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Parent and Student Feedback Survey Report

2009 – 2010 School Year

Written by Dr. Scott V. Nicol, Principal

Parent and Student Feedback Survey Report

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Introduction:

This report is for the general public to view. It will be posted on Strong Middle School's website.

The address is <http://www.rsd13ct.org/schools/strong/index.html>.

In April 2010 Strong students and parents completed two separate anonymous surveys regarding their experiences, feelings and perceptions of Strong Middle School. 99% of students and 54% of parents took part in the survey. Strong was very pleased with the number of parents who participated in this on-line anonymous survey.

The staff at Strong understands the importance of systematically soliciting feedback from parents and students in order to improve our service. This report will provide a summary of the results with select commentary and Strong highlights over the past year.

All of the parent and student feedback is important. However, all of the comments will not be addressed in this report. This would not be practical for this publication. The major themes associated with the parent and student comments will be included.

Anyone wishing to discuss this report may contact Dr. Scott V. Nicol, Principal via phone (860)349-7222 or e-mail snicol@rsd13.org.

Parent and Student Feedback Annual Report

2009 – 2010 School Year

7th and 8th Grade Student Feedback Summary:

The focus of this section was student safety and their general relationship with adults and peers. The feedback instrument was brief for a variety of reasons. Students were also afforded the opportunity to address any topic in the open-ended section.

Students were asked to respond to the following statements with Almost Always, Often, Sometimes, or Never

Statement #1

I feel safe at Strong.

Almost Always / Often -	93%
Sometimes / Never -	7%

Statement #2

I feel respected by my peers.

Almost Always / Often -	85%
Sometimes / Never -	15%

Statement #3

I feel respected by my teachers.

Almost Always / Often -	80%
Sometimes / Never -	20%

Statement #4

I am comfortable around students that are different than I am.

Almost Always / Often -	85%
Sometimes / Never -	15%

Students were afforded the opportunity to make other comments (concerns, suggestions, etc.) regarding Strong Middle School. 75% of the students who completed the survey made additional comments. Below is a summary.

40% of the comments focused on **Strong being a great school.**

Example – *Strong is a very nice school where the teachers are great and I feel safe almost all the time.*

Example – *Strong is a fun place!*

20% of the comments focused on **Strong teachers giving too much homework or planning too many quizzes at the same time.**

Example - *I would like you to know I have enjoyed the year, but there is way too much homework. I wish I could be a kid instead of having homework 24/7. I just want them to plan better and give us less homework and not give us three projects due on the same day.*

Example - *I think everyone is doing a good job but the teachers need to communicate a little more because sometimes we will have 5 tests and like 4 quizzes.*

10% of the comments focused on **Students being mean to other students.**

Example - *There's a lot of bullying and other types of harmful things going on in our school. People get hurt verbally or a lot of gossip continues.*

Example - *Sometimes the 8th graders are mean to the 7th graders, most of the time it is at our lockers...*

25% of the comments focused on **Students opinion of Strong teachers (majority are positive).**

Example - *All teachers are helpful and caring. They help me with problems that I have, whether it be at school or home.*

Example - *Whenever I enter Strong School, I feel that I am respected by my teachers and that I can always trust them. Strong is a great atmosphere for me.*

Example - *Pay just a little more attention to your students here. For some teachers, have just a little more respect for students' feelings and try not to put someone on the spot.*

The remaining 5% of responses were a potpourri of the following topics:

- A few students discussed the pressure their parents place upon them to be high achievers.
- A few students singled out several teachers feeling they did a great job.
- A few students singled out several teachers feeling they could do a better job.
- A few students want more freedom within the school.

Commentary on Student Feedback:

Overall, Strong was pleased with the feedback provided from Strong students. It is quite clear the vast majority of students are having an overall positive and productive experience at Strong. However, there is always room for improvement. Many of the students articulated thoughtful and constructive suggestions. The Strong staff greatly appreciates this approach.

It should be noted that the feedback instrument focused primarily on gauging students' connectedness to their middle school. Research overwhelming finds that when a student has a positive school connection with at least one adult and one peer, the probability that he or she will achieve both academically and socially dramatically increases. The Strong staff recognizes this and places a high priority on making this happen for all students.

