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September 23, 2009

Dear Parents,

I am delighted to write the preface to the results of the Parent Survey, sent to you by the Parent Survey Committee. This past winter, Neave Karger-Megenhardt, Cindy Scheyer, and Kristen Hammerback responded to my call for a survey of our parents following an accreditation planning meeting to which all parents were invited. This wonderful group of parents understood the necessity to conduct a parent survey independent from the Board and the administration, and gifted their time and considerable expertise to this process. I received the results of this survey on September 21, which gave me just enough time to consider the results in the context of our most recent efforts, some of which I gladly share here with you. Like you, our Board of Trustees is discovering the survey results with this publication.

Many of the issues identified in the survey as needing improvement are already being looked at carefully. Some have already been changed; others will take more time to modify as they are being considered and discussed. Both the Board and the administration care deeply about your opinions and feelings about our school, and are committed to doing what is reasonably possible to address your concerns as we continue to improve the overall quality of school life.

As the Board progresses along its Strategic Plan process, the commitment to regular and thorough communication is at the forefront of the Board's attention. In her letter published in this year's first issue of *The Update*, Michelle Frame, Board President, shares some of the important Board projects currently implemented or unfolding. In her introduction to the Back to School Night last week, Michelle expressed the Board's sincere commitment to be well-connected with the school community. She will be supported in this important work by a renewed understanding of the importance of solid communication that comes from the results of this survey.

The same can be said in regard to the administration, where further improvements in the quality and promptness of our responses appear, from the survey results, to be needed. While administrative staff is striving to serve you as best as possible, we are always looking for ways to enhance our service. We will continue to do so in the coming weeks and months. We hope our new website and blog, upcoming Development work projects and communication with our school community will make significant steps toward yet another level of effectiveness. Whether furthering the school community's understanding of our high school or educational support program, we are dedicated to building a community of inspired and satisfied families. It appears from the survey results that a large majority of you would recommend our school to your family and friends. We are sincerely grateful, as this is the most meaningful compliment we could ever receive.

I thank you sincerely for participating in the survey, and look forward to our continued conversation, in school wide forums and future surveys.

Sincerely,
Geraldine Kline, Director of Administration



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Parent Survey Committee

2009 SWS Parent Survey - Report of Results

In the spring of 2009, following a request from Geraldine Kline, a group of parents created an independent Parent Survey Committee and designed a survey of SWS parents. The Parent Survey Committee used the usual school email system to distribute the survey to parents, and with the help of follow-up requests, a total of **211** parents completed it.

In designing the survey, our team of parent volunteers had **3** goals:

1. Construct a **comprehensive portrait** of parental opinions about the school's teaching and administration. It can be difficult for members of our community to know whether their experiences are unique or are shared by others. By surveying the entire parent body, we hoped to give the school information on the **full range** of families' perceptions and experiences.
2. Provide parents an opportunity to express their major areas of **concern**. This information will help the school as it thinks about potential **changes** in its policies, procedures, and methods of operation.
3. Invite parents to describe the areas where they thought the school was functioning **well**, thereby meeting or exceeding their expectations.

In sum, the survey attempted to collect, in one place, what parents see as the **strengths** of the school in addition to the areas needing minor or major **improvements**.

The questions divide into **5** basic types:

I. Overall satisfaction with the school

II. Satisfaction about particular aspects of the school

III. Knowledge of the school's operations and procedures

IV. Open-ended opportunities for parents to make **comments** or recommend **changes** regarding the board, the administration, the family's general experiences, and the family's classroom experiences

V. Open-ended opportunities for parents to describe what they **like best** about the school

We will describe below the results from **each category** of questions. For ease of interpretation, we have added together the numbers saying "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" to reach the "total agree." Similarly, "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" are combined into the "total disagree." Please note: Some of the percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding error.

I. Overall satisfaction with the school.

1. *“Overall, my child is receiving the educational experience I envisioned at the time of admissions.”*
total **agree** 85%
total **disagree** 15%
2. *“I would recommend Seattle Waldorf School to family and friends.”*
total **agree** 92%
total **disagree** 8%

The two questions above indicate that parents have a high level of general satisfaction with the school. As we individually and collectively reflect on where the school needs to go in the future, it’s worth pausing to celebrate the school’s founders thirty years ago, who left us with a thriving Waldorf community in Seattle.

Moving beyond general satisfaction, the more specific questions below highlight some areas (namely parent-teacher conferences and the responses of teachers to questions) where parental satisfaction is equally high. However, these questions also point to areas where many parents believe the school needs **improvement**. The results from these questions should also be kept top of mind as the school works to achieve the ideals of Waldorf education.

II. Satisfaction about particular aspects of the school

3. *“I feel like I am heard when I voice a concern to the administration at SWS.”*
total **agree** 51%
total **disagree** 30%
I've never felt the need to voice a concern to the administration 19%
4. *“When I bring a concern to a teacher or someone in the administration, I feel it is addressed in a timely manner.”*
total **agree** 60%
total **disagree** 30%
I've never brought a concern to a teacher or someone in the administration 10%
5. *“I usually get a lot of information and value out of parent/teacher conferences.”*
total **agree** 85%
total **disagree** 15%
6. *“I am satisfied with the way my child's teacher(s) respond to my questions or concerns.”*
total **agree** 87%
total **disagree** 13%
7. *“I am satisfied with how the school handles issues surrounding children with unique challenges or special needs.”*
total **agree** 32%
total **disagree** 35%
I'm unaware of how the school handles issues surrounding special needs 34%

8. *“I feel like the school is sensitive to the needs and concerns of financially-challenged families.”*
total **agree** 77%
total **disagree** 23%

9. *“I consider myself to be an active participant in the community by volunteering at least 20 hours per year and attending most community festivals and events.”*
total **agree** 71%
total **disagree** 29%

III. Knowledge of the school’s operations and procedures

Overall, the SWS parent body assigned its lowest scores to the knowledge-based items below. In particular, many parents indicate that they do not understand how the board operates, the organizational structure of the school, how the high school works, and how the high school benefits the entire community.

