

February 9, 2010

To: Pin Oak PTO Executive Board
Amy Simson, Principal, Pin Oak Middle School

From: Paula Colman, VP Communications

Re: Communications Survey

Summary

To determine what information and methods of communication are important to the parents of Pin Oak Middle School, the PTO drafted a brief survey via Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and emailed it to parents listed in the PTO Manager database. A total of 114 responses were received during the survey period in January 2010. The results of the survey indicated that parents: (1) want and receive adequate information regarding grades, particularly through Gradespeed; (2) want more consistent information (in terms of timeliness, clarity and consistency among the clusters and electives) about homework assignments and projects; and (3) want more information about school activities to increase participation and foster school spirit. Each of these issues can be addressed with the refinement of existing programs and technologies, imposing little additional time to the faculty and staff and incurring little, if any, additional costs to the school or PTO.

Description

The survey can be found at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/FVHGD2Z>. A copy of it and the responses are attached to this memorandum. The questions contained in the survey focused on the most common types of information sought by parents (grades, homework, activities), the methods of obtaining such information and their effectiveness in communicating information. The questions were drafted by this memo's author with input from several members of the Pin Oak PTO and school administration (the "Survey Committee"). On January 13, 2010, a letter explaining the survey and inviting people to complete it was sent via email to members of the PTO contained in the PTO Manager database. A copy of the letter is attached to this memo. One hundred fourteen (114) responses were collected through January 31, 2010. Due to the limitations imposed by Survey Monkey, only the first 100 responses were tabulated. The Survey Committee analyzed the responses and formulated several observations, recommendations and conclusions that are set forth below.

Observations

Question 1: What House/Cluster is your child (or children) in at Pin Oak Middle School?

More 6th grade parents completed the survey than any other grade (54%), followed by 7th grade (29%) and then 8th grade (11%). It is unclear whether the survey reached more 6th grade parents and in what proportion. However, because a majority of the responses were from people “new” to Pin Oak, the availability and accessibility of information about grades, homework and activities is highly relevant and instructive (i.e., the old-timers eventually figure out what they need to know).

No one house had a disproportionate number of responses. House A had the greatest number of 6th grade responses (21%), House B had the most in 7th grade (13%), and House C had the most in 8th grade (6%).

Question 2: The primary language spoken at home is [English, Spanish, Chinese, Other].

Ninety-seven percent (97%) of the respondents said English. Spanish followed with three percent (3%). Because the survey was written in English, the disproportionate number was expected. However, it is unclear whether the lack of communication in languages other than English (or in some circumstances, Spanish) is a barrier for Pin Oak parents in obtaining information. Gradespeed, for example, is accessible in English and Spanish.

Question 3: How often do I know what HOMEWORK is assigned, GRADES are received and ACTIVITIES are taking place at Pin Oak— [Always, Usually, Occasionally, Never]?

Almost half (46%) of parents responded that they Usually know what HOMEWORK is assigned, many of them Always (29%) know, but a significant number only Occasionally know (23%) what HOMEWORK is assigned. A huge number of parents Always (43%) or Usually (41%) knew what GRADES were received. Many parents (41%) Usually knew about ACTIVITIES, but almost a third (31%) only Occasionally knew.

Question 4: I receive information about HOMEWORK and ACTIVITIES from [Cluster Newsletter, Gradespeed, School website, PTO website, Child, Agenda Book, Telephone messages, Marquis, Never receive info](choose all that apply).

An overwhelming number (actual numbers used here) receive information about HOMEWORK from Gradespeed (70), their Child (83), or the Cluster Newsletter (62).

A significant number stated that they receive HOMEWORK information from the Child's Agenda (37).

Information about ACTIVITIES was usually gleaned from Telephone Messages (78), followed by the School Website (42), the PTO Website (28) and the Marquis (19).

Recommendations: There are several recommendations arising from this question. However, almost all of them involve refining existing communication methods.

(1) First and foremost, keep the School Website informative and up-to-date. It is the first thing present and prospective families look at when getting information about the school. If it is not current, it conveys no information and sends an unfavorable image.

(2) The Principal should post on the School Website a weekly letter to parents outlining activities, thoughts, or whatever is relevant. Every other school does this.

(3) Send the Principal's morning announcements to the PTO VP-Communications to post on the PTO or School Website, or record Principal's morning announcements on a computer as a .wav file and upload to School Website.

(4) Put "Parent e-Newsletter, click here" at top of the School Website with link to PTO Website. PTO Website has many of the school activities listed but it is unknown or confused with the School Website.

(5) Make sure Athletics posts all schedules, try-out information, forms, instructions and other relevant information on the School Website. Avoid paper – It gets lost and is bad for the environment.

(6) Assign student office workers to update Marquis instead of placing burden on Principal. If they can organize a walk-a-thon, they can type on a marquis.

(7) Don't be afraid to use the Telephone Message system for activities. People seem to like it, and it often runs around dinner time giving parents and their middle-schooler something to talk about.

Question 5: Generally, I would prefer to have information about HOMEWORK and ACTIVITIES (choose your favorites) [Cluster Newsletter, Gradespeed, School website, PTO website, Child, Agenda Book, Telephone messages, Marquis, Don't want info].

When it comes to HOMEWORK, parents overwhelmingly want to hear about it from the Cluster Newsletter (71) or Gradespeed (65). Surprisingly, while a similar number (69) want to receive the information from their Child directly, a much lesser number (37) said they prefer getting their information from their Child's Agenda. There were numerous comments criticizing the blogs favoring email or listserve

instead. Parents with children in different clusters want to find information in one place and in one format.

