Improving the Use of Survey Data:
A Study of Principals' Needs

Report Submitted to the
South Carolina Education Oversight Committee
Parent and Community Involvement Subcommittee

by

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Executive Summary

The Education Accountability Act of 1998 and the Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education Act of 2000 require the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee to survey parents to determine parent perceptions of their child's school and the effectiveness of state and local parental involvement programs to improve parental involvement. In response to these statutory requirements and in consultation with educators, a survey was developed by the Institute for Families in Society at the University of South Carolina and pilot tested with parents.

To ensure the usefulness of the results of the survey, the EOC contracted in April 2003 with The Center for Child and Family Studies in the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina to conduct a focused study of what principals need to make use of the survey results. The specific focus of the study was on the use of results from the 2002 Parent Survey and how the results of the parent survey compare with those from the teacher and student surveys.

Staff members from the Center's research and evaluation division used a procedure called purposive sampling to create two focus groups: one for elementary-school principals and another for middle-and high-school principals. We sought representation across the state, across counties within a region, and across urban and rural schools within a region. For the secondary-level focus group, we sought equal representation of middle and high school principals.

Each focus group consisted of six participants. The secondary-level group had an equal number of male and female participants, while the elementary-level group was entirely female in composition. One black female participated in the secondary-level group. The school districts represented in the groups were Horry, Lee, Marion One, Florence One, Florence Two, Williamsburg, Chester, Laurens 56, Kershaw, Newberry, Orangeburg, and Richland One.

The following four questions were asked of participants in both groups. The specific prompts that followed each question differed slightly from group to group, but each group responded to the same initial questions.

1. Regardless of the distribution process used in the parent survey, how can principals improve the parent survey response rate at their school?

2. What specific tools (manual, computer model, summary tables) etc. do principals need in order to analyze the results of the parent survey and to compare the results of the parent survey with the results of the teacher survey?

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3. What specific tools do principals need to determine areas for improving home-school relations, the learning environment, or the physical environment of their school?

4. What specific tools do principals need to utilize the results of the parent and teacher surveys when formulating policies and programs to improve parental involvement at their school?

Each focus group was audiotaped (with the permission of the participants), and from each audiotape, a verbatim written transcript was produced. From repeated reading of the transcripts, categories were developed to capture the content of the discussions. This procedure was repeated several times to ensure that the most accurate and appropriate categories had been created and that the content of both transcripts was appropriately organized.

The findings are summarized according to the four major questions asked of the principals.

1. Regardless of the distribution process used in the parent survey, how can principals improve the parent survey response rate at their school?

> The principals offered many suggestions for improving the response rate at their schools. These included offering more incentives to teachers, parents, and students; selecting more grade levels; administering the surveys with more personal, face-to-face contact (i.e., hand delivering the surveys, having them completed during events at school or in a special location at school); making the surveys more user-friendly, including clarifying the content of the questions; changing the time of year the survey is administered, and providing a longer response time.

2. What specific tools (manual, computer model, summary tables, etc.) do principals need in order to analyze the results of the parent survey and to compare the results of the parent survey with the results of the teacher survey?

> In terms of "specific tools," the suggestions made by the participants were (1) to develop a "frequently asked questions" pamphlet to make the findings more understandable to parents and (2) to develop a manual that they could consult to better understand the survey and the results. Other important suggestions were to simplify the survey report by using more charts, graphs, and tables; to combine the results of the parent survey with other surveys to determine overall meaning; and to provide more expertise and information about how to interpret the significance of the results, especially the meaning of percentages and the comparison of any given school with schools similar to it.

> In terms of comparing the results of the parent survey with those from the teacher survey, the principals stated that various forms of informal

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discussion (one-on-one and small group) among the school administration, the faculty, and parents is the best method for determining comparisons and interpreting their meaning.

It is clear to the facilitator of the focus groups that the principals' concerns about sampling from specific grade levels, about the survey itself, and about specific procedural issues are an impediment to their use of the results.

3. What specific tools do principals need to determine areas for improving home-school relations, the learning environment, or the physical environment of their school?

Even when prompted and redirected, the discussions in both groups in response to this question were less about specific tools or strategies for determining areas for improvement and more about how they are using the survey results to involve parents and about the inherent challenges. The discussions indicated keen interest in the topics. Among the challenges mentioned, the need for better preparation of teachers to interact with diverse groups was of special interest.

4. What specific tools do principals need to utilize the results of the parent and teacher surveys when formulating policies and programs to improve parental involvement at their school?

The responses to this question were significantly fewer in number than to the other three questions. The participants in both groups stated that the policies and procedures in their schools are largely determined by district policies. One comment pertained to the need for districts as a whole to examine how they can improve parent involvement.

We are making four primary recommendations:

1. Display the survey results through more charts and colorful graphs. (Details to accompany this recommendation are presented in the full report.)

2. Provide ways for principals to talk about the survey results with evaluators, either through telephone conversations or group meetings or both. Follow up with the principals from the focus groups to understand which method of communication or combination of methods best meets their needs.

3. Address concerns expressed by the principals regarding the representativeness of the survey results. Review for feasibility their ideas about how to improve the response rate.

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4. Conduct a factor analysis of the survey (to understand how a profile of scores can be reported) and other statistical analyses (to generate a significance criterion for interpreting the percentages provided in the score reports.)

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Background

The Education Accountability Act of 1998 and the Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education Act of 2000 require the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee to survey parents to determine parent perceptions of their child's school and the effectiveness of state and local parental involvement programs to improve parental involvement. In response to these statutory requirements and in consultation with educators, a survey was developed by the Institute for Families in Society at the University of South Carolina and pilot tested with parents.

