

Knowing Your School

**A series of briefing notes for school governors from
the National Governors' Association produced in
association with partners**



Getting to Know Your Parents

This is the third briefing note in the NGA's *Knowing your School* series, produced in partnership with Kirkland Rowell Surveys. The first two briefing notes focused on RAISEonline and can be viewed on the NGA website, www.nga.org.uk.

National Governors' Association

The National Governors' Association aims to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by promoting high standards in all our schools and improving the effectiveness of their governing bodies. NGA represents governors across England in both maintained schools and academies.

The NGA is a membership organisation: governing bodies can join at a standard (£70 for 2012/13) or GOLD rate (£250). To join NGA and receive regular updates, visit the following website:

Website: www.nga.org.uk
Telephone: 0121 237 3780
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Kirkland Rowell Surveys

Over the last 12 years, Kirkland Rowell Surveys for parents, pupils and staff have been used by over 2,500 schools across the UK. The surveys enable schools to monitor the changing perceptions of key stakeholders, providing a wealth of evidence for effective self-evaluation. The statistics referenced in this paper are taken from over 420,000 parental responses from both Primary and Secondary schools in the last 12 months.

Kirkland Rowell Surveys is part of GL Performance, a provider of school management tools and resources that are designed to maximise the impact of self-evaluation, school development planning and school improvement in primary, secondary, independent and special schools, as well as schools with Academy status.

Resources from GL Performance include Kirkland Rowell Surveys, Professional Development Services, Schoolcentre and GO 4 Schools.

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About the author

Ian Rowe has been working with Kirkland Rowell Surveys since 2000 and was appointed General Manager in 2009, before the company was acquired by the GL Education Group. Ian is now the General Manager of GL Performance, which includes the management of Kirkland Rowell Surveys, and is also a school committee member at Newminster Middle School, part of The Three Rivers Learning Trust.

Endorsement from Brian Lightman, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders



We know from research that parental involvement has a major influence on how well children do in school. After all, children spend less than a quarter of their waking lives in school, so parents' behaviour and approach is bound to have a major effect on their children's attitude to their education. School leaders recognise this and are constantly looking for ways to more effectively engage parents and governing bodies have an important role to play in supporting senior staff in these efforts.

Parents and schools are a powerful force when they work together in the best interests of children and the community, and this report helpfully outlines some of the ways that schools can build these relationships. Research shows that the majority of parents want to be more involved in their children's education and this is encouraging. The majority of schools already are investigating more informal and flexible means of two-way communication with parents. Objective and in depth surveys are one way to accomplish this.

We welcome the fact that this report backs up what ASCL has consistently said: parents want a good local school rather than more choice of schools, and they want reassurance that their child will be safe and happy and be encouraged to fulfil their full potential. These factors are every bit as important as exam results.

Endorsement from Russell Hobby, General Secretary, NAHT



A school can't shine without parents and families on side. At the very least, this means good two way communication – keeping people informed and listening carefully. Listening needn't be painful. In fact, most parents think their children's school is wonderful. According to a recent NAHT survey, 85% think teaching is good or better and 93% feel welcome in school. And where people do have concerns, early action can prevent them growing into disputes.

With the growth of transparency and parent power, working with parents becomes ever more urgent. It is no longer enough to have a sound educational vision; school leaders have to get out there and convince people of it in the face of competing ideas for what makes a good education. There is every reason to believe they can succeed – they are trusted and respected – but it cannot be taken for granted. Nor should schools feel they have all the answers: parents' hopes for their children are not only legitimate but also powerful sources of energy and enthusiasm for a school's work.

Parents: the key stakeholder?

The government has repeatedly emphasised the importance it places on stakeholders and their views on schools, none more so than parents. Research has shown that the involvement of parents, for children between the ages of seven to 16, in their schooling had a greater influence on attainment than family background, size of family and level of parental education.