10. *“If I have a concern I need to voice, I generally know the correct person to speak to in the administration.”*
total **agree** 63%
total **disagree** 27%
I've never felt the need to voice a concern to the administration 10%

11. *“I understand how the SWS Board works, and how it relates to the operation of the school.”*
total **agree** 39%
total **disagree** 61%

12. *“In general, I understand the organizational structure of the school, such as who teachers report to.”*
total **agree** 56%
total **disagree** 44%

13. *“In general, I am aware of what my child is learning in the classroom.”*
total **agree** 85%
total **disagree** 15%

14. *“In general, I have a good sense of how my child is progressing in the classroom.”*
total **agree** 79%
total **disagree** 21%

15. *“In general, I am aware of my child's important due dates, homework assignments, and other classroom-related milestones.”*
total **agree** 81%
total **disagree** 19%

16. *“I feel like I understand how the high school works.”*
total **agree** 36%
total **disagree** 64%

17. *“I feel like I understand how the high school benefits the entire community of SWS.”*

total **agree** 45%
total **disagree** 55%

18. *“I understand the role of the Parent Association, including how it works.”*

total **agree** 65%
total **disagree** 35%

IV. Open-ended opportunities for parents to make comments or recommend changes regarding the board, the administration, the family’s general experiences, and the family’s classroom experiences

The questions noted above in sections I, II, and III provide a snapshot of parents’ opinions about a variety of topics. In designing the survey, we thought it important to allow parents to comment in an open-ended way. We expected that parents would have a great deal to say, and they did! Our community includes a wide range of views, and these were fully reflected in the open-ended questions. Because we viewed this information as a valuable source of anonymous feedback about the school, we have forwarded the complete set of answers to the board and the administration. For the benefit of the entire community, we have grouped together similar answers for purposes of presentation. Those mentioned by **four or more parents** are included below.

19. *“If I could tell the SWS Board one thing, here is what it would be:”*

(110 parents answered this question, with 101 leaving it blank.)

25 parents: improve the board’s communication, transparency, and presence in the community

11 parents: problems noted with the administration, including the executive director

7 parents: thank you to the board for its service

5 parents: tuition is too high and is going up too fast

5 parents: support for the administration and the executive director

4 parents: recommendations to rethink the school’s organizational structure

3 parents or fewer: variety of other comments

20. *“If I could change one thing about how SWS is run, here is what it would be:”*

(109 parents answered this question, with 102 leaving it blank.)

16 parents: improve the school’s communication and transparency

12 parents: change how the administration operates

8 parents: modify the school’s governance structure to make it more decentralized

3 parents or fewer: many other comments

21. *“If I could choose one thing to change about the experience my child is having in the classroom, here is what it would be:”*

(109 parents answered this question, with 102 leaving it blank.)

25 parents: nothing, everything is great as it stands.

7 parents: make it more challenging and/or more academic

7 parents: strengthen the language program, especially Spanish

3 parents or fewer: many other comments

22. *“If I could choose one thing to change about our family’s experience at SWS, here is what it would be:”*

(91 parents answered this question, with 120 leaving it blank.)

12 parents: nothing, everything is great as it stands

11 parents: need better communication from teachers, the administration, and the board

7 parents: improve the responsiveness, warmth, or fairness of the administration

5 parents: make the school more affordable

4 parents: friendliness of the teachers

3 parents or fewer: many other comments

V. Open-ended opportunities for parents to describe what they like best about the school

Finally, we assumed that parents—despite the concerns many of them noted in the questions above—have good reasons for sending their children to SWS. We wanted to identify those reasons, both to recognize what the school is doing well and to ensure that it remains a vibrant community in the future. The final question, then, asks parents to pick the **best thing** about their family’s experience at SWS.

You will notice that parents gave a much more limited range of answers for question 23 than they did for questions 20, 21, and 22. In interpreting these results, we are reminded of Tolstoy’s line from *Anna Karenina*, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” In expressing concerns about the school, answers to the open-ended questions 20, 21, and 22 were all over the map. There were certain patterns, to be sure, but most of the responses were unique. In contrast, for question 23 that asks parents to pick what they like best about the school, answers clustered in only a few groups.

23. “If I could choose one thing that I like best about our family’s experience at SWS, here is what it would be:”

(127 parents answered this question, including 15 who listed more than one thing, with 84 leaving it blank.)

36 parents: the feeling of community

31 parents: the curriculum and teaching philosophy

29 parents: skilled, caring, and committed teachers

19 parents: my child and others are thriving

10 parents: festivals and seasonal rhythms

7 parents: other parents and families

3 parents or fewer: a few other comments

Our team of parent volunteers would like to conclude by **thanking** those who completed the survey, as well as those who have expressed their views in other forums. Again, the full set of responses to the open-ended questions has been forwarded to the board and the administration. You’ll hear more from them in the upcoming months about how the survey informs their ongoing efforts to protect and strengthen SWS as a center of excellence in Waldorf education.

Kristen Hammerback, on behalf of the SWS Parent Survey Committee

Neave Karger-Megenhardt

Cindy Scheyer

Kristen Hammerback