At Starbucks and drop-off lines, birthday parties and bar mitzvahs, parents of school age children exchange impressions of their children’s schools, and other parents listen. When full-tuition families at private schools are paying $20,000-$40,000 a year for their children’s education – often the greatest expense in their lives and in some cases more than their annual mortgage – parents’ perceptions play the most critical role in enrollment. Schools had better be listening to them on an ongoing and systematic basis.

Measuring Success has collected feedback from nearly 100,000 parents, students and alumni in schools, and sense that, despite the relevance, the field still has large pockets of resistance to capturing and using feedback.

So where does the resistance come from?

Primarily, from board members or administrators who have strongly held anecdotes, intuition and “gut” about the changes in the school that need to be made. These anecdotes tend to be formed by the family’s own experience with their child, or a complaint from a close friend during a cocktail party. And as we know, it is often the loudest voice or wealthiest funder at the table who gets the grease.

But the problem is knowing whether that anecdote holds for the larger population in question. We have tested this by asking school leaders to hypothesize, based on their anecdotal knowledge, the answers to questions like, “Which demographic groups in your school community are the happiest or the least happy?” 80% of those anecdotes are not supported when we examine them against representative feedback data. Which means that potentially 80% of all the time and energy is spent on initiatives that are not going to make a difference.
When collecting feedback data for schools, there are four main stakeholder groups that you should identify and survey:

1. Capturing parents’ objective feedback through short and frequent “pulse surveys” gives a school the best leading indicator for its likelihood to grow or shrink, and a chance to demonstrate customer responsiveness by quickly addressing the issues once they’ve been identified.

2. Solicit student input to make improvements to electives, scheduling, and school culture with surveys that are objective and protect anonymity.

3. Alumni are the living proof of your school’s impact, and a critical source of feedback as to whether your school has added value. Alumni can express how effectively the school prepared them—academically, ethically, character-wise, and socio-emotionally—for high school, college and career relative to their peers.

4. Community surveys help to identify the potential size of the marketplace interested in a given school by identifying groups of parents most likely to attend the school, as well as identifying a list of prospective families that would be the best fit that the admission office could use to cultivate.

While algorithms and analyses undergird much of the work identified above, the most important lessons we have learned are about trust and intention. Feedback is a powerful trust-building tool that tells your stakeholders that you are listening (especially when you take action on the feedback). Transparency about survey results, especially in areas where customers are critical of the school’s performance, also builds trust with your customers because you are acknowledging their feedback. The other lesson about intention speaks to the importance of focus and accountability. Schools that are committed to listening to stakeholder feedback, setting a measurable goal, and acting on it consistently see statistically significant improvements in those areas they focused on.

One common question that comes up is how often should a given stakeholder group be surveyed for feedback? I spent a few days last summer with the leadership of Gann Academy in Waltham, Mas-
Suffolk, helping to think through how to track and measure the student experience. We discussed approaches to collecting data daily: what if students complete a two-question survey on their mobile phone about how the school had impacted or inspired them that day? We also imagined asking faculty to note on a phone app the mood in each interaction with each student. Such a frequency of feedback no doubt would present a serious cultural change; could schools do this in a way that stays true to their educational mission?

The quality of human interaction is so essential to outstanding teaching and learning; how might this activity be an enhancement rather than a distraction?

Perhaps this frequency of feedback is too much for your school, but make no mistake that this is part of a larger trend. Many foundations that we have worked with are investing in public schools tracking students’ “individual learning journeys,” where the school’s job is to ensure that each student maximizes his or her potential (and thus maximizes the value-add of the school). Rather than sending out one-size-fits-all messages to our parents, students, alumni and donors, what if our schools automatically integrated a customer’s preferences, interests, prior feedback and social media activity into creating a customized set of messages aligned with that customer’s interests?

For Gann Academy, because they saw the link between feedback and the school’s mission toward individualized instruction, it became intriguing enough to lead to trial experimentation this past year.

No matter at what level of intensity, or with which stakeholders your school chooses to get feedback, the key is how your school uses the feedback to make improvements that enable each family to feel like their child is maximizing his or her potential at your school. And where you are failing to do so, the feedback lets you know so your school is empowered to fix it. Feedback loops, whether performed once every few years or every day, are critical tools for continuous improvement and allowing our schools to put the “custom” back in “customer.”

To learn more about Measuring Success’ talent for creating surveys for your school, visit the website www.Measuring-Success.com.