To ensure the usefulness of the results of the survey, the EOC contracted in April 2003 with The Center for Child and Family Studies in the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina to conduct a focused study of what principals need to make use of the survey results. The specific focus of the study was on the use of results from the 2002 Parent Survey and how the results of the parent survey compare with those from the teacher and student surveys.

Methodology

Staff members from the Center's research and evaluation division used purposive sampling for selecting the focus group participants. This form of sampling is based upon the goals of a focus group and produces the appropriate sample of individuals who can contribute to a discussion on a given topic. Discussions about sampling led us to the conclusion that primary and elementary school principals face some issues that are different from those faced by secondary (middle and high school) school principals. Thus, we decided that more meaningful discussion would result from forming two separate groups of participants.

Each prospective participant received a letter of invitation from the EOC regarding the focus group. The researchers followed up with a phone call and then a mailing of the informed consent form to those who could participate. We held the group for secondary principals from the Upstate and Midlands areas in Columbia and the other group from Charleston and the Pee Dee in Florence. Dates for the focus groups (May 27th and 29th) were chosen based upon PACT testing and proximity to the end of school to ensure that principals were not asked to be away from school during these important times.

The Participants

In developing our list of prospective participants, we sought representation across the state, across counties within a region, and across urban and rural schools within a region. For the secondary focus group, we sought equal representation of middle and high school principals. A list of ten prospective participants was developed for each focus group; for each participant on the

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list, an alternate principal from the same county, and when possible, the same district, was identified.

Each focus group consisted of six participants. The secondary group had an equal number of male and female participants, while the elementary group was entirely female in composition. One black female participated in the secondary group. The school districts represented by the participants in the two groups were Horry, Lee, Marion One, Florence One, Florence Two, Williamsburg, Chester, Laurens 56, Kershaw, Newberry, Orangeburg, and Richland One.

Questions Asked during the Focus Groups

The following four questions were asked of participants in both groups. The specific prompts and follow-up questions differed slightly from group to group, but each group responded to the same initial questions.

1. Regardless of the distribution process used in the parent survey, how can principals improve the parent survey response rate at their school?

2. What specific tools (manual, computer model, summary tables) etc. do principals need in order to analyze the results of the parent survey and to compare the results of the parent survey with the results of the teacher survey?

3. What specific tools do principals need to determine areas for improving home-school relations, the learning environment, or the physical environment of their school?

4. What specific tools do principals need to utilize the results of the parent and teacher surveys when formulating policies and programs to improve parental involvement at their school?

Analysis of Transcripts

Each focus group was audio taped (with the permission of the participants), and from each audiotape a verbatim written transcript was produced. From repeated reading of the transcripts, categories were developed to capture the content of the discussions. This procedure was repeated several times to ensure that the most accurate and appropriate categories had been created and that the content of both transcripts was appropriately organized.

Findings

The findings are organized below into five major sections. These sections reflect the most appropriate rubric for organizing the content of the transcripts from both groups. The issues raised across the groups were sufficiently similar to warrant collapsing the findings, except in section five, which reflects comments

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from the elementary principals only. If there were other differences in the scope of discussion on specific topics, they are noted below.

The comments from the participants are printed as bulleted items below the major headings (bold) and subheadings (bold and italicized). The comments have been shortened for readability, and they should be read as separate comments, not as a continuous discussion.

Findings: Section One
The participants made several suggestions about what they need to make better use of the survey results. These are organized below as specific tools, the format of the survey report, combining results of surveys, and more expertise and information in interpreting the significance of findings.

Specific Tools
- ➤ In the school improvement council meetings we discussed the surveys and thought about if we created a frequently asked question pamphlet that it would help the parents tremendously to better understand. This would go out to all parents and would help them interpret the survey results. It would be a large job but I think it would do a better job.

- ➤ A manual that you may want to consult or you may want to look at closer.

Format of the Survey Report
- ➤ I want to see the least amount of narrative that I can see. I like the tables that have the 1 to 4 and I can quickly look and see percentages on the above versus the below. I don't want more description because I am going to be in a hurry to look and I want to be able to see quickly and be able to use the results.

- ➤ I think the charts are very helpful because that is a quick look and you can get a general feel of the survey without having to read a lot of narrative or having to go back and look at the results individually. The charts and graphs are very helpful.

- ➤ What you really want to do is pick out areas of strengths and weaknesses so you know where to zero in to improve.   The tables and graphs just stand out and you don't have to search for it and that helps a lot.

- ➤ The school faculty indicators are not relevant to parents and it doesn't need to be there. It is too much information.

- ➤ If they could somehow take out the important things and put them under a few headings–that is all the parents are going to look at. They don't

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even know what that parent-teacher ratio means and they could care less. If you just said School Performance Indicators and you pulled out 2 or 3 and you could do a survey around the state to see what the principals thought should be the indicators.

Combining Results
➢ I don't think we have problems understanding what we get back. I think that one of the things for me has to do with getting things in pieces. You fill out different surveys for different things and they all come back separately and that ends up being kind of a pile of things on your desk. There are certain ones that you look at more closely than others. I think that the parent survey probably is one of those but it would be helpful to me if that data could be combined more in a single report.

➢ I think you would have a much clearer picture of what your issues are if you had all of that in one place. What tends to happen is that you look at it as it comes back in and then you put that away and then another comes and you put that away. You are kind of looking at them in isolated situations. I think that if it could somehow be combined where you could give all this information that would be collected and get it all back in one report as opposed to individual pieces like that.

