

Caution: Parents 2.0 Ahead!

Managing the Shift in Parental Expectations

BY MARC T. FRANKEL AND JUDITH L. SCHECHTMAN

As we travel from school to school listening to thousands of parents in focus groups talk about what they want from their schools, we hear remarkably consistent themes despite considerable variance in each school's mission, size, location, and religious affiliation. As expected, certain themes arise from larger societal trends — back-to-basics, a desire for hard evidence of student progress, global connectivity at warp speed, and social networking, to name a few. Within these issues, parental concerns today differ from the past primarily in the increasing stridency with which parents give voice to them and their apparent willingness to change schools if they think another will better fulfill their expectations. But what we notice most are the emerging themes that seem to reflect the interests of a relatively new group of independent school parents — a group we've come to call Parents 2.0.

This cohort of parents, tracking generational archetypes, arrives in school with a whole new set of concerns and expectations. Taken together, these emerging themes pose both a challenge and an opportunity for school leaders. We believe that school success from a business point of view will increasingly mean finding ways to offer a value proposition that resonates with these parents.

Technology 24/7

The wish for technology 24/7 is illustrated by a set of parent focus groups at an elementary school (pre-K through sixth grade) in a rapidly growing city. Parent attitudes toward technology were among the issues we probed, as the head of school was planning a major upgrade to the school's infrastructure and digital

capacity. We started with the parents of the upper grades and found them happy, for the most part, with the smart boards and keyboarding and other standard uses of technology in the classroom. A few of these parents said that the proposed technology plan was too much for young children, while a few others thought that it was not enough exposure for success in the next school. In short, these parents sounded just like thousands of other parents in dozens of focus groups across the United States since the advent of the personal computer.

However, as we dropped down in grade level, we also dropped down in the age demographic of the parents; Gen X segues into Gen Y — where views differ in important ways. One of our technology-related queries asked parents how often the parents themselves texted. In the older grades, almost none of the parents texted and very few of them checked their email regularly unless they were using it at work. (Remember, these parents did not yet have teenagers, and so were not forced to learn to text to communicate with their children!) When we asked the parents of the pre-K and kindergarten children, they all said they *only* text, had largely given up on email because it takes too long to compose a message, and wanted the school to text any messages it sent home. These parents fully expected their children to be using a computer (preferably an iPad) in the classroom and at home daily as an ordinary part of teaching and learning. Further, they pushed hard on the idea that technology was going to be integral to life success for their children, and wanted the school to build in practice with collaborative learning across time and space, exploring the world through partnerships with schools around the globe, coupling foreign-language acquisition with technology for growth in cultural competencies, etc. A substantial number of the Gen Y parents want the school, even in the primary grades, to find and integrate into the curriculum good online courses, particularly in subjects not currently offered at the school.

We noticed that these parents are living and working in jobs that require use of the same skills they wanted their children to learn. They are also younger by a decade than the parents from the upper-grade focus groups above, and they sounded unlike most of the parents we were accustomed to hearing. The difference is in the full-on, ubiquitous presence of technology that they embrace as a given, not only for their own lives, but for those of their children, too. For them, anything less seems woefully inadequate.

At the same time, as it has for years, a small but countervailing force in schools is the vocal minority — the parents who believe, as one father told us, “technology is like inviting the devil into the room.” These parents would prefer that their child never encounter a computer until they enter high school and only then in the supposed safety of their own homes, where the parents believe they can exert control over its usage.

Me-ism: The Consumerist Revolution

The second theme is one we’re calling “Me-ism” — the idea that every parent wants his or her child’s experience to meet the unique needs and interests of that child. Generally, these parents feel it is no longer enough for schools to offer small class sizes or low student-teacher ratios as the way for teachers to lavish attention on each student. Increasingly, they believe that education across the grade spectrum should offer a menu of options from which they can create a unique and totally customized experience for each of their children. Against this wish, school administrators usually push back, saying that the curriculum is a package that cannot be disaggregated based on a parent’s preference. But an increasing number of parents are dissatisfied with this response.

In a focus group in a large Western U.S. city, a representative parent told us, “We are going to be needy and demanding because we think that is what we are owed for our \$35,000 a year.” You would be correct to infer a

sense of entitlement in this attitude, and it is born of the belief that school is a consumer product to be purchased as one would any other good or service.

These parents believe it both reasonable and appropriate to demand that a school accommodate these wishes within its tuition and school day. If you won’t offer some customization at your school, they believe they can find another school that will or that they can cobble together a unique experience via online and outside-school opportunities. These parents will say they understand and embrace the mission of your school, and they may up to a point, but what they talk about most is the idea that within that mission the school should serve the menu that works best — in their view — for their child.

