



Congrats and Concerns—An Evolutionary Parent Feedback System

by Kirsten Fisher, Linton Hall Road School principal, Prince William County Schools

Are you frustrated by parent complaints? Do you believe you are doing everything you can to communicate and collaborate with them, yet rumors spread and complaints rarely reflect the real situation? Have you heard comments such as:

- There's too much homework.
- There's not enough homework.
- Stop giving standardized tests.
- You need more text books.
- You need an art room (not an art cart).
- The school needs a larger cafeteria.
- Behavior on the bus is out of control.
- More than 20 students in a classroom is too many.
- Parents are illegally parking in handicapped spaces when they run their children in.

Our school division surveys parents every two years to evaluate the quality of instructional staff, which must achieve an 80% satisfaction rate. Our school is a high-performing one, with excellent satisfaction rates of 98% in 2006 and 96% in 2008. With consistent scores well above 90%, we thought we were doing an outstanding job. We still heard complaints, however, from the bus stops and rumors at soccer games, and we occasionally had parents who wanted their child removed from a classroom and immediately put into another one. Sometimes, parents even called the superintendent or the school board without consulting school administration.

The data we received from the surveys did not glean the detailed information and explanations we needed to improve service and increase parent satisfaction. We not only wanted to achieve a higher satisfaction rate, but we also wanted to move from the merely “agree” statement to “strongly agree” on a series of 30 questions asked every other year.

To be truly world class, we strive to continuously improve all of our practices and systems to increase student achievement and stakeholder satisfaction. Our goal is to

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achieve 100% parent satisfaction. As a leader, my role includes ensuring parents, students and staff members feel empowered to transform our mission of “educating lifelong learners” into actions that result in increased academic success.

We did not have a process for frequently and systematically capturing the data, and conducting a survey every other year was certainly not sufficient enough to guide practices and procedures. We needed to solve the puzzle of the dissonance between our perceptions of our performance and that of our stakeholders—the parents. We wanted to dig further and score higher.

Increasing satisfaction rates

The following takes you through our improvement process and strategies by which administration, teachers and parents disaggregated data and used the plan-do-study-act approach to increase parent satisfaction rates and channel energy into achieving goals. You, too, can increase your parent participation and satisfaction by following the process used at our school.

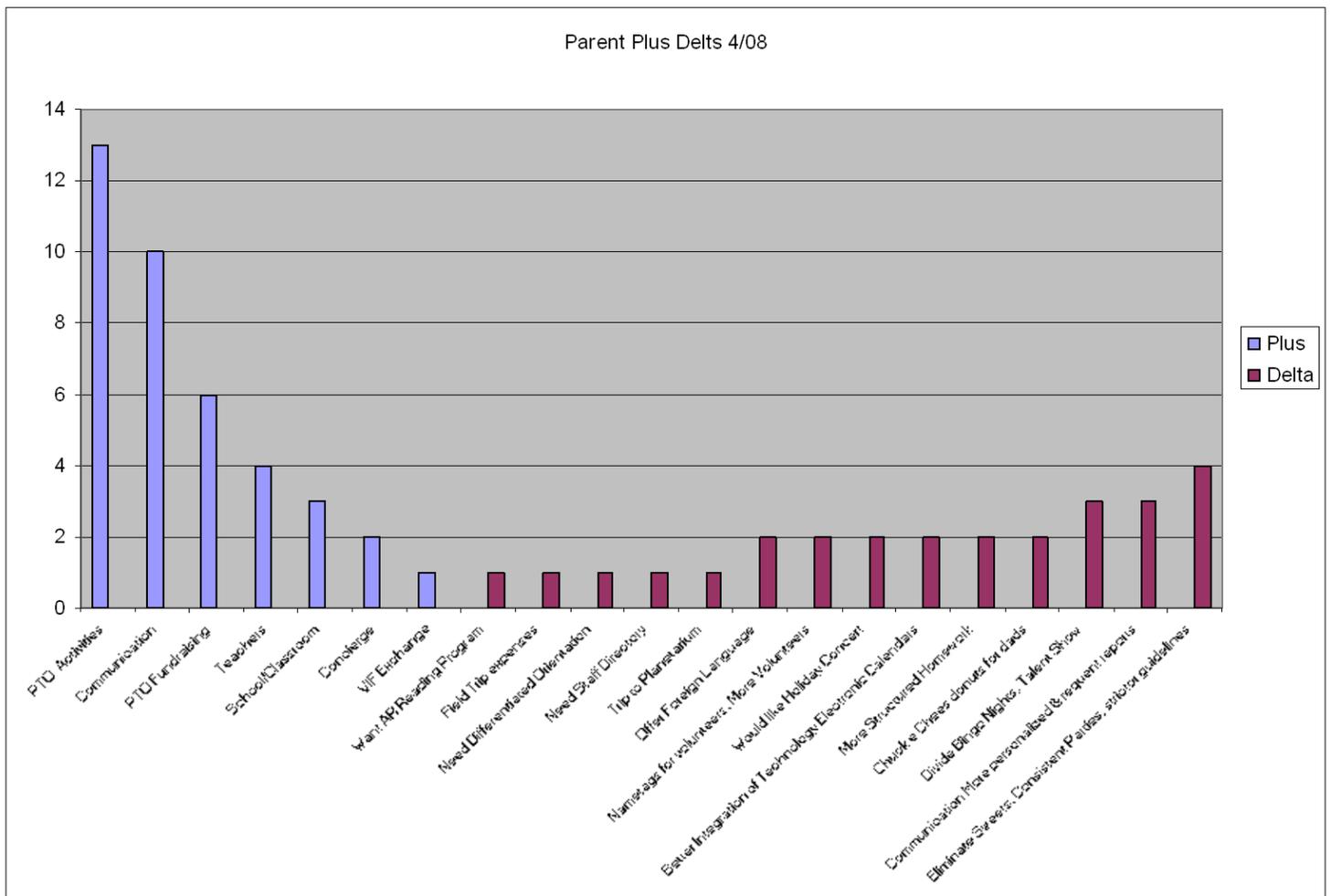
The procedure is easily replicable and simple to implement for any stakeholder population. Teachers can apply the same process to its individual classrooms, and administration can apply it to their individual schools or divisions and systems as a districtwide initiative. It is sustainable and doesn't cost much.

