

Complaint Response Report

Re: Lighthouse School

Complaint Received: 18 August 2014

Complainant:

Mr. and Mrs. Kent McTaggart

Prepared by:

James Watler, Customer Service Manager

Submitted to:

Shirley Wahler, Chief Education Officer

Date:

5 November 2014



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1 Executive summary

This report documents the investigation on the complaint received by the Department of Education Services on 18 August 2014 from Mr. and Mrs. Kent McTaggart regarding their concerns about conditions within Lighthouse School that affected their child, who is a student at Lighthouse, and their concerns about ongoing practices at the school.

A full investigation of this complaint was conducted by appropriate staff at the Department of Education Services. The details of this investigation are provided below. This report also contains a summary of evidence collected, key findings from that evidence, conclusions reached by the investigative team, and recommendations to be implemented to address all areas of documented concern.

2 Complaint

In making their complaint, Mr. and Mrs. McTaggart set out a wide-ranging and comprehensive set of concerns about the school in a four-hour-long meeting with the Chief Education Officer, the Complaints Officer and the Senior School Improvement Officer with responsibility for Lighthouse School on 18 August 2014. Following that meeting, the McTaggarts agreed that the statements below fairly documented their complaint:

- Lighthouse School is poorly led and managed
- Students within the school are sometimes treated roughly and with disrespect
- The Deputy Principal is sometimes harsh and inappropriate with children
- Students at Lighthouse School are not properly supervised.
- The culture of the school is sensitive and discourages open communication with parents
- Communication overall at the school is poor, with concerns and ideas from parents often not communicated up to DES/Ministry and very little information shared with parents

3 Introduction / Background

The McTaggarts report that their concerns about the leadership at Lighthouse School arose from an initial incident which occurred near the end of the 2012/13 school year at a teacher appreciation event for the school. Subsequent to this event, McTaggarts made an anonymous complaint to staff within the Ministry of Education, though not to the Department of Education Services, expressing concern about an activity at this event at which teachers were encouraged to compete by performing their impressions of individual students, with a prize for the best impression.

This concern was then communicated to the Chief Education Officer by the Chief Policy Advisor within the Ministry of Education, with the request that this concern not be logged as a formal complaint but instead considered in light of the performance management of the Principal. Because of the request that this concern not be considered as a formal complaint, the matter did not go through the usual complaints process and was not logged through the Complaints Officer or formally investigated in the usual manner. This was discussed and agreed in advance with the Chief Policy Advisor, who indicated that this was at the request of the individual who had contacted the Ministry about the concern.

Accordingly Mr. Christopher Spencer, Senior School Improvement Officer with responsibility for Lighthouse School, was asked to investigate the matter as the line manager for the Principal of Lighthouse School. His investigation of the incident determined that this activity was an established 'tradition', having been used at similar events in past years. When questioned, the Principal readily admitted that the activity had been included as described, but noted that there was no mockery of student disabilities, but rather an imitation of catchphrases and characteristic behaviours, and was seen by staff as a way of demonstrating their knowledge of their students' personalities and traits. Other staff indicated as well that they were unaware that there was any disapproval of the activity on the part of other attendees at the event.

Based on the information gathered, Mr. Spencer concluded that, although distasteful to some attendees at the event, and in his opinion ill-advised, there was no indication that the activity had been undertaken in a derisory or mocking spirit. He very strongly advised the Principal that no such activity should be undertaken in the future and pointed out that the very fact that a concern had been raised indicated that it was offensive to at least some stakeholders.

Acting upon this guidance, the Principal wrote a letter of apology to the Chief Education Officer and expressed both her regret at the incident and her commitment that it would not recur. The outcome of the investigation by Mr. Spencer was communicated to the Chief Policy Advisor. At that time, the identity of the person raising the concern was unknown to DES and based on the findings by Mr. Spencer, the matter was deemed to be closed after the warning issued to the Principal and the subsequent letter of apology. It is not clear that any information about the investigation or the letter of apology were ever communicated to the McTaggarts, who in turn were unclear about steps taken by DES or the Ministry.

4 Investigation / Examination

Given the breadth and far-reaching implications of the concerns raised, this complaint was treated as a matter of urgency and gravity and a full investigation was undertaken by the Department of Education Services at the instigation of the Ministry of Education.

The purpose of this investigation is first to determine where there is substance to the concerns raised in the complaint and subsequently to recommend next steps to be undertaken by the Department of Education Services. The investigation was undertaken by the Customer Service Manager of the Department of Education Services who serves as the Complaints Officer for the DES. He was assisted in his work by the Senior School Improvement Officer with responsibility for Lighthouse School where specialist guidance was necessary.

