

Parent Surveys: Asking Questions Helps Build Positive Relationships

By Laura McInerney

At the moment, when I call Headteacher's Associations to ask about trends and things we should survey, there's usually a resigned sigh followed by the words: "Can you ask about parents?"

Over 90% of school leaders said they've seen an increase in vexatious parent complaints in the past few years. Our data, collected over this period, suggests more online abuse and verbal harassment is occurring, too.

Which is why it seems a really bad time as an organisation to be telling headteachers they ought to survey their parents. And yet...

Flames are put out by water, not more flames

In a post-pandemic world, parents are having an intense time. Not only did they have to go through a period of unexpectedly educating their children, but the financial pressures on parents are particularly acute at the moment - especially those in single-earner families.

Given these financial pressures, more families than ever are in poverty. Housing is also less secure. The same goes for food, the same goes for travel costs, the same goes for everything.

When the demands of school are added to this, it can all seem too much. "You want us to bring in three types of sugar for food tech - are you kidding?" So, the parents, whose cries into the ether in other parts of their lives are equally ignored, take to the WhatsApp groups and begin the regular kick-offs. Cue 53 other parents getting involved to release their own concerns, worries or concerns about being part of an in-group.

Headteachers, meanwhile, are on the receiving end of much of this frustration. Furthermore, the doors have been opened even wider to it since Covid. Because the pandemic required so much more communication with parents, most schools invested in systems to enable this. Email addresses were shared, apps were enabled. On the one hand, most schools can quickly let parents know if there's a snow day. On the other hand, when many parents are having a bad day, they can also let the school (and sometimes other parents) quickly know too.

Amidst all this, why would anyone open the avenue for more complaints to pour in the door?

Here's why: people who are encouraged to vent via writing feel better afterwards. How counterintuitive, right? However, research going back to the Pennebaker diary studies in 1997 shows that people sitting down to write and express their negative feelings helps them feel better. Which, of course, is why people take to WhatsApp groups in the first place! If you can get them to write it in a private forum, they will get the same outcome, but you can deal with the problems for that person rather than dealing with the emotions of 50 people.

Secondly, the ability to review the complaints at a time when you're ready is also crucial to how you, as a school leader, are likely to respond to them. A plethora of psychological experiments show that when we feel negative emotions, we are more likely to act aggressively towards others, which in turn causes them to be aggressive back.

If the first time you encounter a parent is them yelling in reception, it's likely your own physiology will kick in and make you feel more on edge. Likewise, the parent, who has had weeks of an issue building up, is probably at the final point of frustration - another emotion which prompts us to act aggressively.

Rewind this and imagine sending out a short survey a few weeks earlier. You've used the [School Surveys by Teacher Tapp platform](#), so it only takes a few minutes to plan (and you can be confident the questions make sense!). The parent, frustrated at... let's say, the fact their child is always last for lunch and so misses out on the best food... is now able to write this into the survey. They point out that it's not a huge deal, but it's upsetting their child.

The school leader receives back the report after the closing date and sits down, calmly, quietly, to look at what the parents have said. The results are mostly positive: the numerical questions are above local benchmarks. Hurray! The leader steals themselves before reading the open answers, knowing there will be a few complaints. But they are pleased to find that's not what happens! Most people are happy. There's a few issues, and the head decides to spend lunchtimes in the canteen next week to work out why some children are always at the back (are they going to clubs? Is it a game?!) and then feed that back to parents in an overall summation of the report in the end-of-term newsletter.

A crisis averted. The parent sated.

Is this just fantasy?

Okay, this isn't always how it goes. I'd love it if a survey could solve every angry parent. But I'm fascinated speaking with leaders who are using School Surveys to find out how they manage the process of calmly reading and responding to the engagement and how so many of them say that they sit down (a) expecting it to be worse (though it does sometimes feel bad), and (b) how positive they find relationships get once they start asking.

So, if you've never done a parent survey, it's worth considering how you might. And if you'd like it to be quick, easy and emotionally less challenging, check out schools-surveys.com and see if what we offer might help.