With this in mind, an effective governing body should:

- Question how its school is engaging with parents;
- Ensure that the school is engaging effectively with parents;
- Use the information obtained from parents to challenge school leaders effectively. Research shows that governing bodies do not generally challenge well. We are good at supporting schools and often good at monitoring the compliance aspects of our role but not at challenging the headteacher / principal effectively. Governing bodies need to have independent information and parents' perceptions are a key source;
- Use parental views to inform the school evaluation and strategic planning; and
- Report back to parents the results and the changes you have made as a result.

Why are the views of parents so important?

A school needs to understand its parents and their views of the education being provided to their children because parents choose schools and they have an enormous influence on their children's learning.

This briefing does not cover the issue of engaging with parents in order to involve them more effectively in supporting their child's learning or their parenting. Nor is it a document concerned with dealing with parental complaints, although the information gleaned from a complaint might also alert governing bodies to issues which need consideration. This note aims to give governing bodies an understanding of their role in seeking the views of parents.

Ofsted and the introduction of Parent View

Ofsted has recently introduced Parent View – a website that encourages parents to contribute their views on schools' performance. The questionnaire includes 12 questions covering issues important to the parents and schools alike.

Some schools have voiced their concern that a small number of disaffected parents could skew the overall feedback about their school. At a recent NGA seminar, Ofsted confirmed that only three contributions were needed to allow the views to be seen, but assured delegates that far more than that number would be needed to trigger an inspection.

It's natural that as parents become better informed about their child's education, we can expect them to challenge schools more about standards and goals. That should encourage school leaders to actively seek their input.

Ofsted laid out its thinking on the matter in its 2010/11 Annual Report: "Most commonly, the governing body knew too little about the school because monitoring was not rigorous or because over-generous self review judgements were accepted without sufficient challenge," it wrote. "At times of great change and in an inherently challenging sector, they accepted too much on trust."

Five key questions governors need to consider:

This briefing paper will cover some of the key ways we should be engaging with parents, although it will concentrate on arguably the most effective way of canvassing parental opinion: the parental survey.

The questions we will cover are:

1. How can we engage with parents?
2. How do we conduct a survey for parents?
3. What are useful questions to ask parents
4. What do our results tell us?
5. How do we report and act on the results?

Question 1: how can we engage with parents?

There are many ways to engage with parents:

- Encourage head teachers, members of the senior leadership team and / or classroom staff (more in Primaries) to welcome pupils into school or be at the school gate at the end of the day;
- Invite parents into school to talk about key school initiatives within a class or Key Stage, as well as provide guidance on what parents should do to support their children's learning;
- Circulate regular newsletters;
- Utilise the school website, ParentMail or even a Twitter feed to provide regular school updates and encourage dialogue;
- Include information about the governing body in a dedicated section of the school website, provide governors with recognisable 'governor badges' and organise a photo wall in the school reception that includes head and shoulders photographs of members of staff and also key members of the governing body;
- Think about having some kind of open door policy, when the headteacher or members of the senior leadership team offer set times for parents to meet with them.

Often, parental engagement is more of a struggle for secondary schools. But the Family and Parenting Institute found dramatic differences were possible through the use of link workers, who can arrange follow ups with those parents who are unable to attend parents' evenings, or even arrange information meetings between staff and parents.

However, there are two further key ways to encourage effective parental engagement: establish an active Parent Council and conduct regular parental questionnaires to gauge feedback and act on any concerns raised.

Parent Councils

Many schools will already have a Parent Council active within their establishment. A Parent Council is a body which enables parents to meet, share ideas and feed back to the school, and helps to develop a partnership between parents and school.

However, it's important to note that the role of the governing body does not diminish where there is a Parent Council, and it still remains the decision-maker providing strategic leadership. The governing body will however need to take into account views expressed by and representations made by the Parent Council.

Parent Councils provide a valuable forum for parents to have a voice within the school, providing feedback about key initiatives within the school. They frequently provide a direct conduit for the governing body to engage with parents. Their role is different from the traditional fundraising role of the PTA, but some schools do use their PTA as a consultative group.