More Expertise and Information in Interpreting the Significance of Findings
➢ …we can look at numbers and unless you have a background in statistics it is difficult but whoever developed this survey-- if they had an idea what numbers to look at and kind of give you a hint when to make changes because sometimes it is kind of fuzzy. It is especially difficult when you get into this strongly disagree, disagree, strongly agree, and don't know stuff.

➢ I think I just go to the 3 or 4 areas or questions that seem to be most positive or most negative and try to build on the most positive and try to work on the most negative. I realize that is leaving out a lot of others but the ones that are on the extreme seem to be the ones that you can really begin to understand and do something with. I don't know that we would want this but another aspect of that is that if my school is very negative on one question or area, you wonder how that relates to someone else's school down the road.

➢ We do get the feedback of what other schools similar to ours are and I do look at that.

➢ I am not always clear because my school is very unique. It is really unique so I can't figure out which ones they felt were similar to mine. On one hand you may be talking about a 75 year-old building, so it is not going to get the same rave reviews as a 5 year-old building.

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> I think that it might be better if it were more global. If it were based on how you compared to all schools then it would probably be more meaningful actually because you don't know which schools are similar to you. I think that would be more meaningful than trying to select a few schools that you thought were similar to that school.

> I think in terms of use of the survey results that even if you don't get good responses there are certain questions on there that are valuable. For example, the safety issue even if you had one person say that they didn't feel safe then I would want to review what we are doing and see if that is valid. I think you need to look at it both based on the percentage of people that may have answered a question a certain way but there are certain questions that you need to pay special attention to because of their importance.

Findings: Section Two
The participants made many comments about the survey itself. These pertained to their perception of the validity of the survey, suggested changes in the development and scoring of items, and procedural issues. They made suggestions about how to improve the response rate, and they commented upon positive aspects of the survey.

The principals made general comments about the validity of the survey and more specific comments about how sampling issues and the response rate influenced the validity of results and the accuracy of how their schools were represented. The concern about sampling by grade level was discussed at more length by the middle- and high-school principals but also was of concern to the elementary-school principals.

Validity

General
> I am not sure we are getting a reflection of the truth especially concerning the question on discipline. I feel that maybe it should be more specific and ask if there are few or many discipline problems. If a student walks by and sees 6 students in ISS but that is only 6 out of 820 students, to the student that may look like a lot because there are only 7 places in the room. They may go home and tell their parents that the ISS room was full. That is certainly not a valid reason to say that you have discipline problems in your school.

> A parent that doesn't come to school can't give you a good picture either. They don't know the picture. They are going to ask "little Johnny" or "little Jane" what they think and you are getting a student survey back when you are asking for a parent survey.

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- Our teacher results are always the best. I think that is due to loyalty since they have been in the school and they know more about what is going on than anyone else. Our teacher results are always the highest percentages of positive.

- The first year that I got the survey back and looked at it I had students look at them and asked them why they thought someone responded in a certain way and if they felt the statements were true. We compiled the results to look at as to why they would mark something and we did not feel as a staff that it was actually happening at the school. For example if one child misbehaved in class then the perception was that discipline was a problem at school.

- We offered the children an incentive to have them bring the surveys back. I would bet that 9 out of 10 children answered the questions on the survey in order to get the reward. I know that because the parent and children responses matched too closely. I don't feel that it was an accurate reflection. Maybe some of the parents couldn't read it and the students read it and completed it for them.

- This time when we had to do it by grade level, we did the juniors and distributed it in their English classes and had them bring them back and I am certain that some of them completed them themselves but there is no way to monitor that.

- When they hit middle school and high school if they are filled out you can almost bet the students did them. Some of the parents have less education than the students. You get less back from the parents when they get to middle school and high school.

- I don't like perceptions but perceptions for us are reality and that is what we really have to deal with. How does this tie in with the survey results? Whatever the perceptions are on the results then it gives us an opportunity to take them and figure out how we can change those perceptions.

Sampling
- My concern is whether or not we are getting valid results. We are taking one grade level and getting results back from that grade level and the dynamics in one grade level are entirely different from the others. The safety and the learning environment and even physical environment are different from grade to grade. I think that with that and then figuring in the illiterate parents who cannot understand the terminology, you are not getting valid results.

- I think we need to do more mass surveying. I don't like just one grade level being done.

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- I would prefer that it not be limited to a certain grade level and for us to be able to get as many as you can because we had the same problem that you always do in terms of getting things back.

- I like the grade level thing. I know that every grade level is not the same and if you are getting results from the 1st grade or kindergarten and they are not alike and then the 4th grade are really positive and the ones from your 2nd grade are very negative then that it is something to talk with your grade level about…

- I don't really see a difference. When I send out the Title 1 or the other surveys in all the grades, I don't see a difference in grades in my school. There is pretty much consistency.

Response Rate
The participants stated that selecting survey respondents according to specific grade levels affected the response rate. This point is made through some of the comments listed below.

- We just don't feel like we are getting enough response back from our population. It was just focusing on the 8th grade in middle school. For example, last year when we did this we had 400 students in the 8th grade and we got 103 back. We had 800 students in the school so we only got results back from less than 25% of our parent population. We just feel like we are not getting a very good look at what actually parents feel about us on the report card and the feedback that we get.

- I had about 140 8th graders and I had 3 surveys returned. So the information I received and I knew when I looked at the report card that the results only represented 3 families in my school. I agree with Billy that we need to do it at all grade levels.

- And the 8th grade is probably the grade when parents are the least involved in the school. Our 6th and 7th grade parents are more involved and it tends to drop off after that. That is one of the concerns that we have in particular with looking at the 8th grade. I don't think it is a good picture of what we have.

- I would prefer that it not be limited to a certain grade level and for us to be able to get as many as you can because we had the same problem that you always do in terms of getting things back.