One of the primary methods of assuring a student's connectedness is the number of extra-curricular activities Strong offers that are developed based upon student interest. Many activities were added at zero cost to the school district. In other words, staff members took on extra work without compensation for the benefit of the students they care about. The following activities were offered to Strong students over the past **TWO** years (each year offerings are added, dropped, or recur):

** Indicates club / activity developed and run at zero cost to school district.*

<u>Club / Activity</u>	<u>Approximate # of Students Who Participated</u>
*Peer Tutoring Program	75 approved tutors
*Peer Mentors	10
*Talent Show	28
*Archaeology Club	15
*Yoga Club	18
*Principal's Advisory	14
*Radio Club	12
*Service Club	20

*Eco Club	12
*Cardio Kick Boxing	25
*Healthy Cooking	26
*Best Buddies	15
*Knitting	10
Student Council	23
Art / Mural Makers Club	44
School Newspaper	10
Drama Club	39
Yearbook Committee	25
Soccer	71
Tennis	32
Golf	21
Mini-Hockey	15
Basketball	45
Volleyball	109
Cross Country	48
Cheerleading	23
Baseball/Softball	42

Clearly there is evidence that a percentage of our student body feels disconnected from Strong School. Many of those students feel there is a lot of bullying or **students being mean to other students.** The following is a small sample of new and existing initiatives Strong will begin and continue to implement next school year:

- Bullying unit taught to seventh graders by Guidance Counselor and Health teacher.
 - Includes reasons why people bully, how others feel if bullied, self esteem, and internet safety and bullying
- School wide presentations regarding treating others well
 - One in the fall to “kick-off” the year

- One in the winter to reinforce monthly lessons
- Possible presenters include “Looking In Theater,” Camfel Productions, Character-Building, Branford Players
- Students, Teachers and Staff sign a school wide pledge to treat peers/adults well
- School Climate survey
 - Results shared with staff and parents
- Monthly lessons taught by Guidance Counselor, School Psychologist, and Social Worker
 - Lessons will occur in the classrooms
 - Lessons derived from various books, articles, “A Thin Line” website, Premier Agendas inserts, and videos such as “ABC News Specials “The In Crowd and Social Cruelty” and 20/20’s “Bullying”, etc.
- Various bulletin boards in guidance and the school regarding positive behavior in school and on the internet
- Teacher information session
 - Possible faculty meeting or presentation regarding new laws, and ways to prevent/address bullying
- Parent information sessions
 - Presentations to be offered in the evening as well as “Coffee with the Counselors.”
 - Email information/references using Naviance and parent e-mail system
- CRHS Edge presentation to 7th and 8th graders regarding internet safety
- Student agenda inserts regarding bullying and character
- Revamp Guidance website adding a variety of parent and student resource links

A significant number of students felt that **Strong teachers give too much homework or plan too many quizzes at the same time.** There isn’t any question this can happen from time to time. It is unavoidable. Teachers consistently plan together as a team, placing emphasis on making the work load for students manageable yet challenging. However, teachers can underestimate the amount of time it will take for students to complete such assignments. It is important to note that students work at varying rates. Some students may take 20 minutes to complete a homework assignment, whereas others may take 90 minutes to complete the exact same assignment. Remember, teachers have over 100 students. This makes measuring the workload a major challenge. Teams place an emphasis on visually and verbally reminding students of the major assignments for which they are responsible. In the future, Strong has a goal of developing and maintaining teacher and team websites to further support this communication.

Moreover, teachers walk a fine line of providing students with enough support, while at the same time not to providing too much. Part of the learning process is for students to grow and mature both academically and socially. Typically, this growth is accompanied with strife, in which a middle school student can perceive a teacher’s attempt to challenge him or her as a lack of support. Parents should partner with teachers and encourage their children both to persevere through challenging times and when appropriate to advocate for necessary support. These are important lifelong learning skills. The challenge

for both parents and teachers is to decide when to push and when to pull back. In middle school, the amount and type of support can change from day to day making this process far from an exact science.

Twenty-five percent of Strong's students shared their opinion of **Strong teachers (majority are positive)**. This report finds that most students have positive relationships with the adults at Strong. However, there are certainly times when educators (including the principal) make errors in judgment when assisting students. Sometimes, with good intentions, adults make decisions resulting in unintended outcomes. This is unfortunate yet also unavoidable. However, all of the employees including the principal are held accountable one way or another for their actions. For example, the principal, utilizing a process approved by the Board of Education, evaluates all teachers. A similar process is utilized with the principal, who reports directly to the Superintendent. The Strong staff encourages all students to share with an adult their concerns. Strong staff members will work closely with students and parents to value their input and in turn improve their service. In fact, this report is one way for us to improve as professionals.