This complaint is somewhat unusual in that it alleges a pattern of systemic underperformance within a school rather than focusing on a single specific incident or interaction. For this reason, the usual investigative strategies focused on collecting evidence around a specific occurrence had to be expanded to a much broader review of staff and parental concerns and perceptions about the operations of the school and staff in relation to the specific issues raised.

For this reason, a series of more general investigative strategies were pursued:

- A meeting was held with the complainants, Mr. and Mrs. Kent McTaggart, on August 18th, 2014, shortly after this matter was referred to the Department of Education Services. The meeting was led by the Chief Education Officer with the Complaints Officer and the Senior School Improvement Officer for Special Needs in attendance.
- The outcomes of the meeting were summarized and sent to the complainants for their review and approval before further steps were taken.
- The Chief Education Officer met with the Principal of the School on 3 September 2014 to discuss the concerns raised and to outline the steps to be undertaken in the investigation.
- The Chief Education Officer and the Complaints Officer met with the entire staff of Lighthouse School informing them of the investigation and to advise them of the process to be undertaken on September 10th, 2014
- An anonymous questionnaire seeking personal responses to the concerns raised was circulated to a selected group of staff members on September 23rd, 2014 (A copy of this survey is provided in Appendix 1)
- An identical anonymous questionnaire seeking personal responses to the concerns raised was circulated to a selected group of parents on September 23rd, 2014
- Structured and confidential face-to-face interviews using the same set of questions were conducted with a selected group of staff members on October 6th, - 8th, 2014
- Opportunities were provided to any member of staff who wished to participate in the investigation or to discuss concerns with the Complaints Officer during the period of October 6th – 8th, 2014.

The questionnaire asked participants to respond to twelve questions (set out in Section 5 below) which reflected what were felt to be the key issues under investigation. In addition, participants were given

opportunities to volunteer additional information in a confidential medium. The final item invited participants to make suggestions for improvement within the school, again to be kept confidential.

The responses to the survey were then tallied and the results analysed by the Complaints Officer.

5 Analysis of evidence

The initial phase of the in-school investigation and evidence gathering came from the anonymous questionnaires. From this instrument, the following results were obtained:

- 1. "Families are welcomed by school staff as partners in their children's education." In response to this statement, 94.8 % of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with only 5.3% of the respondents strongly disagreeing.
- 2. "Students are treated with respect, care and understanding at all times by staff." Responses to question 2 were more divided; 52.6% strongly disagreed or disagreed, with 47.4% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. In this item, a majority of respondents to this statement raised serious concerns about the respect, care and understanding according to students. This is a key finding of the investigation.
- 3. "The culture of the school is open and welcoming." 70.6% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 29.4% strongly disagreed and disagreed.
- 4. "Communication with parents and other stakeholders is good." 66.7% strongly agreed and or agreed with this statement, whereas 33.4% strongly disagreed or disagreed on this issue.
- 5. "The school has open lines of communications with the Ministry, DES, parents, and the community at large." This statement restated Question 4 with a corresponding change of response. This slightly different framing of the issue elicited a response in which 55.5% of participants agreed and 44.4% disagreed. It could be concluded that there is not a sense, perhaps on the part of staff, that the school is disconnected from the broader education system.
- 6. **"Our school leadership encourages openness, fairness and transparency".** The response to this question was almost evenly divided. The actual percentage strongly agreeing and agreeing was 52.6% versus 47.4% who strongly disagreed or disagreed.
- 7. "Students at this school are carefully monitored and supervised by all staff". Respondents indicated that 68.5% strongly agreed and agreed with this statement, versus 31.6% who strongly disagreed or disagreed.
- 8. "Staff at this school is sensitive to children's physical and emotional needs". For this question, 55% strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement while only 45% strongly agreed and agreed. The majority of respondents felt that staff lacked sensitivity to the physical and emotional needs of children in the school. This is a key finding of the investigation.
- 9. "Staff at this school are sensitive to each child's individual learning needs". 70% of respondents strongly agreed and agreed whereas 30% strongly disagreed and disagreed.