Digging deeper, we find that customization for more and more parents ranges from accelerating learning via technology to individual tutoring within the normal school day to a broad menu of language courses to unbundling the curriculum so they can pick their own version of math because they don’t like the one the school is using. And these parents come to school with greater knowledge of how all this might work. For instance, many young parents bring a detailed knowledge of available math curricula (Singapore, Chicago, and others) that only rarely emerged in our groups a decade ago. In other words, parental expectations are growing as the ability to access high-quality online learning expands. And let’s not forget, many of these children come with diagnoses that require specific accommodations in learning and testing.

The parents often say things like, “I expect the school to arrange accommodations so that my daughter can compete in select league soccer year-round and attend away tournaments without problems in catching up with school.” Or, “We expect that the school will make arrangements for our son to travel with us for three months while we are on sabbatical. After all, it is only three months and we do not intend to put him in school elsewhere because

we won't be staying in one place." Or, "My child is a [fill in the blank] genius and we want him/her to be able to be challenged every day in school, so we expect that the teacher will [fill in the blank]."

Me-ism is not just all about the child. It also describes the expectations of many parents about how the school will deal with them. Among other things, they expect customized contact and communication, access to an individualized daily or weekly summary of what their child has done and learned, and schedules for meetings, volunteer opportunities, and school events that meet their work and family needs. Like their wants for their child's experience at your school, parents think of their own preferences in a highly consumerist sort of way — as reasonable demands based on the fact that they are paying an increasingly large amount of tuition for what they see as a luxury experience.

Back to the Future

Seemingly paradoxical to the above, a growing number of parents want the curriculum to reflect what is familiar — and therefore safe — from their own school days; hence, our third theme, Back to the Future. For example, parents in progressive or Montessori schools love the idea of narrative report cards in the youngest years, but often say, "I need to know how my fifth-grader stacks up against other fifth-graders in this and other schools, so the school should test and give us frequent reports." Or, "I want my third-grader to know her times tables backward and forward. I don't care if the head of school thinks she will be just as successful in math by sixth grade as any other child. I want to know she has the basics in hand now." Or, "My children have to be drilled in spelling. None of this crazy spelling-like-it-sounds. They will never succeed at work if they cannot spell."

These parents may approve of your educational philosophy as well as your mission, but then want to customize the curriculum so they are assured their child will succeed the way they

expect. And it turns out that one of their favorite words is *rigor* — meaning more conventional academics with an aggressive edge often focused as much on future employability as elite university admission.

An independent school is a choice for parents, and, as Swarthmore's Barry Schwartz shows in his consumer research, choice really only makes us more anxious, not less.¹ Compounding the anxiety for parents is the fact that they can never truly know whether they made the right choice or not by buying into your school. Any outcomes they seek will take years to unfold, be influenced by thousands of other factors, and can never be compared with the path not taken (*e.g.*, to the other school down the street).

Facing this anxiety, which mounts as their child gets older and the next school choice looms large, parents want it all: the charm and intimacy of your school plus the traditional drills that characterize the rigor of another school. While this has always been the case to a point, what makes Back to the Future a leading theme of Parents 2.0 is the increasing belief among parents that buying into your school means buying relief from the anxiety and a guarantee that their child will succeed, be happy, and win in life.

Life Skills: Not Your Father's Shop Class

A surprising theme we are hearing is about teaching children the basic life skills they will need to survive once they are on their own. These skills range from how to iron a shirt, to how to cook, to knowing what is under the hood of a car, to understanding basic plumbing and electricity and being able to do simple repairs, to learning how to sew on a button. Beyond these, we have even heard parents ask for a return of the shop class with a comment like, "Not every child will go on to college any longer and we need to be a school that supports the idea that it is just as valuable to work with your hands as your brain." Or, even if my child gets an advanced degree, I want her to not depend on paying someone

else to replace a leaky faucet."

For some of us in the boomer generation, these were skills that we learned at home. Regardless, today's parents, perhaps with the genetic memory of their own parents' experiences in school with shop class and home economics, increasingly tell us they fear that their children are not going to be able to take care of themselves. What we hear parents asking for is to fundamentally rethink what has been lost or eliminated over the years and to make school the place where these things can be taught.

We could ask why they are not making sure their kids learn these things at home. Some are, in fact. Some are not, because they lack confidence in their own ability to teach life skills, or have little time or energy to devote to the subject. The net result is that more and more parents believe that school is now the central place from which *all* learning and experience emanates, whether academic, social, or manual. And, as with Me-ism, these same parents think this a perfectly reasonable expectation for their tuition payments.