7th and 8th Grade Parent Feedback Summary:

Parents were asked to respond to the following statements with Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree or No Opinion.

The following percentages reflect those parents who formed an opinion of the statement.

Statement #1

To date, Strong has been an outstanding middle school for your child.

Strongly Agree / Agree -	82%
Disagree / Strongly Disagree-	18%

Statement #2

To date, Strong's principal (Scott Nicol) has been an effective leader.

Strongly Agree / Agree -	85%
Disagree / Strongly Disagree-	15%

Statement #3

Overall, Strong teachers have been receptive and responsive to the needs of your child.

Strongly Agree / Agree -	88%
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Disagree / Strongly Disagree- 12%

Statement #4

I feel well informed about Strong's academic program and extra-curricular activities.

Strongly Agree / Agree - 90%

Disagree / Strongly Disagree- 10%

Statement #5

Overall, I feel welcome to share my concerns and/or questions with the Strong School community.

Strongly Agree / Agree - 82%

Disagree / Strongly Disagree- 18%

Parents were afforded the opportunity to make other comments (concerns, suggestions, etc.) regarding Strong Middle School. 35% of the parents who completed the survey made additional comments.

Because the parent comments are very specific and difficult to group into a summary, this report will attempt to select a representative sample. After each of the parent comments, this report will then provide commentary addressing the issue. Strong's response will be in blue.

Of note – comments using specific teacher names will not be included. However, every Strong teacher's name that was commented on by a parent (whether positive or negative) was reviewed by the principal with the teacher.

Commentary on Parent Feedback

The vast majority of the comments were constructive and written in a thoughtful manner. The Strong staff greatly appreciates this approach.

Parent Comment #1

Why does my kid have to be taken out of academic classes for instrumental lessons it is so frustrating? The principal has to be able to do a better job at scheduling. It can't be that complicated.

Strong's Response:

This is an annual and reasonable complaint amongst parents. We are also frustrated that students must miss academic classes for instrument lessons. When we overhauled the master schedule three years ago this issue was closely examined. Students partake in lessons based upon a specific instrument. For example, those students specializing in playing flute may consist of a group from ALL three teams both 7th and 8th grade. We haven't been able to develop a master schedule allowing for a common practice during the school day. The variables are simply too great. Lessons cannot occur before or after school. As it is, school starts at 7:15 AM. Currently, jazz band does meet prior to school. However, this is an exception. After school presents even more difficulties, students participate in a plethora of extra-curricular activities. It would be unworkable to get all students from a specific instrument together to practice on a regular basis. Moreover, we have examined similar middle schools and have found they also struggle with this same issue. Unfortunately, at this time we have been unable to find a solution. We will keep working on it.

Parent Comment #2 - 4

We moved to Durham specifically for the school system. It has been everything we had hoped for and more. Our daughter loves school and subjects such as math that she seemed absolutely unable to understand have become areas of strength. The remarkable effort of the school and its teachers to provide an open and inviting bunch of social opportunities has been stunning. Even more remarkable is that many of these activities take place outside of normal school hours. We can't imagine a better academic and social environment for our daughter to have had to grow in these two years, many thanks for everything.

Both of my daughters (one in 10th grade and one presently in 8th grade) have had a phenomenal experience at Strong School. I feel that there was excellent communication about the day to day school agenda via e-mail. I also feel that the teachers and principal truly care about the children attending the school. I would recommend Strong school very highly. Thanks

I am impressed with how our teachers use creative ways to intrigue our children with their studies. I believe the teachers want our children to be successful. To all our teachers, Thank You

Strong's Response:

Many children and families have a wonderful experience at Strong. The staff really appreciates the positive feedback from parents. It is very energizing for our staff. At times – education can be thankless profession. Thank you.

Parent Comment #5

Note - I have modified this comment because of its length. All of the info was very valuable; it had to be shortened for practical reasons.