- 10. "Management responds quickly and professionally to challenges that are brought to their attention". Participants indicated that 57.9% strongly agreed and agreed that this is the case while 42.1% strongly disagreed and disagreed.
- 11. "There is a culture of courtesy and respect within the school". 57.9% strongly agreed and agreed, whereas 42.1% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement.
- 12. "Students are sometimes treated roughly and/or with disrespect by some staff members".
 68.5% of respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed, with a corresponding 31.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.
- 13. Question 13 offered an opportunity to provide general comments about staff and school which would remain confidential.
- 14. Question 14 asked: "What suggestions do you have for improvement at the school?" and provided opportunities for confidential responses.

Detailed results of this survey are provided in Appendix 2.

As indicated above, another dimension of this investigation included face-to-face interviews with randomly selected members of staff. Ten members of staff from Lighthouse School were selected to participate in this interview process. These interviews were conducted on October $6^{th}-8^{th}$, 2014 and were held at the school. As all participants were assured that their discussions would be held in confidence as internal discussions between staff and DES and that while the information gathered would inform the conclusions of the investigation, there would be no disclosure of these interviews or of the comments and suggestions put forward by the staff members involved.

6 Key Findings

In reviewing the evidence provided by surveys and interviews there were a number of key findings:

- A majority of participants in the anonymous online survey disagreed or strongly disagreed with
 the statement that "Students are treated with respect, care and understanding at all times by
 staff." This is a key finding of the investigation and raises serious questions about the quality of
 care and emotional support provided to students.
- A majority of participants in the anonymous online survey disagreed or strongly disagreed with
 the statement that "Staff at this school is sensitive to children's physical and emotional
 needs". The majority of respondents felt that staff lacked sensitivity to the physical and
 emotional needs of children in the school, raising concerns about both the emotional support
 and physical care offered to students.
- Although the majority of respondents did not agree with the statement that "Students are sometimes treated roughly and/or with disrespect by some staff members," nearly a third of respondents expressed concern in this area.

7 Conclusions

Upon review of the evidence derived from interviews and surveys and consideration of the body of information and observation thus afforded, the investigative team reached the following conclusions:

- As a positive indicator of school relationships, there is a consistent belief that the school
 welcomes parents as key stakeholders and partners.
- There is, however, a critical concern that the treatment of students by staff in the school does
 not consistently match the professional standards established by the Department of Education
 Services and the Ministry of Education. There is at least some indication that staff members
 themselves are concerned about this issue.
- There is a strong perception by stakeholders that there is a lack of sensitivity within the school the physical and emotional needs of students.
- There is a majority view by stakeholders that students are not consistently treated with respect and care and may be treated roughly and inappropriately by some staff members.
- Although not necessarily the majority view, there is a clear concern by stakeholders that communications within the school are not always good and that decisive and effective action is not always taken by school leadership in response to problems.
- Nearly half of stakeholders expressed concern about leadership within the school, specifically
 around issues of fairness and transparency. This may well be linked to concerns about
 communication, so that decisions taken may not always be understood by stakeholders..

With regards to the allegations in the complaint, the investigation led to the following conclusions with regards to the specific aspects of the overall complaint.

Complaint: "Lighthouse School is poorly led and managed"

There is evidence that stakeholders perceive significant issues with the leadership and management within the school. Both the survey and the interviews reveal that there are a significant number of stakeholders who feel that the management of the school may not always encourage fairness and transparency. In addition, there is a strong feeling that the school environment is not one of respect.

The investigation also raised concerns about the consistency of compliance with school and departmental policies by staff. There is an urgent need for the school leadership to ensure that there are clear and explicit policies within the school that are well understood and followed by all staff members, with consistent monitoring and accountability.

In general, systems within the school do not seem to be clear and consistently followed. Much is left to the discretion of individual staff members, with much less emphasis on consistency of practice or compliance with school policies and procedures. This is a management

responsibility, but in light of the urgency of the need within the school, it is recommended that the Department of Education Services provides external support to address these issues quickly.

Students within the school are sometimes treated roughly and with disrespect

This concern was well documented in the investigation with concerns raised by both parents and staff members. It became clear in the course of the investigation that lack of clarity around expectations and procedures within the school means that staff members may sometimes disagree on how to meet the needs of the students. This, in turn, may lead to internal issues around what actions are appropriate.

• The Deputy Principal is sometimes harsh and inappropriate with children

There were no specific incidents which emerged from the investigation which indicated clearly inappropriate interactions with students by the Deputy Principal.

There was, however, some indication that communications within the school, and specifically from the leadership team, are sometimes viewed as disrespectful or 'rough' by a number of stakeholders. These comments more generally focused on interchanges between adults, but sometimes referenced communication with students as well. Based on the evidence collected, there was no clear proof of this allegation, but some evidence that interpersonal communications within the school are sometimes perceived as unprofessional. In the absence of proof of misconduct, concerns about professional expectations in this area can be most appropriately addressed through professional development and performance management.