- Everyone here and all principals out there want to know where our weaknesses are and what we need to work on and we use these results, but I don't know that we are getting a good picture with just 100 parents getting it back to us.

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➢ Our return is running about the same—about 20-25% and you don't feel like you get enough back to get really to make a good survey out of it.

➢ If we do not offer an incentive to the children then we don't get the surveys back. I also think that sometimes the children complete the surveys themselves, especially the 5th and 6th graders.

Ways to Improve the Response Rate
➢ If you don't do the incentives and put the pressure on the teachers to collect the surveys then you are just not going to get them back. I am interested in what you said about giving back staff development time.

➢ I think that if you could hand deliver the surveys that you would get better response back.

➢ If you had times that the parents came in and did their survey in a room by themselves and read through the survey first and then asked questions about anything that they don't understand and then have them complete them and turn them in to you at that time then I think the results would be more valid and you would get more results back.

➢ Some parents that have students in both lower and upper grades always tell me to give the information to the younger child and they will bring it home whereas the older ones will not.

➢ We would get more surveys back in elementary school if we sent them home with the kindergarten parents, and we would get the fewest back if we sent them with the 5th graders. When you tell the kindergarten children something they literally will respond that way.

➢ The best response rate that we have ever gotten was by having them fill them out at football games. You take the surveys and pencils to the game and hand them out to parents there and get them right back. If you are sending them home then you really don't know.

➢ We have mailed them home when we've had money and given them self-addressed envelopes to have them mailed back but still we didn't get the responses that we felt we should.

➢ We only received 3 back when we mailed them to the homes and that was a lot of money.

Suggested Changes to the Survey

Scaling of Responses

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- I was thinking on that survey that I would like to have a summary of the "agree" responses and I would like to see it divided among the "agree" and the very much agree in the same manner of the 1, 2, 3, 4 and then also the disagree and very much disagree. I would like to have those categories summarized because I had to add them up myself. We have to keep in mind that principals are looking at 500 sheets of paper per day. The quickest way that we can grab the information and look at it is the biggest thing that I would like to emphasize.

- I really like it when it has "I don't know" because so often people really just don't know. If that is a choice then they can be honest but if not then it is kind of random and they just choose one.

- I also like the "I don't know" because that tells you that you have to do some work. But to me, it doesn't make much difference between agree and very much agree. I would like to see the number that summarizes the two together.

Making it More User-Friendly
- The surveys need to be more user-friendly.

- I think there is too much information and the parents are overwhelmed. It needs to be a little more user friendly. Only the educated or upper income parents are going to stop and look at that.

- I really like the percentages because for some reason that is what my parents look at. Even my lowest educated parents understand the percentages.

- I think that they really need to understand what they are answering on the survey. That needs to be clarified. I don't know about the rest of you but I have to explain it over and over again even to the teachers and they are educated. At the School Improvement council we go through it very thoroughly because I feel that they are liaisons in the community and can help people so I feel like they have a greater understanding than the others. We also go over it at PTO and explain that they should get it in the mail and explain what it is because they sometimes receive information and just throw it away.

The Wording of Survey Items
- You have to draw the line as to whether or not the children's behavior is affecting the teacher's ability to have a classroom where learning can take place. Maybe work on the questioning so that the parents know that clearly they are asked if there are disruptions that keep your child from learning.

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- I feel that the survey should be worded very specifically so that it is talking about if and how an issue is influencing instruction in the classroom

- Also we should question if these discipline problems are being dealt with by the teachers and the administrators and if the answer is yes, then does the behavior improve when these problems are dealt with? In that way the parents know that there are discipline problems but that the teachers and administrators deal with them.

- I think that safety has to be focused and clear. The last thing you want is for a survey to come back and say that your school is not safe.

- Sometimes I am not sure that the questions are well understood. I know as you have said that a lot of time and money goes into constructing those questions and dealing with that but sometimes when those results come back and you see the group as a whole, you really wonder what they were thinking when they answered those questions. You wonder if they really understand or just what were they thinking. You would like to respond to a lot of issues but you don't know how to respond because you really wonder what the question meant to them.

- I do have one specific example. There was one question that asked, "Do you feel safe coming to school?" In talking with some of the people who filled it out, some of them answered thinking that the question was asking them about the transportation to school and did they feel safe riding the bus or riding in their cars to school. Some people answered it based on being at school and do I feel safe when I come to school. There was a difference there in how people perceived that question.

- Many of our parents read at 4th grade level at best and the terminology needs to be written in such a way that they can understand what they are answering. Sometimes it needs to be defined under it such as when we talk about *climate* this is what we mean and not the temperature or rain outside.

- Principals, teachers, and parents need to come together to review the questions and how they are worded.

Procedural Issues

Time of Year the Survey is Administered
- I think that the timing of those surveys is critical in getting a good response back. If you were going to survey your 8th graders it shouldn't be after 4 days of PACT testing; it should be after field day.

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➢ That is where the timing of the survey would help. In September we have a hot-dog supper where we feed all the families including the parents and grandparents and we will have a turnout of 600-700 people and the reason we don't have the turnout at the end of the year when the time of the survey is done is because that is when the Pomaria-Prosperity ball fields are packed. They don't come to the school then. If I could do the survey in September I could hand out the surveys and get great results.

➢ Our students have gone on to middle school by the time we get them back so we don't have the same children that completed the survey.

Providing a Longer Response Time

➢ If you had those surveys for a longer period of time it would be helpful. If you could sign them out from the coordinator and use them when you have events at the school that would be great. As you are doing things during the second semester from January until May you could check them out and have the surveys there for the parents to complete.