While some schools are legally required to set up a Parent Council (namely Trust schools where a majority of governors are appointed by the Trust), for most it remains up to the governing body of the school to decide if it wants one and how to support it. While there is no longer any requirement to include details of the Parent Council in self-evaluation reports for Ofsted, given the need to demonstrate how parents' views are being acted upon, it would be surprising to omit this now.

For more information and examples of how Parent Councils can be effective, visit www.parentcouncils.co.uk.

Question 2: how do we conduct a survey for parents?

Gauging parental opinion is not a straightforward task. It may well be that parents with a child that has excelled or those with an axe to grind are only too happy to complete and return a questionnaire. But these views may not be representative and it's imperative that school leaders devise strategies to poll opinion from the silent majority of parents to ensure their self-evaluation is properly robust.

One of the best ways to improve response rates is through an active marketing campaign before the questionnaire is sent out. Use newsletters, ParentMail and the like to inform parents about the questionnaire, and explain why their views matter. It also helps to get the pupils involved – their cajoling can help drive response rates up. Meanwhile, form tutors can keep an eye on which parents have returned questionnaires, so can help pass on reminders, if needed.

When sending reminders, keep a positive spin on the message. Sending a reminder that says you have only received 10 responses will not motivate other parents into action. Rather, a message such as “For those that have not yet had chance to give us their feedback ...” tends to produce a much better outcome.

These days, there’s a temptation to think that technology can make our lives easier. But when it comes to parental surveys, we would urge school leaders not to be seduced by apparent ease of online questionnaires. From our experience, it seems that using online surveys is the most sure-fire way of actually reducing response rates – typically by a factor of 10. It’s just too easy for parents to ignore something that lands in an inbox.

Timing is also important. Holidays are kryptonite for questionnaires – so pick your times carefully and ensure you have two full weeks that will not be interrupted by holidays, inset days or school plays.

Having a motivated child as the conduit between parents and schools makes the single biggest difference to a school’s response rates. While response rates vary from school to school and area to area, you should ideally look for a response rate of at least 40% in order to obtain statistically reliable data.

Question 3: what are useful questions to ask parents?

One of the hallmarks of a successful self-evaluation process is having a clearly defined goal at the outset. Those schools that understand what they want to measure in order to improve teaching and learning have an immediate head start. Often, school leaders struggle with the questions that they want to ask parents. However, one good trick is to use surveys to poll opinion on changes that the school has already implemented.

This is a powerful way to demonstrate the quality of the self-evaluation process as it provides a feedback mechanism, enabling school leaders to appraise the success of initiatives and make adjustments to their strategies accordingly. It can also help demonstrate that the governing body has understood what issues within the school need addressing.

To give parental responses a degree of context, it is best practice to ask two types of questions: ones that assess how satisfied parents are with particular aspects of the schools; and ones that assess how important these are to parents.

Without asking both types of question, there’s a risk that school leaders will be misled by parents’ satisfaction with aspects of the school that they regard as unimportant – or fail to identify dissatisfaction with important issues.

It’s also important to give parents more than a straight scorecard. While this approach makes the task of analysing the results more straightforward, you miss out on the opportunity to put context to some of the results. Qualitative information, such as “any further comments or suggestions”, might take more time to analyse, but it provides an invaluable opportunity to identify potential issues that may otherwise go undetected. An example of this was a comment, “I am no longer able to help my child in Year 4 with his maths homework – can someone please help me.”

Top 5 questions to ask

From our experience, these are the top five areas schools explore in their surveys. The top four are common to both Primary and Secondary schools, however there is one main difference in 5th place. 'Extra curricular activities' which is asked of Secondary parents is replaced by 'quality of management' for Primary parents.

1. Ensuring pupils do their best and make good progress
2. Encouraging and listening to parent views
3. Treating all pupils fairly and equally
4. Explaining to parents how to help their child
5. Quality of school management (Primary) / Extra curricular activities (Secondary)

These five areas should be included in any parental questionnaire. However, it is best practice to also choose some additional questions which are pertinent to your own school's particular circumstances.

