

School Council Power

A school survey is a good way to identify problems — and solutions!

By Bill Robson

If you are a parent on a school council in Ontario and uncertain about how to represent your constituents, you are not alone. The respondents to the Ontario Parent Council's 1997 province-wide survey of councils indicated that difficulty in communicating with parents was one of the most wide-spread problems.

Maybe other parents on your council share your views on phonics, testing and chaos in the grade 3-4 split class but, if you push on those fronts when it turns out that most parents at the school are more concerned with computers, anti-racism and the dilapidated playground, you aren't really doing your job. But how to tell?

Well, why not ask? A school survey is one of the most powerful tools a council can use. It can provide a wealth of information about how the community views everything from curriculum to the lunchroom. The information obtained via a survey can help your council run more smoothly, assisting even your most eccentric members to find common ground. You might even find that a survey has an unlooked-for bonus, alerting school staff to a problem that they rush to fix before the school council has a chance to lift a finger.

If your council could benefit from surveying the community, you need to make sure you design your questionnaire well. To cover all subjects and provide checks against questions that might be misinterpreted, it helps to ask lots of questions. To keep the burden of answering (not to mention compiling) manageable, it therefore also helps to make the survey easy to fill out. Asking respondents to circle numbers on a scale running from complete agreement to complete disagreement is useful for many topics.

Especially if this sort of thing is new to your school, it is a good idea to be diplomatic with your questions: positive wording can overcome a lot of fears. And, while you're at it, be sure to invite responses from staff as well as parents — you'll almost certainly find that some of the most insightful comments come from teachers.

Compiling the results is a bit of a chore — but the odd late night is nothing new to most council members, and the effect on your council will make it all worthwhile. Good publicity and a couple of reminders should result in pretty good coverage of the families in your school. Particularly if you note the number of non-responses to each question (to gauge the breadth as well as the depth of feeling on an issue), the knowledge you gain will put you way ahead.

If, for example, council members see that a majority of parents support a public speaking competition, you won't feel defensive suggesting one. And if (as happened to me) you find that the bulk of parents are inclined to go with each individual teacher's judgment about how to arrange the desks in a class, you may resolve to proselytize about the virtues of rows to other parents in the halls but you'll know that the council ought to focus its energies elsewhere.

One of the toughest decisions in designing a survey is whether or not to ask pointed questions about suspected problems. Singling out individuals can cause more trouble than it solves, and it may make the whole idea of a survey so threatening that the staff and the principal balk. It may be better to decide in advance to publish only summaries of the results of each section, keeping the detailed compilation in the hands of the principal or council member who worked on it. A little delicacy in your plans for handling the results can provide the reassurance needed to go ahead with the question.

Our council took this approach, after some debate, when several members insisted that our survey should cover a school function that they felt was alienating many parents. Our action paid off in a way we had not anticipated. To our surprise, no sooner was the survey out than the situation began to improve.

By the time the results were in, staff who had previously seemed unwelcoming and unhelpful had become approachable and constructive. No follow-up by the council or the principal was necessary — and the improvement has lasted to this day! The survey itself probably did more to fix the problem than a confrontation could ever have done.

Surveying your school is likely to mean some delicate diplomacy beforehand, some hard work during and at least one late night compiling afterwards. But if your council is floundering, fighting or having a hard time getting the principal's ear, a school survey will almost certainly repay the effort. It is very hard for even the most belligerent members and autocratic principals to ignore views that are clearly backed by an overwhelming majority of the school community. So if your school council is unsure about its mandate or stuck on an issue because of uncertainty about the community's views, the answer may be simple. It may turn out that all you have to do is ask!

(A generic version of the survey used by Mr. Robson's school council is available on OQE's web site at www.oqe.org. Alternatively, you may order a free copy by requesting it on your membership renewal form.)

(Mr. Robson is the former chair of the Ontario Parent Council and the father of three school-age children in Toronto.)