➢ I would like to see it offered to all of our students' parents and maybe give us a little more flexibility in when we can send it out and get it back. I think that those time restraints are too close together in getting them back. We found it best that when we can get parents to come in for example to a science club night or a packed family night event, we would have a great turnout and we could give it out to the parents then and have more participation and get a better feedback, which is what we want.

Providing a More Personal Touch

➢ I think that one thing about getting survey results back and getting valid results is getting the parents into the school. We really have to work hard to find ways to bring those different parents in for a reason. We have had parents come in who don't even know who their child's teacher is.

➢ I would think that you would want to get the people who are doing the surveys together because the only way that you can understand that perception is to talk with those people. I think having a chat with the parents, students and teachers and talking together with some ground rules is good idea.

Positive Aspects of the Survey

➢ Just the fact that you are doing a survey and parents feel like they have an opportunity to have input makes the survey itself positive.

➢ I like the way they lump it together also. You have all these questions and then they lump it into all these broad categories. All of the other

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surveys we do give the information but they are not published. I think the fact that it is published and out there to all the parents is very positive.

Findings: Section Three
The focus group participants provided specific comments about how they are using the survey results to improve home-school relations, the learning environment, and the physical environment of their schools.

➢ We take the survey and use it as part of our school renewal plan or planning for next year. We look at the responses from the students and try to figure out why did they think that way. We do the parenting twice a month during different times…That really didn't make a difference until my parenting person came up with the idea of having a parent chat once per month. The parents can just come in and ask any questions that they have. Now the parents just can't wait to come to the parent chats. They had rather come for the chats than go to the meetings.

➢ I sent out a Monday newsletter every week, and I tried to get out of that after I got it started, but the parents said that they like knowing what I am thinking. Anytime something comes back I will summarize it and I will make it brief for the newsletter. I like the idea of breaking it down at the improvement council meetings and maybe having committees.

➢ If there is a difference (among the parent, teacher, and student surveys), then maybe during a PTO meeting you could bring out a point and say that this question was asked of 3 different groups and that there were 3 different answers. Then open it up for discussion. It needs to be brought out in the open to let people know there was a difference and let them know that you want to know why so that you can take measures to correct it.

➢ Sometimes that will work in a group and sometimes it won't. If you know a parent well enough to talk to one-on-one then you might get more information or if you felt like your parent coordinator would have that rapport and the parent would be more open with them. I know some parents that I could go to and ask and they would tell me but I know some that I feel would not be forthcoming. I don't know that some of them would be forthcoming with anyone unless you send another survey and ask why do you think that way.

➢ I use my group meetings a lot—the parent chats and PTO, for example. I also discuss them with the staff at our meetings. The results are gone over with the students also. One of things we ask is why do you think this and their names are not on the survey so that we could get some feedback on why they felt that way.

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➢ I only have one rule and that is that I won't discuss your child in the group. If they have something to discuss concerning their child such as grades or discipline, we will do that in private. I will discuss school-wide involvement if it involves their child.

➢ I use the school newsletter. It is a tool that we use to report just about anything. I don't know how effective it is.

Using Survey Results to Change Policies
➢ I think that so many of our policies are directly linked to district policies. I think the districts could use a study or a school report card as a total and I think the real impact could come from the district level instead of inside the individual schools when you are talking about policies.

➢ If you are talking about procedures, we do change procedures at the school level but you can't change the policies unless it is a rule that you have for your school. I would call those more procedures than policies.

Findings: Section Four
The participants made many comments about how they are encouraging parent involvement at their schools and expressed concern about a number of issues. The comments pertained to their concerns about reaching the hard-to-reach parents; the difficulty of involving parents at the middle- and high-school levels; the importance of focusing on the positive; the impact of losing a good program; the importance of encouraging communication at extra-curricular events, making communication student-specific, and communicating with the community, especially churches; specific issues with foster- and group-home placements and special education; and the need for better teacher preparation in parent involvement.

➢ I always ask my PTO president to serve as a school improvement council member and it is amazing the tie together that that brings about. I finally thought about it and started doing it, I couldn't believe how long I had struggled and had not thought about it

➢ I think that one of the things a principal needs to do is learn the people yourself. If you don't know your parents then you can't really expect to help the teachers as they communicate with them…The principal has to accept the role of "go-between" which can be a very tiring role in many instances but very important and by role-modeling they will begin to do that too.

Reaching the Hard-to-Reach
➢ The problem that I have with surveys and everything else that we are trying to do with our parent involvement is that you do everything that is

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suggested and still you have that poverty-stricken and uneducated group that is not even answering.

➢ Usually when we have a PTO meeting the more affluent are the ones who are in attendance. When we did workshops the parents who needed them never came so I went to the old Carver community center and had the meeting at night and food was provided. All the black parents came and all the parents who needed it attended.

➢ The project communities where most of our discipline problems come from are unfortunately the ones who are below basic in their PACT scores, and I found that going into this area does not bother me. When a child is sick, I just put them in my car and take them home. We have some children with some real specific needs and we just take them under our wings and have become friends with the families.

➢ We have a very similar population and we have a lot of projects throughout our area. We take some of our students home because transportation has always been a problem since it is mainly a rural area even though we are in town. We have gotten 100% participation this year with our parents for our conferences. The superintendent allows me to use the staff development day as a comp day for the hours that they put in so they all push for 100% participation from their parents… I don't mind watching a class while they do a home visit if need be because we find out a lot by just visiting the home…

➢ I think that most teachers probably come from middle class families and after going to this school I recognized that they had not made the home visits to see the terrible situations that some of the students were in. The ones that I was having trouble with-- I would take them into the student's home because I couldn't believe some of the situations. Because of this, I think they talked to those parents differently. The teachers were intimidating the parents without realizing that they were doing it because they didn't know about the situation and they didn't have any empathy for what the family is going through.

