

Parent Surveys Can Give You Useful Information

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For the past 11 years—first as a public school principal and now as the head of The New City School, an independent school in St. Louis—I've used parent surveys to help me gauge how parents are viewing our programs. When I began the process, I used a simple format, a one-page sheet that asked parents to respond to three items:

- "I'm happy about _____"
- "I'm unhappy about _____"
- "I'd like to know _____"

The sheets were sent home with the children and could be returned, anonymously, to the school. I was pleasantly surprised when almost one-quarter of our families responded.

Over time, I've added more and more different kinds of surveys to help me determine how parents view various aspects of our school. We typically receive responses from between one-quarter and one-third of our families. All questionnaires contain Likert-scale items ("strongly agree," "strongly disagree," and the like) as well as open-ended questions. If a child's parents are separated or divorced, we send a form to each household. The forms can be returned anonymously, but we ask parents to indicate their child's grade level. By checking a box on the form, parents can indicate that they do not wish for me to share their comments with others. Every questionnaire ends with the invitation, "Other thoughts?"

A Survey for Every Season

I mail these questionnaires to parents at regular times throughout the school year. For example, I poll parents after the first parent-teacher conference of the year to ascertain their level of agreement with the following statements:

- "My parent-teacher conference was a good use of my time."
- "During the conference, information shared gave me a good understanding of my child's current strengths and weaknesses."
- "The progress report was understandable and effective in indicating my child's progress."
- "Joint planning occurred regarding what steps school and home can take to strengthen my child's skills."
- "I feel that the school is providing learning experiences that are geared to my child's capabilities."

In May I also conduct a general spring survey to gather information about the values of our institution. The questionnaire asks parents to rank order the reasons they chose to send their child to The New City School (academics, student diversity, nurturing environment, and so on). I also solicit their perceptions about other matters, including our Extended Day Program and my own helpfulness.

In the fall I poll new parents to learn what their initial reactions are to our school, whether we are meeting their expectations, whether the open house was helpful, and so on. Parents whose children graduate will receive a form the following November, asking how the child has adjusted to the secondary school. I also send a questionnaire to parents who elect not to have their children return next year to find out what caused them to make this decision.

For each survey a summary sheet is prepared to show the frequency of responses and to capture the flavor of the narrative comments. These sheets allow us to track and compare data over time. In preparing for our parent-teacher conferences, we devote part of a faculty meeting to reviewing the survey data from the previous conference. Teachers also meet by grade level to review the questionnaires from their respective students' parents.

Only the First Step

Schools that use surveys on a regular basis can obtain valuable information about what parents perceive as their strengths and weaknesses. They can then use these data to open lines of communication so that school and home understand each other better. In doing so, both can work together toward their common goal: providing the best learning environment for the students.

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whether they will have the opportunity to touch, make, or experiment with the product demonstrated. Other topics covered during the training were ground rules for asking questions, whether raising hands was necessary, how an interested student could find out more, what materials were needed to get started, and so on. At the end of the session, the trainers directed the parents to references¹ to enhance their presentations.

Another critically important aspect of training parents to work in classrooms is the preparation necessary for laypersons to deal with professional and possibly confidential information. Anyone working with students has access to information (test scores, behavioral problems, family situations) that must not become a part of casual conversation. Because parents can be intrigued, amused, or outraged by students' comments or behaviors, they must develop sensitivity to issues of invasion of privacy and to the legal regulations regarding confidentiality so that they adopt professional precautions to protect students.

Scheduling and Observation

At the training session, the Par-aiders had indicated the ages of students with whom they wished to work and the times and days of the week when they could be available. The Par-aide Coordinator (a classroom teacher with some released time) then developed a schoolwide schedule.

After their training, Par-aiders had an opportunity to go over their "lesson plans" with the Par-aide Coordinator. This step in the process helped to eliminate the booby traps that unwary enthusiasts often design into lessons and to ensure the educational match between the Par-aider's presentation and the students.

The final component of our successful Par-aide program was the observation of each Par-aider's presentation by the teacher who had prepared students for the "lesson" followed by feedback on how they had done. The teachers discussed the successful aspects of their presentations with the

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