Five Ideas from Parents for the New School Year

The district sent out a survey to all families in the spring. We had two big questions driving this request for feedback:

- How did remote instruction go for your child this past spring?
- What are your suggestions for the coming school year?

Almost 130 families responded. I read all of their comments. What's clear is most families were very supportive of teachers' efforts in an incredibly complex situation. They also shared a variety of comments about this current challenge. Next are the five most common ideas and suggestions that revealed themselves in their responses.

Facilitate and guide student discussion by any means possible

This was the number #1 suggestion. Families observed how engaged their kids became when they could see their peers and teacher and talk with each other. As one parent put it:

> "When they got to see their teachers in Zoom, it seemed to give them a spark and make them more pleased and happy doing their classwork. It was a good motivator that their teacher was still there and interested that they keep learning."

Zoom of course is no replacement for in-person interactions. Still, video conferencing tools seem to be an essential tool for creating and sustaining learning communities.

Less assignments and more authentic learning experiences

Multiple teachers commented on the waning student enthusiasm for learning as remote instruction carried on in the spring. Parents provided feedback on one reason this may be the case: Digital applications such as IXL were frequently referenced within critical comments regarding basic practice activities.

When considering the future, families repeatedly requested authentic, "real" learning experiences that would motivate their children to keep learning. Project-oriented tasks were named multiple times as opportunities to improve the educational experience. They might also provide possibilities for different disciplines to integrate the subjects.

Proactively reach out to students and families

Parents didn't want staff to simply "be available" or encourage families to reach out if they have any questions. They commented positively on the teachers who would call, email, or message regularly to check in and see how things were going.

Families also differentiated their comments about *what* schools should reach out about. Communications should be focused both on academics and on kids' social and emotional well-being. Live chats and specific office hours were also appreciated so students and families knew when they could reach out and get a prompt response.

Clearly communicate expectations and demonstrations

Families understood that with the suddenness of transitioning to remote instruction, that new learning would be hard to accomplish consistently this past spring.

Yet they have reasonably high expectations for the coming school year, especially if instruction remains at least partially mediated via the Internet. Parents requested recorded demonstrations, creative ways of delivering new instruction, and clarity regarding what was expected of their child(ren).

Student voice and choice within structure

While families would like clear communication and expectations, they also see opportunity for voice and choice within these structures. Student autonomy is not just a nice-to-have; they provide the space for students to explore, take risks, and achieve success on their own terms. Personal development and student agency are fostered.

As one parent noted:

> "Teachers should create assignments where the kids get to express their feelings, their worries, perhaps find hope (even science can be structured to show how nature overcomes impossible situations, how life always finds a way)... Resilient, creative and flexible individuals will find their way in the world, learn on the go, on the job, adapt. The online learning should be structured to support those qualities in students. Grades are not that important and neither is perfectionism."

These ideas were the top five themes from the survey results but not the only recommendations. Families also suggested the following multiple times:

- Build in opportunities of multiple ways for student expression and representation of learning through differentiated instruction and assessment.
- Prioritize feedback and encouragement over scores and grades.

- Continue to explore novel and creative ways to teach and learn in online spaces, for example more opportunities for students to set and pursue personal goals.

I've continued to be generally impressed with how empathetic and knowledgeable families are regarding teaching and learning. This experience has spotlighted the critical importance of partnering with our parents in their child's education.