➢ That is a very good point. They need to understand where those kids come from and what they are dealing with. The teachers need to "go to the ball fields and see them play." The students' parents need to see them more than just teachers sitting in the classroom. They need to see them out being a supporter of their children and the students need to see them being supporters outside of the classroom

➢ Last Christmas the in-service day was on the last day of school after the students were already gone for the holidays. We took all of our teachers into the neighborhood, which is almost a 40 square mile zone. Some teachers had been teaching there for over 20 years and had never driven

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down in (name of housing project) because it is not somewhere you just drive down into or into the back side of (name of another housing project) and places like that…That was very meaningful.

➢ The ones that you really need to see are not the ones who have children participating in the school events.

➢ We have to go and pick our parents up and bring them in for meetings and take them home. It is not that they don't want to be involved; it is that they have no transportation and no telephone and that is how we have to deal with it. It is very time consuming and we are understaffed and it is nearly impossible to do it all.

The Difficulty of Involving Parents at Middle and High-school Levels
➢ In terms of organizations, we have tried several times to start a PTO at our school but the most we ever managed to get at a meeting was 5 parents and again it was the same people that you know would come to serve on a committee or participate in other events…It is very difficult to get parents involved at the high school level.

➢ I guess that at a high school the real issue has to do with parents feeling like they don't need to be involved anymore…What they know is based on what they are told during whatever conversations they may have with their children about school which in some cases is also limited.

➢ Even at the middle school level, if the child is involved in something they don't want their parents there. It is embarrassing for a middle school child to have their parents at any event.

Focusing on the Positive
➢ Schools are an intimidating place for parents. A lot of them or some of them didn't have good experiences and so when they come into school, they feel like it is going to be a combative thing. We talk to our teachers all the time about no matter how bad "little Johnny" is or "little Sally" is—you can find at least one or two positive things to start the conversation off with the parent. We do the good notes.

➢ …we invite the parents in for meals where there is more of an informal interaction and it is not something centered on conferencing. That has been helpful, and we also do the good notes and phone calls, which have been good, but I think having more opportunities for interaction between parents and teachers is very helpful. We also do more of having 3rd parties sitting in on conferences and helping to facilitate things and that has been helpful as well.

➢ Parent involvement has been one of the hardest things that I have dealt with since I have been at my school because parents felt turned off. They

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felt like the only thing at that school was something negative. We have really had to work hard to change their mindset and get them to understand that we wanted them there and that we need them there and it makes a difference. We have tried every thing and the only way that we can get our parents in is a large group of strategies—door prizes, student performance and food...They like having everything together.

➢ It is clear to us. We try to make it clear to them. We are a team together to get the best that we can out of their student.

➢ It sounds very cliché—this whole village raising a child issue—but I really do think that it is a lonely business, especially for high school parents. Just knowing that your school is there with you and that they are going to communicate and let you know what is going on with your child is very important to the parents. Sometimes the parents just need the teachers to let them know that they do have a great kid. It is really hard to dislike or work against someone that likes your child.

➢ Going through the Red Carpet Program this year helped us look at ourselves a lot and to make parents feel welcome and not feel intimidated. That has to be done through your front office, which is their first contact, and then teachers have to be trained on how to talk with the parents. It is kind of like the adage that you only get one chance to make a first impression.

The Loss of a Good Program
➢ The Communities in Schools Program really had helped my school as far as getting the parents in that normally would not come in. They would have family suppers and I would see parents that we could never get in but that was cut out with the budget in March. That was sad to see that program leave.

➢ In my former school, we had a very active Communities in Schools Program and it really did help with getting the parents to come in. High school teachers in particular don't necessarily feel the obligation to communicate as well with parents as teachers at younger ages do, but once they get into the habit they like it a lot and some are quite good at it. One of the things that we did this year was make it a topic of collegial discussion to let them talk among themselves about how to communicate and how to streamline the process when you are teaching 150 students.

Encouraging Communication at Extra-Curricular Events
➢ We also give our teachers home passes to all athletic and artistic events because it can be very expensive to be a high school teacher and have to pay for entry into all of these things. We found out that their involvement went way up when they didn't have to pay.

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- We do that also but they have to also agree to help with the event. It changes that child's attitude in the classroom to see the teacher at the events.

- I don't think they [the students] mind the parents being there. It is just that they don't want them messing with them while they are there. The other thing is that sometimes we just need to comfort parents. They will remember that you are there. I think it would be helpful to do some more literature review on how to help parents understand the different ages and stages of their students' lives so they are more comfortable with the students' behavior.

The Importance of Student-Specific Communication

- It seems that if there is an attitude in the community that their child is going to be safe at school and they are going to get a good education at the high school level, then that is what the parent wants and they expect you to do that and the involvement from them is just to back off.

- I think another thing that gets overlooked is the communication with the students as a way of the parent feeling better about the interactions because especially in high school most of what they hear about that teacher is not first hand. It is what the kid says about the teacher. The better the communication you have with the student and their perception of that relationship the better the parent feels about it as well because that is usually where their perception comes from—what the child has said.

- Most of the time when that student is happy and understands what is going on then that parent is going to be happy and understand what is going on.

- Even if it is something unpleasant when you sit in a conference and you talk and the parent knows that this child has been aware of all these things and understands this then it makes a big difference with the parent and how they feel about what is going on at the time.

- I think all the laws that educators have to go by really intimidate parents also. I can say that speaking as a parent recently realizing what I had been doing to parents as an educator when my child was having trouble reading.

