

Use non-exit interviews to improve retention

In the spring, talking with parents without assuming they are leaving

“The most valuable resource you can give customers [parents] is your time. Listen to them to uncover their real needs. Only then can you find a way to solve their problems or meet their expectations. Treat the cause, not just the symptoms.”

Ginger Conlon, Author

Last week, Frank the Hedgehog promised a sample exit interview form. But the attachment fell off--bad staples. This is **good** from my perspective. Because although exit interviews are vital, at this time of year you should not be assuming, or believing, or accepting a parent's plan to enroll their child someplace else next fall.

So Frank gave me permission to share a different perspective, specifically for springtime—the non-exit interview.

Use non-exit interviews to improve retention

In the spring, parents have **plans** for next fall. But you should not consider those plans final. A caring conversation that gets to the root of their decision may change their mind. And even if not, it will demonstrate your care and interest. (It hurts my heart when parents have told me, “We pulled our child out of school and no one even missed us.”)

Have these conversations yourself

This should not be delegated. The **tone** for this conversation needs to be, “We care about your child. We would miss him or her at our school. And we would miss you as part of our school family. What can we do to make next year work for you?”

Board members can and should do exit interviews **after the first of next school year when a child has not shown up** for the first week of school.

Ask why they are considering a different school

Then listen. Actively. (You already know how to do this better than I can describe.)

After they have explained their reason ask:

“If we could fix _____, would you return?”

If you get another reason, repeat the process above until there are no more reasons.

Fix what you can

Don't promise specific changes or solutions in this conversation.

Do promise to look into the issue(s) they brought up and get back to them by _____ (and give them a specific time.) Then be sure to follow up.

Often, at least one of their answers will be finances. You and your board need to balance a) if you will be better off with a family paying partial tuition or not attending at all, with b) dealing fairly with all your school families.

Yes, these are very similar to exit interviews

You will notice that in many ways these conversations are the same as how I've recommended teachers and principals do exit interviews. The difference is in your assumption based on timing: In non-exit interviews you need to assume they are strongly considering other options but are willing to be reasonable and work things out. An exit interview happens *only when they have enrolled somewhere else* and your goal is healing the relationship—if for no other reason than they may discover that the grass was not greener on the other side of the fence and you will have left the gate open for their return (and hopefully even offered a handful of oats).

Delegating:

Sorry, not this time.

Credits:

Dan Krause, thank you for the reminder that we shouldn't accept a "no" until we know why.

Binder tab: April

School size: All