Students at Lighthouse School are not properly supervised

There is evidence arising from the investigation that both staff and parents feel that supervision of students is not always consistent. This is a matter of serious concern, given the nature of the school. At the same time, there is evidence that the majority of staff members within the school work very hard and take their responsibilities seriously, with a strong level of commitment to their students. The issues arising seem to derive more from poor organization and monitoring rather than from deliberate neglect.

There is, in addition, a high level of staff absenteeism within the school, which staff members generally attribute to the highly stressful nature of their work. This adds to the challenge of providing the level of supervision necessary. There was evidence arising from the investigation that systems within the school are often inflexible and may not work well in responding to changing needs of students, which then compounds the difficulty when staff members are absent. This matter must be addressed immediately by the management of the school, with support from the Department of Education, and may well require that the school review current staff allocation and assignments.

- The culture of the school is sensitive and discourages open communication with parents
- Communication overall at the school is poor, with concerns and ideas from parents often not communicated up to DES/Ministry and very little information shared with parents

These two issues were evaluated together as they have considerable overlap. There are mixed views expressed on this issue by various stake holders. There is a very positive view of the degree to which the school welcomes parents as stakeholders, but a less positive perspective on the openness of communication. In general, this again seems to arise in part from a lack of clear expectations and systems for communication. The school leadership and most staff feel that there is considerable effort made to work closely with parents

Based on these conclusions, two key areas of concern have emerged:

- There is a need to ensure a clear understanding of expected professional standards and
 appropriate conduct by school staff, particularly in regards to their duty of care for students and
 most particularly in light of the special challenges and vulnerabilities faced by the students of
 Lighthouse School, and a corresponding need to closely monitor subsequent school
 performance in this regard.
- The leadership and management of the school may well need considerable external support to address the multiple issues of concern to stakeholders. Issues with regards to effective and positive communication, fairness and transparency, and effective and timely responses to problems that arise in the school present concerns to stakeholders. These issues in turn impede the ability of the school leaders to ensure consistently high performance by school staff and have the potential to negatively affect the care and education provided to students.

8 Recommendations

These recommendations address actions to be taken with regards to the complaint put forward on 18 August 2014.

 The Department of Education Services should develop and put in place a written Support Plan to formally address the issues identified through the investigation as significant concerns in the school.

A School Support Plan represents an action plan for school support which identifies areas for improvement, sets clear targets to be achieved, sets out the interventions to be undertaken for each area, and outlines the responsible parties, timelines and costs associated with these interventions. A key characteristic of a School Support Plan is that it identifies external agencies, supports and monitoring for school improvement. This is in contrast to the School Improvement Plan, which is an internal action plan for school improvement which is developed within the school.

School Support Plan are typically put in place in response to situations in which there is a clear need for external support and guidance in assisting a school to move forward. There is reason to believe that Lighthouse School is in need of that support and that it would be welcomed by the school leadership. A School Support Plan also outlines clear accountabilities for the parties involved and requires measurable and timely outcomes from stakeholders.

The items below, then, should all be included in the overall School Support Plan developed by the Department of Education Services with the school.

- Sensitivity training should be provided to all staff to support their work in dealing with students with varying disabilities and with their families and caregivers.
 - Working with children with varying disabilities and with their parents and caregivers can be challenging and requires empathy, sensitivity and good communication skills. Sensitivity training should be provided and mandated by the Department of Education Services for all staff at Lighthouse School as a way to support staff in their work.
- The Department of Education Services should take steps to investigate the feasibility of installation of security cameras to monitor the safety and security of students within Lighthouse School.
 - This strategy has been recommended as a measure to increase stakeholder confidence in the safety of students with disabilities by a number of influential bodies, for example the National Autism Association in the United States. There are a number of pre-requisite steps which would be required, including approval at a policy level by the Ministry of Education, consultation with parents and the development of appropriate protocols to ensure that confidentiality issues are fully addressed, but there is a significant body of existing practice in other jurisdictions to support such an implementation if approved in principle.
- There is a clear need for external support for the school in reviewing and strengthening school policies and procedures which ensure the health and safety of students.
 - The school needs to ensure that there are explicit policies in place with clear procedures outlined and communicated to staff, and that these are assigned, enforced and monitored on a consistent basis. The school leadership has indicated that they would welcome help in improving the management of the school and it is strongly recommended that external supports are provided with immediate effect.