Part I (shortened) ... *Not enough parent involvement, yes they are growing up but they ARE still kids. Some are not as mature as others and still need nurturing, please remember they are still young. Many parents feel like Strong tries too hard to make our kids grow up in two years like its their responsibility. We don't expect that, nor do we want you to take on that responsibility... We just want an environment where they can learn, feel comfortable to be themselves and get the attention they need....I am not insulting Strong School I am just letting you know how some parents feel about it...Again, I am a happy customer, I have a son who does very well and will continue to do so. He has had mostly positive experiences at your school with his teachers.*

Part II (shortened) *I will tell you we still laugh at the fact that he had a lunch detention his first month of 7th grade. We do not feel detentions are appropriate punishment for 3 tardies at this grade level. If you hand out detentions like that in 7th grade what punishment should they fear in high school...In cases of children being consistently tardy, maybe you should look into the situation, you may find the route and help solve the problem...I see your intent, but it needs some adjustment. What kind of punishment is used for the real problems like bullying, inappropriate behavior, disrespect to faculty...*

Part III (shortened) *I'm just making these comments based on our experience, we have loved each school we've attended so far, we just have some mixed feelings about Strong. Believe me I am not making these comments without first raising a middle school child and also working in a middle school setting.... I hope if anything at all, my comments will make you reflect for even just a minute. Again, I am looking at this as a parent and educator, I am mostly happy with our experience and as I said earlier our son has done very well. Good luck*

Strong's Response:

Overall, thank you very much for taking the time to provide us with this feedback.

In response to Part I – The staff agrees with you and this is our goal. Of course, this is easier said than done. We get very conflicting feedback at “how much support or guidance” we should provide students and their families. Many times we receive feedback that is the exact opposite of what you have reported. We have found that parents have very different ideas of what the school’s role should be or how fast kids should or shouldn’t grow up. We try, when possible and appropriate, to alter our approach with particular students and their families. Many times we have great success. Other times, not so much. One venue for parental involvement is the Strong PTO. We have around 6 parents who regularly attend with several others who readily contribute in other ways. The school and district have offered some programs (Strong School Reads, Internet safety presentations etc.) over the years and parent participation is very low. We will keep trying.

In response to Part II – Clarification - a student has to get three tardies within a month to receive a lunch detention, not simply three total tardies. The data on lunch detentions reducing student tardies to school has been overwhelming successful. The policy works great; of course it does not fit every situation. Because of the policy Strong has had very few repeat tardy offenders. Those that do repeat are addressed in other means through our student support team. Typically, we do get to the root cause of the matter. In addition, we have a systematic letter system that addresses both tardies and attendance. The data on this program’s success has also been overwhelming positive. Students at CRHS have a more strict consequence in regards to chronic tardiness to school and class. Those students can lose credit to their class or classes. This is a board of Education policy.

In regards to bullying, disrespect of faculty and possible consequences - Early in the report I outlined some of the proactive measures we take from a macro standpoint. In terms of typical well known consequences here are some: (Of course, any consequence is only effective when applied appropriately.)

Out-of- school suspension

In-school suspension

Modified academic schedule
Parent / Student conference with appropriate staff
Delayed passing / hallway restriction
One-on-one temporary staff supervision
Office after-school detention
Teacher detention
Lunch detention
Assigned seat on bus
Assigned seat in cafeteria
Behavior reflection sheets

There are many more creative consequences the staff comes up with. To varying degrees (context of the situation is paramount), we work with parents when determining such consequences. Of course, the school administration makes the final determination.

In response to Part III - Again, thank you for your thoughtful comments. They are helpful. I hope my responses helped to clarify the school's perspective. Also, we are very pleased your child had a positive experience at Strong.

Parent Comments #6 -10

I believe the 7th graders should not have a conference in November, but sometime in March. The teachers cannot effectively evaluate the students in just a couple short months. Also, the time allotted is not sufficient. I should not need an egg timer for a FIRST year conference!

After the first report cards came out, we were not encouraged to meet with the teachers if our child was doing well. I know it's difficult to schedule, but I regret not meeting with the teachers. I think all 7th graders should be scheduled for a parent/teacher conference for the first trimester...

Each parent should have at least 30 – 60 minutes with the team for conferences. The fact that we have 10 is ridiculous.

I have heard parents complain about the length of conferences, I think sometimes they forget the fact that each teacher has over 100 kids and it would be impossible logistically to have conferences like they were in the elementary schools.

I do not believe that the teachers having conferences all together is a good thing in some cases. The parent walks in the room feeling as though they are meeting the firing squad. Even if you have a child who is doing very well and you only have a couple of questions for 1 or 2 teachers. It makes a very odd feeling to be discussing concerns with one teacher when everyone is sitting around the table.

Strong's Response:

All of these comments make sense. Running parent / teacher conferences at the secondary level is quite challenging. This is why we always offer a full 35 minute block of time throughout the entire year for parents who wish for increased individualized time. A meeting such as this can be scheduled between September and June. One of the parents hit the nail on the head. For example, – the Green Team has over 120 students. If Strong was to hold a 30 minute conference for each student that would translate into 60 hours of parent conferences. For many obvious reasons this wouldn't be practical. So, we run a schedule allotting for ten minute conferences. This is definitely short. Most of the conferences run over 10 minutes and parents end up waiting. The schedule is set up to buffer this wait time. However, it is difficult to appropriately move the meeting along without offending parents.