When it comes to ACTIVITIES, Parents want to get their information from the School Website (64), followed by Telephone Messages (42) and the PTO Website (30). A small number (14) indicated the School Marquis. The comments repeatedly stated the need to find updated information on one website or to send out a weekly email. There were numerous comments criticizing the blogs favoring email blasts or listserves, instead.

Recommendations: Imagine that the school is a choir. It can have many voices, singing many parts, but they all need to be singing the same song in the same tempo.

(1) All Clusters should be preparing a weekly outline of Homework and Activities that is understandable by students and their parents.

(2) The same format should be used across the clusters and placed in the same location, such as Gradespeed, or distributed in the same manner (e.g., email or listserve).

(3) If due dates are changed, post the changes to avoid confusion.

(4) Project outlines, rubrics, handouts and other relevant information should be available online. If teachers need help with this, then offer kids extra credit to assist. The most organizationally challenged could benefit from having a second glance at the materials or knowing that there *are* materials.

(5) Electives must provide the same information about Homework and Activities. Many great Activities are organized through Electives.

Question 6: HOMEWORK is graded and returned (or posted online) by my child's teachers [in Reading/LA, Science, History, Math, Electives]-- [Promptly, Within a Reasonable Time, End of Grading Cycle, Grades are Missing].

The good news is that almost all parents said HOMEWORK is graded and posted Promptly (22%-34% across subjects) or Within a Reasonable Time (51%-61%). However, there are a significant number of parents who report that grades are posted By The End of the Cycle (3%-12%) or Missing (0%-8%). This is, obviously, unacceptable. If teachers are going to penalize students for not getting work in on time, then the teachers must grade and post the work in a timely manner. There were several written replies about the problem with obtaining grades from long-term substitute teachers (a math teacher, in particular).

Recommendation: The school should develop and promote a uniform grading policy with respect to timing and monitor performance.

Question 7: If necessary, I feel I am able to contact or meet with my child's teachers at Pin Oak Middle School—[All of the Time, Most of the Time, Some of the Time, Never].

Almost all of the parents felt they could contact or meet a teacher All of the Time (44%) or Most of the Time (42%). A few respondents indicated that individual teachers did not reply to parents' email in a timely manner. This is unacceptable in any organization and only leads to undesirable consequences.

Recommendation: The school should develop and promote a uniform communications policy between faculty and parents (i.e, All emails will receive a reply within 48 hours) and monitor performance.

Question 8: I believe that communication from Pin Oak about the school's HOMEWORK, GRADES and ACTIVITIES is—[Not a Problem, Sometimes a Problem, Often a Problem, a Huge Problem].

A majority of the parents (53%) believed that communication about HOMEWORK is Not a Problem. However, the other half thought it was Sometimes (29%), Often (14%) or a Huge (3%) problem. In other words, for almost half the parents, communication needs improvement.

It was slightly less of an issue for GRADES. Over 57% reported that communication about grades was Not A Problem. It was Sometimes (30%) or Often (11%) a problem for others, but never (0%) a Huge Problem. These numbers appear to track the results of the timeliness of grading (*Question 6*) as well as the actual receipt of information about the grades (*Question 3*). In either case, it is unacceptable for over 10% of parents (and these are PTO parents who are likely to be more involved than not) to feel that they do not know their child's progress in a class.

Recommendations: The same recommendations listed about are relevant here. HOMEWORK needs to be communicated on a clear, concise and consistent basis by the Clusters. GRADES need to be posted promptly. Most teachers are already doing this, but some are not. These are not difficult issues to resolve but they are important to students, parents and prospective parents and should be addressed now.

Question 9: Please provide any additional comments (and, yes, suggestions) about communication with the school and teachers.

Sixty (60) parents provided written comments. They are attached in full to this memorandum. The topics and suggestions most discussed are as follows:

- School Website needs to be updated and kept timely. Compare with websites at Lanier and Pershing.
- Weekly Principal's Letter with activities and announcements should be posted online or sent home. Record principal's daily announcements as a .wav file and email to parents.
- Gradespeed is effective for communicating grades to parents. Post grades in a timely manner.
- Use one site for homework, test dates and grades across houses/clusters as well as electives. Project information, time expected, handouts should be online. Update homework and activity information weekly at a minimum.
- All clubs, sports schedules, practices, etc. should be online.
- Keep the marquis updated.
- If teacher is on long-term leave or frequently absent, the house should take extra care to ensure homework is communicated and grades are posted.

Question 10: Who can we thank for these responses?

Seventy-nine (79) people provided their name.

Conclusions

Overall, the parents answering the survey believe that communication between Pin Oak and parents is good and that any deficiencies could be remedied with little effort or cost.

The most-discussed item parents want addressed is how to communicate Homework. It is done in various ways by the various Clusters or, in some cases, not at all. This must be changed. Parents prefer looking in ONE place for ALL of their child's homework. They want what is expected in the business world to be implemented in their school. They want it consistent and concise. The Clusters and Elective should have a uniform method of providing a weekly online newsletter/schedule that provides email updates and attachments.

Second, parents can access grades online via Gradespeed and expect – as they should – that grades will be posted in a timely manner. This is being done most of the time but, as it does for students' assignments, the school should implement a grading policy for teachers that makes the expectations clear for everyone.

Finally, to build a Pin Oak community, the school needs to communicate and promote its Activities. Parents want to know about the athletic and artistic events, clubs and fundraisers. They want to participate. They want to discuss these things with their children. The success of any school is linked to parent involvement. By

issuing a Principal's letter and placing the content of the morning announcements online, Pin Oak tells parents what the school and their kids are doing and allows them to be a part of it and support it. That is precisely the goal of all communication and each of the recommendations set forth here.