

What Parents Want to Know ... and What to Do about It

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Many of us in Christian education know from the study of Scripture, through the teaching received from others, and from experience that we are in partnership with parents when we undertake teaching students in a Christian school. Yet we live in an imperfect world where confusing messages are sometimes sent between home and school. So what are the things on parents' minds? Can we identify them? And how are we to respond to them if we do identify them?

This article outlines some research that is based on parent surveys that were completed over a three-year period when a school was restructuring to improve the transition between elementary and high school. The focus of the surveys was on what the parents believed was working well for their students and on what was not working well.

Below is a list of the most important categories of questions that parents asked as their students progressed from elementary school into the pilot middle school:

1. Will the daily and weekly routines accommodate my child?

Parents were well aware that issues such as the organization of classes, the amount of homework and assessments given, the list of unacceptable behaviors, and the consequences for these offences played an important role in whether their student enjoyed school. Parents believed that appropriate routines in these areas demonstrated that teachers knew how to develop and adjust teaching programs in order to meet individual learning needs.

2. Do the relational norms of the class and the school reflect compassion?

Parents were very sensitive to situations where their student was involved in unclear relationship expectations. These situations might involve peers or adults. In either case, it was the teacher who was expected to have made known the ground rules to all involved.

Two particular issues arose as common themes in this area. First, parents found that the lack of consistency between teachers in the area of discipline was confusing for their student and for them. Their role of "supporting the school" became complicated and difficult when they had to defend varying responses to similar situations.

Second, some parents were concerned about whether the relational norms of school life were conducive to developing the Christian life of students. Comments such as *this teacher went over the top* reflected concerns about the nature of Christian justice. *Why do some teachers make such a big deal of this when others ignore it?* reflected concerns about fairness. And *My son's story was not heard* reflected concerns about a lack of compassion.

3. Is the basic structure of the school good for my child?

This type of question is not often asked in research or in management because we generally take for granted that the construction of timetables, staffing, and subjects is either too difficult to change or should not be changed. However, the newness of the structure of this school attracted considerable comment.

The key issues for the parents of these students in transition revolved around the balance between variety and stability. They noted that their students, when younger, needed a very stable relational and organizational environment. However, the parents also commented that their children between the ages of 10 and 12 enjoyed having some changes of personnel and place in their day. The bottom line for parents seemed to be that whatever the final mix, they wanted at least one adult to know their child well in the teaching and learning structures.

4. Is this school a place where there is a commitment to care for and respect students?

Though there were some comments over the three years about curriculum, most of the parental feedback that had an impact on whether or not the family was happy at the school centered on both commitment to the children and the manifestation of this commitment. Parents commented on subject choice and delivery, but normally with reference to how good a teacher was at connecting with the student.

The God of the Bible is a relational God, and we who are made for relationships are therefore sensitive to the things that help and hinder them. This truth has been reflected in the comments above. These comments will now be summarized into two profiles: that of the increasingly committed parents and that of the increasingly alienated parents.

The increasingly committed parents speak glowingly of the school, particularly of the teaching faculty. They may not agree with everything that goes on in the school and may be vocal at times about something with which they disagree. However, they are the school's best advertisement because of their unwavering commitment to the place and its people. In the light of this research, what would be the comments of such people? Here is a composite of comments that they may make to their friends:

This school is just great for our Johnny and Marie. As our two have grown up while attending the school, things have changed around them at just the right time. They haven't been frustrated by either the number of teachers they've had or the kinds of subjects offered. Best of all, the school knows that we care for our children, and it lets us express that. The respect shown to our children and to us really convinces us that those at the school know and care for our kids. The discipline has made sense to our kids and us, as have the other important structures in the school. Each year there has been at least one teacher who knew each of the kids as they like to be known. These teachers have been the kind of role models we hoped for as a Christian family. We believe this is the right place for our family.

This kind of family is like a treasure unto all. But beware the grumbling ones—the increasingly alienated parents. These are not ones who simply disagree about a few things in the life of the school. No, here are parents who are “on the way out.” It

almost gets to the stage when spending time with them is like tasting something bitter. Perhaps this type of community member is the modern equivalent of the grumblers that Moses encountered in the desert:

My Anna and Peter find that something goes wrong every day. The uniforms are demeaning. Recess is crazy, and the lack of lockers is causing back problems. Discipline is a joke. It depends on how the teachers feel on any given day. The choice of subjects makes no sense, and you would think that the teachers thought they were God's teaching gift to all people. They wouldn't know what to do with a toddler/teenager/senior if their life depended on it. It's not that we don't know what we want—we do. It's just that this place can't deliver. So many of the school's decisions have simply been unethical. We'd be pleased to find an alternative school that didn't just pretend at being Christian.

Here are some summary tips to help you and parents express your growing commitment to one another, thus improving your partnership:

1. Keep routine things routine.

People do not like shifting goalposts. Parents need to be able to count on calendar dates, such as excursions, exams, reports, and special nights. If dates do change, good notice with clear explanation is important.

Also, the daily organizational commitments for students need to be well-known and consistently practiced. The reasons for these commitments also need to be explained (but don't let this process become a laborious task or a chance to preach to parents).

2. Have every student well-known by at least one of the teaching faculty.

For the parents, this is a critical indicator that they are sharing their parenting and Christian educational responsibilities with the right people. Parents will tolerate annoyances of many kinds if they believe that there is a Christian teacher who understands their student that year. This understanding is demonstrated through the successful living out of mutual respect between teacher and student—and both the student and the parent know it. It is what keeps the relationship from becoming legalistic. The teacher listens and responds to the student's nonverbal cues. Thus, many potentially destructive issues can be dealt with, whether it is a learning problem, a peer problem, or even an aching heart problem. No program can replace this type of relationship. No curriculum document can supply this kind of engagement. And no discipline system on its own can bring about the resulting trust.

3. Are the teaching and learning structures age appropriate?

Why is your school structured the way it is with reference to who teaches what to whom? Do the structures result from the beliefs of the leaders in your state or country? Were the structures preferred by the professional culture in which you trained? Or are they based on sound, Christ-honoring pedagogy?

4. What is your distinctive as a Christian school?

Do you talk regularly about the basics of how you live together as a school community? Is the role of Christ as being central to your understanding and life together regularly presented, discussed, and lived? Is the way you develop curriculum

as Christians understood? Are your staffing, pastoral care, educational administration, teaching, and learning policies well-known? C. S. Lewis wrote that white posts do not stay white if they are left alone.

You may have other ideas to help improve the partnership with parents. It would be good to share these. Perhaps you have found in your school situations similar to those outlined in this article—or perhaps discoveries that are different. The author's email address is included in the biographical information preceding this article.

Fundamentally, parents want to know that Christian schools are based on Christ. They want to know that the teaching and learning structures are best for their child's age and stage. They want teachers who know their children well as people. And they want their children to come home each day without the frustration of having to do things that do not make sense to them. Then these parents will thank God for the ministry to which they have committed themselves so significantly.