In regards to parents not wanting all teachers present at the conference - It is certainly appropriate when scheduling or arriving at the conference to explain your preference of meeting with the whole team or just a few. The teachers are more than willing to accommodate this request. Of note - it is the job responsibility of the team leader or head teacher for the team to supervise all conferences.

Parent Comment #11 -12

Many schools now have an on-line system for real-time tracking of student's assignments and grades. This would be a great feature to implement at Strong, to help parents keep track and support their children as the course work gets more intense leading up to high school.

I think that all Strong teachers should be willing and required if requested to leave the day's assignments at the front desk or some other designated area between 2:45-3:30 PM when a student is absent for one or more days. If parents and children are willing to pick up the work reflecting their commitment to excellence in education, then staff should be willing to leave it, either in the office or in some other location. At least give it a try.

Strong's Response:

Great idea with the on-line system! Actually, Region 13 is in the process of acquiring Power School through grant monies (not from the approved BOE budget) from the state department of education. Power School will eventually allow schools to communicate better with parents in relation to student assignment's etc. This will take time to get rolling, but eventually Strong and the other schools will get to this point.

The policy is for student make up work to be left in the office for those students who are absent TWO or more days. We did try to accommodate parents after only one absence and it was unworkable. Hopefully, in the future, Power School will make this a moot point.

Parent Comment #13

*(Dr. Nicol) is not approachable at all...likes to be seen but not at all interested in you or your kid!
Hope he does not go up to CRHS! Xavier here we come! ☺*

Strong's Response

As I read this comment I chose to re-word it and then respond.

Unfortunately, Dr. Nicol was unable to establish rapport with either myself or my child. My child and I feel that he isn't a principal who is very approachable. I care about the children going to CRHS next school year and strongly feel that Dr. Nicol would not be a good match for the high school. We are very much looking forward to our child attending Xavier this coming fall.

Clearly, despite my consistent efforts I have not established a positive relationship with every Strong parent and student. I must say my opportunities to interact with each child and parent on an individual level are limited. In terms of being approachable, I do make an effort to go out of my way to smile and exchange pleasantries with all students and parents. Although they are few

and far between, there are times when I am able to interact in a much more substantive manner with both parents and students. Clearly, this is an important part of being the Strong principal and an area that is always a priority for me to improve upon.

Of note – I feel it is appropriate to let the community know that I have not applied for the CRHS principal position. Also – I am pleased that this family is looking forward to Xavier. I am sure their high school experience will be what they choose to make of it.

Parent Comment #14

Dr. Nicol's letters to the parents must be an embarrassment to the excellent teachers in the English department. I wish he were as committed to academic excellence as Mr. Brough was.

Strong's Response

I certainly do not want to embarrass our excellent English teachers. I certainly do not want to embarrass myself. I will more closely examine my letters to parents. I am always open to learning from others and Mr. Brough is definitely a colleague I admire. Thank you.

Parent Comment #15

Parent/student feedback should be taken into consideration when teachers have yearly assessments. (both for the positive and negative)

Strong's Response

Parent and student feedback is taken into account when principals evaluate teachers. The feedback is very important.

Parent Comment #16

Note - I have modified this comment because of its length. All of the info was very valuable; it had to be shortened for practical reasons.

I think my and my child's experience with the Strong school staff has been outstanding for the most part. Dr. Nicol has been a consistent and outstanding administrative leader throughout the year...

I have found working with Dr. Nicol a pleasure. My child describes Dr. Nicol as "really nice." I view him as an intellectual with great compassion for students and their parents. He has a gift for understanding the psychological needs of children at the middle school level and making them feel special. He always seemed calm and in control of all situations with adults and children. Throughout the year, he addressed any concern I had regarding the needs of my child promptly and to my satisfaction...

Strong's Response

Thank you for the positive feedback. It really means a lot to me.

Conclusion:

The students of Strong Middle School have had many successes this past school year. Also, many parents feel positive about the education their child has received. However, this was not the case for some students and their families. As educators the staff at Strong accepts their significant role in the life experiences of all students and firmly believes, that with perseverance, a productive partnership can be established with all parents. This is our pledge to the students and parents of Strong – past, present and future.