Question 4: what do our results tell us?

Working with school leaders over the past 12 years, we have identified 20 key parental priorities for parents of primary and secondary school children, 17 of which are common to both. These range from teaching quality and exam results to happiness of child and levels of homework.

The following tables highlight the top 5 most important areas of schooling for parents, listed according to the responses by Primary and Secondary parents and in order of priority.

Some interesting points to note are:

- Surprisingly, exam results do not appear in the top 5 and rarely in the top 10 for most schools.
- The top 5 priorities are identical for Primary and Secondary parents.
- 'Caring teachers' is more important to girls' parents, whereas 'developing potential' is more important to boys' parents.
- In terms of satisfaction with each of the different areas, parents are most satisfied with 'happiness of child'. A satisfaction score of 80% would be equivalent to an average of 4.2 on a 1-5 scale, 75% to an average of 4 on a 1-5 scale and so on.

Even those establishments that have a clear understanding of what to ask parents can face a challenge in interpreting the data they get back. Entering and analysing the data can be a laborious and time-consuming task, especially as those charged with interpreting the data may have little more to rely on than a simple spreadsheet.

Some schools employ third parties to do this for them.

When analysing the data, it's essential to take into account statistical reliability. Without it, an average score of three on a scale of one to five could mean everyone is neutral towards that question, or it could mean that parents are polarised between the highly satisfied or extremely dissatisfied.

You will also want to be able to drill down in to the data, analysing results by gender or year group. As children progress through their school, parents' concerns can change – typically, where parents have children who are taking exams, there's a tendency to place greater importance on academic issues. If you can benchmark your results against those of a large number of schools operating in similar circumstances, it's far easier to spot the unusual results.

To take another example, looking at parental views on academic subjects, it may be tempting to celebrate the achievements of your history teachers, while having a quiet word with the head of religious studies. As it happens, history invariably scores well at the vast majority of schools, while religious studies nearly always rates poorly – apart from at Catholic schools, where it can outshine history. Knowing these patterns and removing parental bias can again provide context for results.

Top priorities for Primary schools

The following table shows the **top 5 most important priorities** for Primary and Secondary school parents, based on data from Kirkland Rowell Surveys.

Criterion	PRIMARY: Top 5 priorities	PRIMARY: Average score (Satisfaction)	SECONDARY: Top 5 priorities	SECONDARY: Average score (Satisfaction)
School discipline	90%	79%	88%	70%
Teaching quality	87%	80%	87%	71%
Happiness of child	85%	81%	79%	72%
Control of bullying	76%	70%	72%	65%
Caring teachers	73%	80%	67%	70%

In these questionnaires, parents are asked to select 10 areas out of a choice of 20 key priorities which they feel are the most important for their child. Out of all the Primary parents surveyed this way, 90% chose 'school discipline', making it the area of highest importance across the board, followed closely by 'teaching quality', which was chosen by 87%.

The second set of questions then demonstrate how satisfied parents are with how their schools are performing against these priority areas. For instance, the table shows that 90% of parents consider 'school discipline' to be what is most important to them. In terms of how satisfied they are with their school's management of discipline, parents give it a satisfaction score of 79% (equivalent to an average score of 4.15 on a 1 – 5 scale where 1 is very unsatisfied and 5 is very satisfied).

Based on our averages of schools, a good satisfaction score in a Primary school would be above 70%, above 80% is outstanding.

Top priorities for Secondary schools

Similarly for Secondary parents, 88% believe that 'school discipline' is the most important priority. However, their level of satisfaction is lower than at Primary level – only 69% of Secondary parents (compared to 79% of Primary parents) are satisfied with how schools manage school discipline. However it is important to note that parents of Primary school children always give a more positive score than those of Secondary schools.

When you look at the main differences between parents of girls and boys, having 'caring teachers' is a more important consideration for girls' parents, whereas 'developing potential' is more important to boys' parents.

Question 5: how do we report and act on the results of consultation?

