Customer Service: Are We Doing as Well as We Think?

Clinton (M I) Middle School surveyed its parents and guardians and teachers about school-family relationship areas and compared their perceptions. What they found helped them determine how to improve communication and support.

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Schools play many roles in a community, but next to educating students, creating successful relationships with their families is perhaps the most important. Accountability and school choice have turned parents or guardians from observers and occasional volunteers into stakeholders and customers, and their perception of their children's schools matters to educators.

Recently, Clinton (MI) Middle School conducted a study to examine school-to-family customer service efforts in the building. We compared parents' perceptions with teacher's perceptions in the areas of school-family communication, listening, and working together. We were especially looking for areas of difference between parents and faculty members to highlight logical areas to concentrate efforts to improve school-home relationships.

Clinton is a small town in southern Michigan. Because of school choice policies in Michigan, students come from across Lenawee County to attend Clinton Middle School. Currently there are about 1,250 students in grades K-12. The population is homogenous with little minority representation. Annual median income is about $58,000 per person, and more than half of the adults in the county have attended or graduated college.

How Are We Doing?
Parents and teachers were asked questions designed to measure perceptions about how community members are served by the school. Discovering the actual numbers for each of these categories—for example, number of contacts in a year—is not the point of the survey; the degree of appropriate school-parent contact will vary from school to school and from child to child. The important information is the parents' perception of the service they are receiving compared with the effort teachers perceive they are making. If their perceptions are similar, the service provided by the school is probably sufficient. If parents are reporting a great deal less service than teachers think they provide, there is room for improvement.

Five areas were covered by the survey:
Number of contacts in a year
The first part of the survey asked parents and teachers about the degree of contact between the two groups. Contacts were defined as calls or notes from teachers to parents. Administrator contacts for discipline are not included in the data.
Promptness of contact
One of the complaints voiced prior to the study was that parents were not contacted soon enough after an incident.
How well groups work together
Working together is a subjective judgment, but by comparing perceptions of teachers and parents, a degree of school effectiveness may be gauged.

Communication from school to home
This item compared how well teachers and parents felt information about school events, programs, and activities was disseminated.

Listening
Schools are usually good about sending information out to parents, but often need to improve how they listen to parents.

Figure 1 compares responses from the families and the school faculty members. All responses are expressed as a percentage of total responses. The greatest two percentages in each response line are shaded to aid in comparing responses.

The Results
The survey told us that we were doing well in some areas but not so well in others. Teachers and parents agreed that contact is made promptly when a concern is raised. The categories regarding communication, listening, and working together, however, revealed differences in perceptions. In general, faculty members thought they were doing better than the parents did. The large difference was in how many contacts were made each year. Parents said one to four contacts were made each year, but faculty members felt they were making seven or more.

After the survey revealed where teacher and parent perceptions were out of alignment, four actions were taken at Clinton Middle School:

1. Active listening became part of the evaluative process.
   Teachers were given one-on-one coaching in active listening skills. Better listening skills have been observed and documented through the process. In the future, professional development may be geared toward listening skills and the benefits good listening will provide.

2. Our school improvement process has also changed from reporting to parents yearly to including parents and students on our goal committees. Parents have input at regularly scheduled parent forums, and several members of the community work directly with our teachers on these committees. Currently we are working on reading skills, writing improvement, and improving students academic choices. The input parents and students have given has directly influenced our choices as professionals. Budget and professional development are tailored to support the decisions of these committees.

3. The current system for sharing information within the district has been improved. An electronic sign and a weekly newsletter enhance event notification. Teachers are encouraged to make and document more phone calls to parents. “Caught being good” postcards have been printed and are sent home to parents to recognize good behavior. An e-mail list has been created so parents receive weekly and special news via the Internet. Parent and community members may place their names on the list.

4. The parent forum process has been continued and improved. Several times each year, a forum is held in which parents may come in and meet with the principal in groups or individually. These forums increase the school’s commitment to listening to parent’s concerns. Every issue raised by parents receives attention and progress is reported at the next forum. Individual issues are followed up by phone calls.

The survey results and the general recognition that we should do a better job listening to our customers prompted improvement in how our school functions. It is a relatively simple and inexpensive tool to let everyone know you value their input and to locate the weak spots in your school-family relationships.