What began as a trickle of voices in our groups is turning into a torrent. Which leads us to the last big trend...

The School as Center

In the wake of tragedies — such as the attacks on 9/11, the DC sniper, Hurricane Katrina, the devastation in Haiti, the Boston Marathon bombing, or even, paradoxically, the school shootings in Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Newtown — schools become the single safe place for children and their families. It is the center or hub where "normal" can be reestablished most quickly, even when nothing outside the school seems at all normal. It is a place where families gather to support each other and to find a way through the chaos and fear around them. Further, it is a place for parents to find refuge and to share with others their hardships, their joys, and a sense of camaraderie.

Following recent disasters, we started hearing an echo of this need for schools as centers for normality, even in schools that were far from the

affected locations. In these schools, we heard statements such as, “Choosing to have our child in this school alienates us from our neighbors and even some of our friends. They don’t understand our choice and see it as snobbish or elitist or a rejection of their choice. But we need a place to connect with other like-minded people and we find it here.” Or, “Life is so hectic and we only want the best for our child. School should be a one-stop shop. A place for education and for social activities for them and us. A place for music or dance lessons so we don’t have to shop around. A place for my child to do homework and learn to hit a baseball. If the school is arranging this or providing this, I feel safe and trust what it offers. Maybe the school could provide prepared meals we can pick up at the end of the day and heat at home for dinner.”

We are hearing another aspect of this trend from a growing subset of parents: that of school (even a secular school) becoming the place that teaches morals, values, and even deals informally with questions related to sex, faith, and the workings of the world. While most schools have either tried to curricularize these topics so that they are safe to discuss or refer the child back to the parents, the reality is that, for most parents not connected to or engaged in a faith community or other similar group that helps teach and reinforce values, the school has become the locus for social education, guidance, and support.

The idea of school as a community with a shared worldview has become even more important to the parents we’ve met in the recent past. Finding “people like us” carried historical baggage from a time in the United States when these would have been code words for seeking racial or ethnic homogeneity. What makes this desire different today is not just its stridency, but that parents now mean finding a community of like-minded parents, where they “can trust that other parents discipline their children the same way we do.” Parents believe schools can and should be racially and ethnically

diverse (a strongly held value in many communities), yet at the same time they crave an immersion for their children in a social network of families with similar values.

What Should School Leaders Do?

Meeting parent demands and needs is to aim at a moving target. By closely analyzing thousands of focus group comments from parents over a 20-year span, we detect shifts that announce the arrival of a new cohort of parents bringing expectations that are different from those of past cohorts.

With all these trends, what we notice most is a generational divide, reflecting in most cases slightly different sensibilities and preferences of Gen Y parents. Probing deeper, we hear an increased stridency of demand, fueled by independent school price points north of \$30,000 even in midsize markets. To be sure, there are still parents who are buying with their child’s enrollment such straightforward things as limited exposure to what they believe are “bad influence” families and children. Some buy tradition, as they themselves attended an independent school as children. Still others believe they are buying the education they remember having, which is no longer available in their local public schools.

Generational shift aside, we are finding a new cadre of independent school parents, spanning Gen X and Gen Y, who expect something different from parents of the past — or who are uniformly vocal about things that used to be the wants of only a tiny minority of parents.

In order to work well with such parents, heads and administrators first need to be clear about the school’s commitment to high-quality and consistent education, a kind of education not offered elsewhere in town. They need to constantly underscore their commitment to building and sustaining a school community that values the emotional, social, and intellectual growth of all children.

Beyond this, as school leaders think

about the future, we believe it essential to listen to these parent voices and hear their expectations so the school can decide if and how to respond. The trends themselves carry no valence — they are neither intrinsically positive nor negative — rather, they are facts of school life.

Many schools are already making adjustments to meet new parent expectations — developing iPad programs, offering online opportunities, global connections, creating programs that help students develop greater social skills, offering academic support, and so on. It may not be possible — or even desirable — to meet all the new demands and expectations, especially when they run counter to a school’s mission. But the savvy school leader would be smart to listen to the new generation of parents, if only to understand where the concept of school may be heading. We think that tomorrow’s market-leading schools will be those that find ways to blend the table stakes of top-tier teaching and learning with the value-enhancing elements parents want and need from schools.

Marc T. Frankel and Judith L. Schechtman are senior consultants and partners at Triangle Associates, Saint Louis, Missouri. They can be reached at projects@ta.stl.com.

Notes

1. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*. HarperCollins, 2009.

“We are going to be needy and demanding because we think that is what we are owed for our \$35,000 a year.”