

Thoughts and Next Steps from the Parent and Belonging Survey Findings

FROM

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Assessing, reflecting, and receiving feedback are essential parts of learning and getting better.

At Menlo, this is true for our students, for our employees, for ourselves as leaders, and for us as an institution.

We regularly undertake processes to evaluate how we are doing as a school, and over the past six months, we've had the opportunity to take a deeper look through our recent parent survey as well as a new belonging survey. Because there were many similar themes across both surveys, we're sharing an overarching summary here to give you a sense of our takeaways and what's to come.

Much like the year itself, the surveys shone a light on our many strengths as a school as well as our areas for growth. Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of our students and families are happy to be at Menlo. They extol our incredible educators, engaging classroom opportunities, and welcoming environment. While the data revealed much to be proud of, not all of these strengths are universally experienced by all members of our community. There are clear opportunities for improvement. Both surveys had challenges around belonging, culture, and social dynamics that hinder the student and parent experiences here. So we've got work to do, and we are committed to doing that work.

Background

We typically send a parent survey approximately every three years (although the pandemic delayed us a bit). It helps us gauge how well we are living our mission and values as a school in the eyes of our parent-guardian community. This year, we administered the survey in February to every parent and guardian in the school—approximately 1,200 email addresses—and received 391 responses (a 31.5% response rate).

Our belonging survey, distributed in December, was new this year. We worked with a survey partner out of UCLA and administered it to students in grades 8-12, parents, and employees. (Due to the nuanced nature of the questions being asked, we provided a modified version of the survey to our 6th and 7th graders.) Unfortunately, as you may have heard in the State of the School, the belonging survey had some shortcomings, such as confusing verbiage and redundancy in some questions, which negatively impacted the clarity of the results and the overall completion rate. That said, we were able to glean some valuable data points, particularly from the responses from 540 students in grades 8-12, which are the basis for many of our findings below.

Strengths

Happy to be at Menlo

Across both surveys, the vast majority of students and parents report being happy to be at Menlo, with over 91% of parents satisfied with their decision to send their children here. Similarly, the belonging survey found that the majority of students, around 85%, “frequently/almost always” say they are “happy to be at Menlo” and “feel like they are a part of Menlo.” Conversely, just 2% of students indicated they are frequently unhappy to attend this school. These are very strong findings, and yet our ultimate goal is for every member of the school to feel happy and at home here.

Excellent Educators

Parents indicated overwhelmingly that one of their favorite things about Menlo is the teachers. Specifically, the parent survey revealed that 90% or more of our families agreed or strongly agreed with the ways in which faculty inspire and support students, the extent to which we foster academic excellence, and the ways in which students receive appropriate levels of both challenge and support. Similarly, the belonging survey revealed that the majority of students, over 85%, “almost always/frequently” feel accepted by their teachers, feel that their teachers are dedicated to their education, and provide support to facilitate academic success. Our dynamic teaching and strong student-teacher relationships have long been at our core, and we are extremely proud to see this reiterated in these findings.

Welcoming Environment

Approximately 90% of parents agree with the ways we provide a “positive overall environment.” Similar numbers of students say they feel the school fosters “a safe learning environment that allows them to be themselves at school without fear.” Most students across all demographics indicated that Menlo is welcoming of all races, religions, and sexual orientations, and that neither teachers nor the

administration tolerate discriminatory behavior. That said, students of color, particularly those who identify as Black and African American, as well as LGBTQ+ students, had somewhat lower responses in these areas, so as we strive for all students to feel welcome and affirmed here, we need to redouble our efforts in these areas (more on that below).

Areas for Growth

The Culture of Our School

The belonging survey revealed some concerning findings that we’re investing resources to better understand and counter. Specifically, Black and African American students are more likely than their peers (40+% vs ~15%) to “think about leaving Menlo” and are less likely to feel accepted by their teachers. LGBTQ+ students were less likely to feel that Menlo is always accepting of all races, religions, and sexual orientations, with 70% of them saying Menlo was “always/frequently accepting” and 24% noted it was “sometimes accepting.” Less than 5% of students across all demographics reported experiencing microaggressions or discrimination at Menlo; however, these experiences were more common among Black/African American (25%) and Latino students (13%). Given that our EDIB efforts are central to our mission and values, we endeavor to drive those numbers to zero.