Our procedure was created as a natural progression from learning about how the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program can support continuous improvement to using data to measure increased parent satisfaction. At our back-to-school staff retreat in August, we cut out them from our parent surveys and used an affinity diagram to group individual comments into categories. Huge posters were hung around the meeting space, and staff members collaborated and decided where to tape the comments by classifying them into groups or types of concerns.

The staff identified 12 general types of negative comments: administration, bus/transportation, cafeteria, communication, homework, office, policies, playground, programs, safety, teachers and other. We then created a plus/delta survey, using Survey Monkey, that parents could respond to electronically. They were asked to write about what was going well and what could be changed for their experience to improve in each

of the 12 areas.

Because we believe in transparency, we created the chart that follows and published it along with all of the comments (with names removed) in a newsletter and on our website.



We also started to display plus/delta charts at all of our school events, including musical programs, curriculum family evenings and parent conferences, to stay informed about how we were doing. We published the results each time we requested parent input.



We also measured enthusiasm for the activity or learning, weighted voting and anecdotal comments to collect information. Our teacher teams used Pareto charts to analyze this data to improve or create new processes. Not only did we publish comments, but we also published the resolution of any areas of concerns.

Individual plus/delta example

We found there were still areas of concern, and we needed more information to understand what the parents meant by their comments. So, we sent home individual plus/deltas for each classroom asking what was going well and what could be changed to make the educational experience better.

Here is an example:

Parents,

Total quality education is a planned approach to systemic improvement. Our goal is to improve effectiveness and efficiency throughout our system. As part of that system, we need your input and creative ideas to continually improve. One of the ways we can analyze situations is to use a plus/delta chart.

Plus	Delta
Please share something that went well ...	Please share something that could be changed to make the experience better for all...

Some feedback was not pleasant for the individual teachers. We thought we were getting complaints and not suggestions about what we could do to make the educational experience better. So, we created a system for communication between stakeholders—a “congrats and concerns” form that would not only give parents the



opportunity to explain their problem in detail, but also allow administration to call them within 24 hours to discuss possible solutions. Previously, although we had often heard from parents, our discussions were usually anecdotal and not captured systematically. With these forms, we could easily tally complaints and congratulations to monitor our system.

We thought we needed mechanisms that allowed parents and children to register complaints, feelings and perceptions without fear of reprisal. All parents want to be involved in the education process but are often reticent because of time constraints, past educational experiences and confusion regarding educational changes made since they were in school. We charted and aggregated data to determine whether a complaint was part of a system problem or an isolated incident, and then determined the best way to come to consensus.

The half-page triplicate forms are kept at our concierge desk and forms are also available online. Administration keeps one copy, one copy is sent home to the parents, and the third copy is given to the teacher. Rather than just seeing complaints, we thought we were actually getting to the root of problems or misunderstandings. The actual comments—without names—are published monthly, and we use a Pareto chart to graph the information.

Congrats and concerns

To continuously improve our systems using Baldrige in education, we are initiating a formal “congrats and concerns” management process. We aggregate data to determine whether a complaint is part of a system problem or an isolated incident, and then determine the best way to come to consensus.



Date	Name			
Name of child		Child's teacher		
Please circle the area of congratulations or concern. Then please describe the area of congratulations or concern in the box below.				
	Administration	Bus/transportation	Cafeteria	
	Communication	Homework	Office	
	Policies	Playground	Programs	
	Safety	Teachers	Other	
Description				
Date of resolution if a concern	(Administrative use only) Person contacted: Context:			

Only a parent's insight can help us improve those processes we can control to make our school the best possible place for their children to learn. We include parents in our professional learning communities to assist us in creating a culture of success. We have several parent communication processes in place, including surveys, plus/deltas, and "congrats and concerns." It is all part of our schoolwide approach to improving parent satisfaction and engaging them as partners to create a world-class school.

As a result, we not only increased satisfaction rates in each indicator, but we have also gained trust, increased transparency and collaboration, and created a sustainable, continuous feedback process.

As the United States continues to reach increased accountability benchmarks to



ensure student learning, we need every stakeholder to take part and be committed to the children and our future success as a nation. To secure parent buy-in, parents need to feel they are an important and integral part in the education of their children. They need to feel free to share their hopes, dreams, feelings and opinions without recrimination.

Bibliography

Byrnes, M.A., and J.C. Baxter, *The Principal's Leadership Counts! Launching a Baldrige-Based Quality School*, ASQ Quality Press, 2006.

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