The End of Sidewalk Talk: Encouraging Meaningful Feedback from Parents to Teachers

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The Challenge

To redirect teacher feedback from parents (e.g., parent-to-parent, parent-to-administrator) in healthy and positive ways.
“Sidewalk Talk”

• An informal discussion that concerns teacher performance or family’s experience with a teacher or the school

• Reasons/sources?
Alternate Titles for Presentation

- *Trying* to End Sidewalk Talk
- Don’t Tell Me, Tell the Teachers!
- Feedback is a Gift
Traditional feedback from parents about teacher performance

• Anonymous summer surveys
• Confidential meetings with administrators
• Parent-Teacher conferences
• Impromptu conversations at social events
Proposed Solution

Parent-Teacher Feedback Form:
• Timely (Real-Time)
• Efficient and easy to use
• Democratic
Collaborators

- BOT’s Learning Environment Committee
- Division Directors
- Faculty
- Pilot participants
Timeline

• Worked with Learning Environment Committee
• Met with the faculty in each division
• Division directors incorporated feedback
• Launched pilot
What Did We Ask?

- Is teacher communication effective?
- Are homework assignments manageable?
- Are meetings with my child’s teachers productive? (PS/LS)
- Is feedback on assignments timely? (MS/US)
- What else would you like to add? [DANGER!]
Preschool/Lower School Questions:

• Teacher communication (e.g., email, newsletters) is effective.
• Homework assignments are manageable (10-40 minutes per night, depending on grade level, plus nightly reading).
• Meetings with my child’s teachers are productive.
• Please use this space for any additional feedback on the above you wish to share.

THE END OF SIDEWALK TALK
Middle/Upper School Questions:

• My child can easily access course information (e.g., homework/assignments on Veracross)
• My child’s homework assignments are manageable (up to 30 minutes for non-AP and Honors courses and up to one hour for AP and Honors courses).
• My child receives timely feedback on assignments.
• Please use this space for any additional feedback on the above you wish to share.
Logistics and Parameters

• Administered twice per year (Nov/Mar)
• Questions about the student’s experience
• Choices for Response:
  • Consistently
  • Usually
  • Sometimes
  • Seldom
  • Never
  • Not Applicable / I Don’t Know
Survey Requirements

• User-friendly -- short and easy to complete
• Responsive design (works on multiple platforms/devices)
• A “walled garden”
• Non-anonymous

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What to do with the data

- Faculty expectations
- Who gets access to the data?
- Administrative oversight?
Pilot Program

• We launched a beta release of the software with select classes from each division
• This allowed us to test the software and hardware and to get immediate feedback from users (parents) about the UX/UI
What we learned from the beta test and initial release

• Concerns about the wording of the questions
• Concerns about not being able to answer the questions
• Concerns about the feedback not being anonymous
Building the Survey Software

We know what we want to ask parents.

But how do we do make it work?
Low $$$ Budget

Survey
Application
Requirements

Want it to Work

Want it This Year

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“This is an easy answer: That’s impossible!”
How to do the impossible: Survey Application MVP (minimum viable product) On-Time & On-Budget
Step 1:

Make system to create and administer surveys
Step 2:

Make system to pull enrollment data from SIS (Veracross)
Step 3:

Make the front-end system for the parents to use
Step 4:

Make the front-end system for the teachers to use
We used mature, proven, open-source technologies.
How do parents access the survey?
Teacher Experience

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Teacher with multiple classes

Parent Feedback Form
Ashu Saxena
Academic Courses:
- Algebra II
- Precalculus
Teacher with multiple classes
How long did it take to create the survey? How long for the software?

• The survey had been discussed for years prior to its creation.
• Creating the questions for the survey took several months.
• Software development process started in October after an initial meeting with Lee, and continued until the end of the school year in May.
How expensive was it to develop, conduct, and analyze the survey?

- The cost was mostly time and energy.
- The software to run the survey did not cost money to use, but required time and effort to develop a system that worked well.
- The hardware and network resources are typically already in place at most schools.
What were the biggest pros and cons of the project?

Pros:
• BOT support; met demonstrated need for additional feedback channels.
• Lack of anonymity led to more measured, professional, thoughtful responses.
• In-house development allowed the freedom to customize the software and survey to fit the exact needs of the school.

Cons:
• Each Division, department, teacher, etc. wanting their own customized questions, UI, colors, sizes, etc.
• Push-back from apprehensive parents.

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Survey Post-Op

• 25% response rate – “too nononymous?”
• Useful feedback
• Teachers interested in encouraging participation
Parent Responses

• Dance is such a highlight in my daughter’s day! She is so glad that she chose this fine art. She is learning a lot, gaining confidence and flexibility, and enjoying herself. Thank you. - US Parent

• I don't always know how my son is doing in LA, in part because he does not always share with us what he is doing etc. There is not always a lot of information or feedback on Veracross either. - MS Parent
Parent Responses

- We are especially grateful to Mme. Radcliffe. French is a tough class for Jake (both at D.A. and before D.A.). Mme. Radcliffe has been extraordinarily patient with him. He has a lot of anxiety when speaking, memorizing and preparing for French assignments, but Mme. Radcliffe seems to understand this about (student) and has been very supportive. We are very grateful. – US Parent
Evernote is a very difficult program for (student) to use, as the multiple steps to get to assignments is hard to manage. He would benefit from Homework consistently being posted on the board, and having the teacher check to make sure everything is written down. When assignments are written down, both new assignments and make up assignments, he is able to manage getting them done and turned in. When he is expected to remember they are usually not completed and turned in. ADHD is a difficult thing to manage in our MS. -MS Parent
Teacher Testimonials