The Importance of Communicating with the Community and with Churches

- That is where it worked best at my school. I had a man that decided to come into school and be a hall monitor. He knew everyone in the community and any time I had to deal with anything that was difficult with discipline then Mr. Boyd was out there in the community telling

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them to trust me and I had my easiest year letting that man walk my halls.

➤ Getting word to the churches and getting them involved has been very helpful. We have even visited the churches.

➤ We have found that the retired community in particular will serve as surrogate parents for those students. That really makes a great relationship…Having your PTO meetings at a church in a different neighborhood so that folks have access is one thing that works. It is really hard as a principal because it is hard to back out of it and let the parents do that.

➤ Everything is discussed at church on Sunday and in fact that is one way we advertise everything. We only have one store in our total attendance zone. My communication within my zone goes out to the ministers so they can announce it on Sundays.

Issues with Foster and Group Home Placements and Special Education

➤ When they are in a group home it is easier than when they are in individual foster homes. There are some strong ties that you can make with a group home situation.

➤ We have certain families that have foster placements and we have gotten to know them. They have had several foster children coming through the system and they do a very good job in communicating with the school and us with them. We have a good relationship as a rule.

➤ Some agencies are better than others. The really difficult situations are often because we are right in the middle of the capital city. We sometimes get kids who are actually in the custody of a DSS worker who is in another section of the state and only shows up when something doesn't please them. Some of our foster homes are better than anything that the child had previously, and some are not strong. One of the good things about Communities in Schools was that there were people in each of the schools for each of those kids. It is not always the same person and for some of the kids it is the DSS worker that services the school.

➤ But you also have some special ed parents who are like the 5 per centers and it doesn't matter what you do—they don't want to be bothered and it is very hard to get them involved.

Teacher Preparation and Parent Involvement

➤ I think that in addition to being aware of the environment the other issue is that I don't think the teachers are trained to deal with students from different cultures and understanding how different cultural aspects affect your interactions with students…it is not something that you get as part

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of your education in becoming a teacher that there are certain things that will escalate a situation if you are not aware. I had a teacher who constantly had run-ins with black males and it was because he didn't know how to relate in a way that didn't cause them to become hostile towards him…Training and information need to be provided.

➤ We are a PDS school with USC, and we are the first exposure those young people have to parents and the community. We need to know what they have been taught. We need better communication with higher ed in terms of what is being taught in that area.

➤ I am not sure how much information people have about what experiences they should be providing to student teachers beyond the classroom aspect of it. I am not sure that the people who are supervising those teachers are aware of the other kinds of things that they need to be exposing them to. Things have changed drastically in the last 10 years.

➤ I think student teaching needs to be more purposeful. I think we kind of assume that it is going to happen because they are there and they are with the kids. Student teaching is sort of real and it is not but it needs to be a more intentional part of that process…. Generally, it is something that is kind of ignored unless there is a problem in that respect.

➤ Is there any requirement that student teachers attend any number of events that the students participate in? I had one student come and watch one of our basketball players and saw a whole different kid. The teacher commented on the student's extreme leadership.

➤ It is amazing how some teachers instinctively know how to deal with the students no matter what the background happens to be and others don't. Is there anyway to screen early on? We struggle to get enough teachers out there to begin with, but there is such a disparity between those who can do it well and those who struggle. We need to get those who do really well to teach the others.

➤ That is something that doesn't happen in the student teaching process-- to interact with other teachers other than your own supervising teacher. You can never do background on them but some of them just have it. You can't pick which teacher is going to have that skill but sometimes you can pick which one doesn't. I think that is an area where the schools could help with –to have them have interaction with kids from different cultures. I think that most schools would be glad to set up small focus groups for the student teachers.

➤ There definitely needs to be a teacher's class when they are training the teachers on people skills and how to deal with the public and parents.

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Findings: Section Five
The elementary school principals offered many spontaneous comments about the No Child Left Behind legislation, the Report Card, and PACT testing. These issues were not evident in the secondary-level group.

➢ I think the report card is more information than the parents need. There are some good things in there but there are also some things such as "student-teacher ratio" which doesn't make sense to the parents. The parents don't really key in on student-teacher ratio, they key in on how well the school is doing in terms of educating their children and how their child feels about school. I really like the percentages because for some reason that is what my parents look at. Even my lowest educated parents understand the percentages.

➢ I think the report card could be more reader friendly. Lots of my parents call and ask what particular items mean and that type of thing. I think it is important that the report card be used with your parent meetings to assist in the understanding of it. There are many parents who will not admit that they don't understand it

➢ I like for parents to feel like they are a part of that report card. A lot of people have a perception of grading the school, but the school is made up of students, teachers, parents, administrators and all other staff members in the community. I try to get the fact across that this is "our report card" and the parents play a big part in that. So I think it is important to have some segments to address or say something about the parents—I think that is important. The parents play a vital role in changing things

➢ The biggest comment I have had from parents on school report cards is that they don't judge what goes on in that report card; instead, their judgments are based on personal experiences with the schools. I am afraid that with our experiences the report cards have not been taken seriously by the parents. The survey results and the report cards as a whole have not been.

➢ The report card has been a real help in terms of school improvement council and having a focus for your school on the goals that you need to set and also the areas that you need to work on. I have done school improvement council meetings for years but the report card has brought focus to those meetings that I've never had before; maybe it was a lack on my part, but if you take the report card and address some facet of that report at each meeting and assign committees and involve the parents, it is a powerful tool.

➢ I think it is important that the report card be used with your parent meetings to assist in the understanding of it. There are many parents

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who will not admit that they don't understand it. I think it is important to use the report card in your parent meetings after it comes out. A question and answer session would be very helpful and we ask them to make up a question and bring it in and we will answer it for them.