It is important to consider how things have changed from the previous year. The results of parental surveys should necessarily play some part in the school improvement plan – if there are any obvious areas of concern, these naturally suggest where action needs to be taken.

You should always provide parents with feedback on the survey results and the actions you intend to take as a result. Failure to do so will mean response rates will drop off with the next survey and as you will want to annually re-evaluate, you don't want this to happen.

You can report the findings in many ways. A letter to all parents ensures that the feedback should reach everyone, and you can also include the findings on the school website and in your next school newsletter. It's always worth highlighting both some of the positive findings and also some of the areas where parents have suggested you need to address – and how you will be doing so.

There may also be issues which you want to investigate further. The governing body could decide to undertake a focus group with parents on a specific subject which is causing concern or was the surprise.

In one school we worked with recently, their survey highlighted concerns around communication between the school and its parents. It was frustrating for the head as she had tried several times to get parents in to discuss certain subjects including this topic and no-one ever turned up. When she fed the results back to her parents, highlighting this was the area they had raised as their number one priority for improvement and specifically asked for parents who had rated this area negatively to come in and tell her how she could improve it, the response was overwhelming.

The leaders at your school should be prepared to discuss the results – whether it has been a lightening rod for parental disaffection or reason for celebration.

Primary case study

Cedar Road Primary in Northampton had been through a period of massive upheaval, with the introduction of Year 6 pupils for the first time in 2007.

“It’s not the case that you’re just dealing with bigger 10-year-olds; they have a whole different set of development needs. You can interact more and they can also be given far greater responsibilities,” says Head teacher, Kay Gerrett. And as well as changing the atmosphere of the school, it also introduced the need to prepare for Key Stage 2 SATs.

In the past, Kay had developed a questionnaire that she sent out to parents, seeking feedback on how they perceived what was going

on in the school and what they thought of the initiatives underway. The problem was, says Kay, that analysing the results and then determining what that told her about the school in comparison to similar establishments was time consuming and difficult.

To ensure she could find out what parents really thought about what was going on in the school, in December 2009, Kay decided to use a parental stakeholder survey from an external provider [Kirkland Rowell Surveys], who produces a dedicated version of the parental survey for Primary schools.

“Our governors have always been very hot on the importance of the parent voice and building a

strong partnership with parents,” Kay says. As such, families have been a strong focus for her team of staff and everyone has been on board with the idea of using a parental questionnaire to provide information that will improve the outcomes for children.

Kay had been concerned that the parents of Foundation Level pupils may have wanted more contact with the school, so she was able to include this as part of the questionnaire. “The results backed up my assumptions”, says Kay, “and as a result, they provided the impetus to address that and puts measurements in place to assess our progress.”

Secondary case study

When Ofsted inspectors gave Jarrow School in Tyne & Wear a school improvement notice in 2009, little can they have imagined that their demands would be met so quickly. The school has been testament to what can be achieved when it’s required.

The Ofsted notice was the tipping point; the school was forced to act. In fact, it was the catalyst for an ambitious school improvement plan which saw it form a partnership with a local outstanding school, Harton Technology College.

“From my perspective, one of the things I wanted to do at the outset was to find out what people within the school community thought needed doing,” says executive head Ken Gibson.

Having sent questionnaires to parents to get feedback, Ken invited them in to a series of meetings to discuss the results. Those meetings were a vital part in forging a strong link with parents, so that Ken and his team could outline their plans and dig into the details of the parents’ concerns. By fostering the relationship,

Jarrow has been able to exceed Ofsted’s improvement targets.

“Surpassing the Ofsted improvement targets is hugely rewarding. Having the questionnaires was an important part of that. The results were concrete evidence that everybody in the school community appreciated the momentous turnaround. It is a massive help with Ofsted inspections to have the information from the stakeholder surveys to hand.”

Feedback

The NGA would like to hear from any governing bodies on this subject of understanding parents. Please let us know if you have any comments on this briefing note, or if you have a success story to share with other schools. Please email emma.knights@nga.org.uk