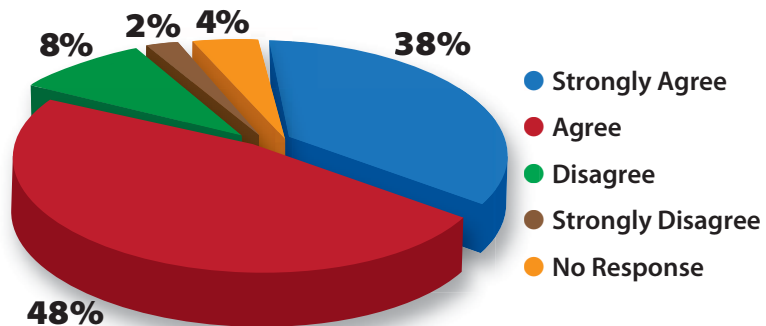
**I think the format of this meeting was effective.**



**I believe I had the opportunity to participate.**



**I feel more informed as a result of this meeting.**

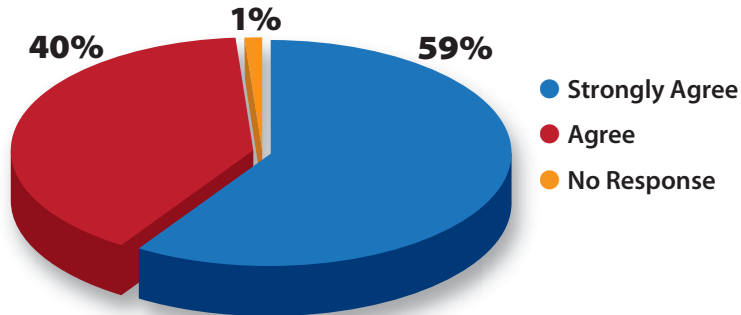


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## Feedback from the Staff Sessions

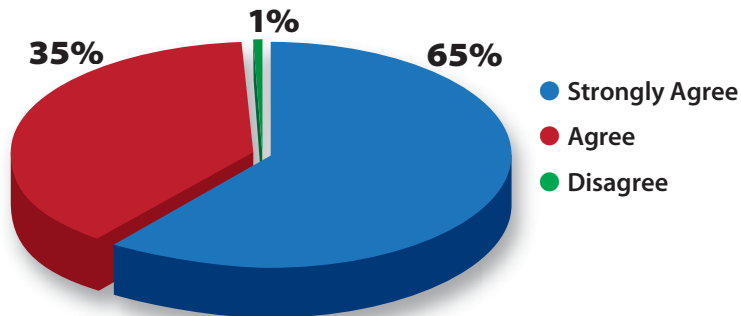
Total of 291 Responses

**I think the format of this meeting was effective.**



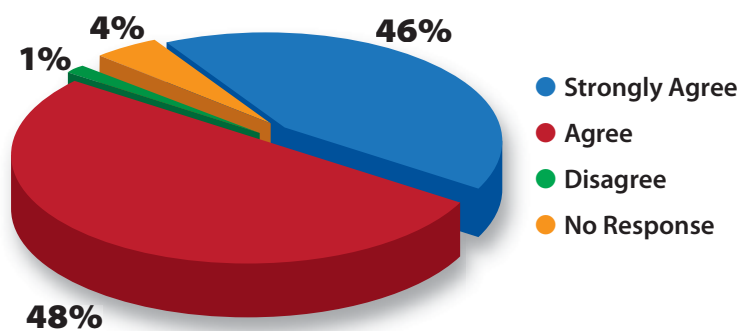
No one responded "Strongly Disagree" or "Disagree"

**I believe I had the opportunity to participate.**



No one responded "Strongly Disagree" or "No Response"

**I feel more informed as a result of this meeting.**



No one responded "Strongly Disagree"



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