“I'm definitely grateful for the positive words of encouragement I've received through the PTFF, especially the comments section. We try to explore challenging material (both intellectually and emotionally), and it feels great when the parents notice the difficult conversations we tackle in LA and History. At the end of the day, I really like that we are collecting this data, and I hope the participation rate continues to improve.” – MS History Teacher
“I got overall positive feedback - I did find it helpful that I posed a specific question to parents as their feedback was more specific to that question. It helped me see that I was on the right track with the homework changes I made this year. I also got some verbal and email feedback related to this question, so maybe parents didn't see the need to respond to the formal survey. One thing that could be improved is having dedicated time for faculty to review these comments or some sort of action that we should take as a result of the comments. I was invested because I had posed a specific question to parents so I took it upon myself to review the feedback. Otherwise, the motivation to review, digest and act upon feedback is vague.” – LS Teacher
Will Durham Academy continue to offer the survey?

• Will run the survey for two more years
• Additional changes being considered
• Hoping to analyze trends
• Committed to changing community norms
Changes to Survey
Fall 2017

• Survey left open, no deadline to complete
• Teachers have exclusive access to results
• Teachers promoted the survey extensively
• Teachers soliciting specific feedback
Recap After Fall 2017

- Continued to lead parents away from the oral tradition of sidewalk talk
- More data to analyze school-wide trends
THE END OF SIDEWALK TALK
Parent-Teacher Feedback Form: Framework

Problem
Like many schools, we struggled to redirect anonymous teacher feedback from parents (e.g., parent-to-parent, parent-to-administrator) in healthy and positive ways. We worried that, over time, such “sidewalk talk” would lead to increased levels of toxicity in our community, and we also wanted to establish that “diagonal” conversations were not in keeping with the mission and values of the school.

Proposed Solution
In addition to our traditional methods of harvesting parent feedback (e.g., parent coffees, the annual anonymous summer survey) we decided to pilot a parent-teacher feedback form that would provide feedback directly to teachers from parents in a non-anonymous format.

Mission & Values
An important part of this initiative is its connection to our most recent Strategic Plan. First, by inviting input from all parents, this new system reflects our ongoing commitment to making sure all voices in our community are heard. Second, it underscores our belief in continuous learning and improvement and a “growth mindset.” We regularly offer continuous, multiphasic feedback to students, acknowledging this is a necessary ingredient of learning. This form adds a similar stream for teacher learning— and is but one of many streams of feedback for teachers from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

Logistics & Parameters
The survey would be administered twice per year—once in the fall and once in the spring—through an online portal of our design. The questions we asked would be limited to aspects of the student experience that the parents could see. Each division may have a unique set of questions.

Questions
1. Is teacher communication effective?
2. Are homework assignments manageable?
3. Are meetings with my child’s teachers productive? (PS/LS)
4. Is feedback on assignments timely? (MS/US)
5. Unrestricted Comments Area

Key Takeaways
- Getting faculty buy-in is critical. Teaching can be a lonely, isolating enterprise, and teachers are hungry for feedback.
- Convincing parents to participate in a non-anonymous teacher survey is difficult. Many worry that if they appear critical, there will be repercussions for their child in the classroom.
- Designing appropriate and sound survey questions takes time (and elicits lots of feedback).
- No matter your initial response rate, commit to conducting the survey for at least two years. Normalizing this process takes time.

Parent-Teacher Feedback Form: Survey Checklist

6 Months Prior to Launch (PTL)
- Administration/Board (A/B) decides to conduct survey and appoint a Project Owner (PO)
- A/B and PO decide which divisions (Lower/Elementary, Middle, High/Upper, etc.) should be surveyed
- PO meets with division directors (DD) to write questions and answer choices
- PO meets with School IT and/or Software Development team (DEV) to begin the software engineering process

5 Months PTL
- DEV provides user interface (UI) mockup for critique
- DEV provides User Story (US) for critique
- PO meets with A/B to report progress and allow for suggestions on UI and US
- PO meets with DD to report progress and allow for suggestions on UI and US

4 Months PTL
- DEV provides revised UI mockup based on suggestions
- DEV provides revised US based on suggestions
- PO meets with DD to share UI and US revisions
- DD meets with their Faculty to report progress and allow for suggestions on UI and US

3 Months PTL
- PO meets with DD to revise questions one last time before pilot launch
- PO provide DEV with desired revisions

2 Months PTL
- DEV has a minimum viable product (MVP) for testing and critique
- PO email all parents: “Coming Soon” email
- PO email parents/faculty in pilot group with info about the survey
- Begin the pilot program
- DEV actively fixes bugs in application discovered in pilot program

1 Month PTL
- PO discuss results and feedback from the pilot program with DD/DEV/A/B
- PO review any content, UI, US, etc. as necessary
- PO meet with DEV to discuss feasibility of changes to US and UI

Launch Month
- PO email all parents/faculty with info about the survey
- Begin the survey
- PO and DEV actively fixing bugs and any mitigating issues that are discovered

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Thanks!
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