Another finding that stood out in the belonging survey was that more than half of students indicated they feel alone or isolated at times. While the data didn’t reveal the root cause, outside research tells us that this is an increasing trend among adolescents nationwide. The U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, in his 2023 Advisory, [*Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*](#), highlighted findings that for young people ages 15 to 24, time spent in-person with friends has reduced by nearly 70% over the past two decades. “Many young people now use social media as a replacement for in-person relationships, and this often meant

lower-quality connections,” he said. While Menlo students appear to be experiencing this less than the national average, this is something we will examine and address as part of our ongoing wellness strategic planning work.

Lastly, while much of our belonging survey findings centered around our students’ experiences, parent feedback also highlighted some adult culture dynamics that need work. Approximately 40% of parents say they sometimes felt “isolated or alone at parent events.” We’re collaborating with the MSPA in this area, and we hope every member of the parent/guardian community will take this to heart and look for individual ways, both big and small, to make others feel at home here.

Fostering Empathy and Greater Purposes

In the parent survey, the responses to “my student has grown more empathic as a result of their experiences at Menlo” and “my student has become more committed to purposes larger than themselves through their experiences at Menlo” were lower than we’d hope to see, with only 74% and 68% of people agreeing or strongly agreeing respectively. While this is still a majority of parents and similar to past parent survey findings, we’d like to see both of these measures improve as they are core to our mission as a school. Whether through our focus on the Habits of the Heart and Mind and Human Skills in the Middle School or the Upper School’s MTerm, Menlo Abroad, and student life programming, we will continue to deepen our efforts to develop empathetic, resilient, and compassionate humans who are prepared with the agency, optimism, and critical-thinking skills they’ll need to positively impact ever-wider communities.

Next Steps

On many fronts, these surveys have confirmed the strengths of this school—amazing teachers who

inspire, support, and care deeply; a joyful and engaging learning environment; and the boundless dedication of this entire community to the well-being of our children. These are strengths that we will lean on to enhance and expand as we move forward. The surveys also confirmed what we already knew from the deeply unsettling racist incidents on campus this year: that we have work to do—all of us—to make this community what we need it to be for all of our children and the world they’ll inherit.

Culture work and the work of creating a kind, welcoming environment that imbues a sense of belonging in all community members is and must continue to be a priority for Menlo School. Strengthening the culture within our student body, in particular, warrants much greater effort on our part.

In April, we engaged Carin Taylor, who recently stepped down from her role as Chief Diversity Officer at Workday and a 30-year career leading diversity efforts at Cisco and Genentech, as an EDIB consultant. She has already spent two days on campus talking to a variety of stakeholders and is helping us define our next steps.

We’ve also bolstered some of the areas that directly support students by increasing our counseling staff, are currently hiring a new Dean of Student Life and Culture in the Upper School, and finding ways to support those members of our community most acutely impacted by the incidents this spring to heal. We will spend the summer prioritizing our next steps. This Fall, we will hold focus groups with students to seek to better understand some of the data we saw in the survey feedback. At a strategic level, we will be pursuing a series of actions that we believe, taken together over time, will help us to address the areas that require growth as a school. These include:

1) ***Increasing our moral clarity as an institution:***

Our children need to understand more clearly what is expected of them in speech and action and be held to those expectations.

2) ***Reinforcing the values of the School:*** We can do an even better job of helping everyone in the community commit to the core principles around which this community is organized.

3) ***Deepening the culture of upstanders in our students:*** At a time in society and at a developmental age where the pressures are high to simply go along with behavior that may not be consistent with one's values, we seek to develop the moral courage in our students to stand up for what they know and believe to be right and just.

4) ***Enhancing the capacity of all Menlo School employees to intervene, respond, and support in situations involving speech or behavior that is counter to our values:*** Our teachers, coaches, advocates, and staff are our central strength, as the survey feedback affirms. We must empower and equip them with the tools and charge to disrupt negative student culture and support them in more fully developing our students' moral compasses.

5) ***And finally, continuing to strengthen our parent and guardian partnership:*** During this critical time in our students' moral development, we need our parents and guardians to actively partner with us to uplift, talk about, and model our core values at home and in the community. We are all in this together.

In Closing

We wish to thank everyone who took the time to respond to these surveys. Your feedback was exceedingly helpful. Yes, there are some areas where we can be better, and we are doing that work. But we don't want to close without noting that throughout this process, it's clear we have the strengths to meet our challenges and support our students. Menlo is a remarkable place for students to learn and grow.

Through a strong partnership—school and parents—coupled with honest assessment, deep introspection, and the courage to take feedback to heart, we truly believe that we can be the school we imagine for all of our students.