➢ I think South Carolina has set ourselves up for real failure because we are using that word "proficient" while "No Child Left Behind" nationally is saying that proficient is really basic. I have some of the best scores in our district and all around, but I am not qualifying according to the "No Child Left Behind" and I know I have that gap, and I still need to work with my free-and-reduced students versus my paying students.

➢ We figure that somewhere there has got to be some alignment with what proficient means--federal and then state. Hopefully our state department is working on that.

➢ If we are ever going to be held to this U.S. Department of Education's standard of proficient, then the way that PACT scores are reported is going to have to change drastically. The only way we are ever going to truly move to proficient is to have a little more detailed feedback in terms of how children did on PACT and how they did on the standards. We have been asking for this breakdown for years.

➢ The parents want to know and they will ask what areas their students are doing poorly in. You can't be specific with them—you can only say Math, English, Language Arts, etc.

➢ If you don't take anything back from this group, please take this. The first year we got reports back in 1998 they broke it down in the strands and we knew what that overall math score was—was it geometry, was it computation, or was it concepts. Now we get an overall math score and I know if the student scored proficient, and I know what the numerical value is. But I don't know whether he came down in geometry or whatever. We are just setting ourselves up for failure. I have asked the question and they will say that we are not teaching to the test...We need to get feedback, and North Carolina has a great system with their objectives, their criterion test, etc....We need a profile.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study are organized below according to the four questions we were asked to examine.

1. Regardless of the distribution process used in the parent survey, how can principals improve the parent survey response rate at their school?

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The principals offered many suggestions for improving the response rate at their schools. These included offering more incentives to teachers, parents, and students; selecting more grade levels; administering the surveys with more personal, face-to-face contact (i.e., hand delivering the surveys, having them completed during events at school or in a special location at school); making the surveys more user-friendly, including clarifying the content of the questions; changing the time of year the survey is administered, and providing a longer response time.

2. What specific tools do principals need in order to analyze the results of the parent survey and to compare the results of the parent survey with the results of the teacher survey?

In terms of "specific tools," the suggestions made by the participants were (1) to develop a "frequently asked questions" pamphlet to make the findings more understandable to parents and (2) to develop a manual they could consult to better understand the survey and the results. Other important suggestions were to simplify the survey report by using more charts, graphs, and tables; to combine the results of the parent survey with other surveys to determine overall meaning; and to provide more expertise and information about how to interpret the significance of the results, especially the meaning of percentages and the comparison of any given school with schools similar to it.

In terms of comparing the results of the parent survey with those from the teacher survey, the principals stated that various forms of informal discussion (one-on-one and small group) among the school administration, the faculty, and parents are the best methods for determining comparisons and interpreting their meaning.

3. What specific tools do principals need to determine areas for improving home-school relations, the learning environment, or the physical environment of their school?

Even when prompted and redirected, the discussions in both groups in response to this question were not about specific tools or strategies for determining areas for improvement. Instead, the discussions were about how they are using the survey results to make improvements and the challenges inherent in involving parents and improving the learning and physical environment. The discussions indicated keen interest in the topics. Among the challenges mentioned, the need for better preparation of teachers to interact with diverse groups warrants special attention.

4. What specific tools do principals need to utilize the results of the parent and teacher surveys when formulating policies and programs to improve parental involvement at their school?

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The responses to this question were significantly fewer in number than to the other three questions. The participants in both groups stated that the policies and procedures in their schools are largely determined by district policies. One comment pertained to the need for districts as a whole to examine how they can improve parent involvement.

Recommendations

The principals who participated in the focus groups expressed many ideas that go beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is important in this report to have documented their ideas and concerns. Our recommendations are focused on what can be done in the short term and in years to come to enhance their understanding of survey results, to compare results across surveys, and to use the results to improve the learning environment in their schools. Our recommendations combine the ideas expressed by the principals with our experience reporting data in a manner that promotes understanding and use. The recommendations are as follows:

1. **Display the survey results through more charts and colorful graphs**. These charts and graphs, generated through Excel, Access, or SPSS software, should display results across the teacher, parent, and student surveys and compare the results for each school to the State mean/median and to a similar school. In addition, a rank ordering of items according to significance within individual schools would help school staff know the relative significance of issues within their own schools. The principals also requested that the four response categories (agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree) be collapsed into two (agree, disagree) for reporting purposes and that interpretation of the results be provided in the context of other surveys that come across their desks during the year.

2. **Provide avenues of communication for principals to talk with evaluators who can assist in interpretation.** At a minimum this could be through individual telephone conversations with evaluators, but we recommend group forums as well. These conversations about specific results per school would not only help principals know which results suggest problem areas; they also would provide a safe channel of communication that would make the survey results more meaningful and thus more useful. Evaluators at The Center for Child and Family Studies have much experience communicating with principals and other school staff in a non-threatening manner. We propose that we conduct a pilot study this year with the principals who participated in the focus groups to document the effectiveness of various forms of communication. We would submit a report to the EOC at the end of the school year, and we would be willing to work with staff at the State Department of Education in the writing of a manual and a Power Point presentation to accompany the survey results when they are sent out to schools.

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3. **Address concerns expressed by the principals regarding the representativeness of the results and the sampling procedures used.** This is important because we observed that these concerns are impeding the use of the survey results. We also recommend a feasibility review of the principals' suggestions for improving the response rate (pp. 8-11).

4. **Conduct a factor analysis** of the survey to better understand how the items are clustering and how the factor structure of the instrument can be translated into score profiles and reported as such. Conduct **other statistical analyses** to determine a clear significance criterion for interpreting the percentages provided in the score reports.

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