For this reason, it is strongly recommended that the Department of Education Services moves immediately to develop a School Support Plan with clear objectives, measures and timelines to

address the problems which have been highlighted in this report. This Support Plan should identify the external supports and intervention required to assist the school and should also document the steps to be taken by the school staff and leadership to bring the school into full compliance with expected standards.

 As a matter of student safety and protection, retraining should be provided to all staff with regards to the mandated reporting standards for child protection.

Despite prior training, there was a lack of clarity within the school on the established structures through which staff are required by law to report any incidents or information that may indicate that children are at risk. Concerns were reported by staff members to the investigation team but had not been reported at the time through the proper channels. It should be noted, however, that the school does have a track record of handing such incidents according to established protocols, and previous investigations by outside agencies with regards to reports from the school confirm this.

It is critical that the school ensure that there is consistency and full compliance with regards to reporting around child protection. For that reason, and on the basis of this recommendation, that training was scheduled for delivery to staff on 24 October 2014.

Review management structures within the school.

This investigation revealed significant issues around compliance and consistency, pointing to lack of effective monitoring of teaching, learning and student support within the school. The school needs to review and consider whether the current structures for internal monitoring and evaluation are sufficient to assure high standards of performance. This process will require some external support and should result in clearly documented procedures and processes for ensuring consistent supervision.

Review staff assignments to ensure that all classes have appropriate support.

School leaders acknowledge that there are challenges within the school in ensuring adequate support on a consistent basis. A high level of staff absences (as noted above) contribute to this problem, but there are also challenges with regards to the high level of support needed by many students and the variable nature of these demands. A single critical incident within the school may require a short-term concentration of staff to provide intense support for a brief period, while other student needs are more constant. This in itself creates significant challenges for staff and adds to the stress of their work.

These issues need to be considered in the assignment of support staff, and scheduling and assignments need to be flexible and responsive to changing needs. The school's leadership team acknowledges that staff could be more effectively and productively utilized and are willing to undertake a review of support staff assignments.

In addition to assuring that all classes have adequate support, the school should put in place measures to ensure that all support staff are fully briefed on classroom and whole school procedures and expectations to help ensure consistency of expectations across the school. This should be supported by detailed lesson and classroom planning by teachers which is shared and communicated to support staff.

 Parents should be provided with information about the outcome of the investigation, the development of the School Support Plan and on the progress made by the school in achieving the targets set out in the Plan.

As key stakeholders in the school, parents should have the opportunity for information not only on the initial outcome of the investigation but also on the ongoing process of the school in achieving the targets set in the School Support Plan. This will serve the dual purpose of ensuring improved communication between key stakeholders.

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Appendix 1	
Survey questionnaire sent out to staff and parents of Lighthouse School	
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Questionnaire for Teachers and other Staff

This questionnaire is designed to sokell your feedback on the interac	ron between students, staff and parents at your	interaction between students, staff and parents at your school. Your responses are collected amonymously	
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2. Students are treated with respect, care and understanding at all times by staff.	all times by staff.		
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5. The school has open lines of communications with the Minist	Ministry, DES, parents, and the community at large.		
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12. Students are sometimes treated roughly and/or with disrespect by some	by some staff members.		
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Do you have any other information you would like to share about the school?			
13. General comments about the school/staff;			
14. What suggestions do you have for improvements at the school?			

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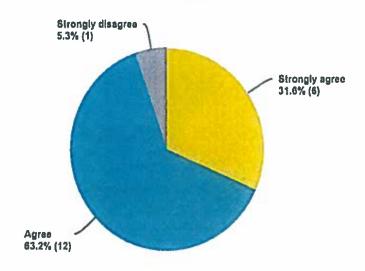
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Appendix 2

Results of survey questionnaire sent out to staff and parents of Lighthouse School

Q1 Families are welcomed by school staff as partners in their children's education.

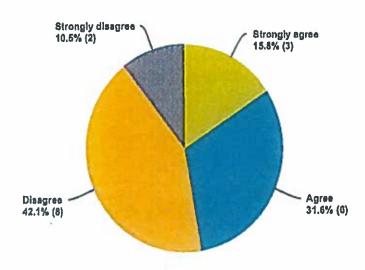
Answered, 19 Skipped, 1



	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree		Total	Average Rating	
(no label)	31.6%	63.2%	0.0%		5,3%			
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Q2 Students are treated with respect, care and understanding at all times by staff.

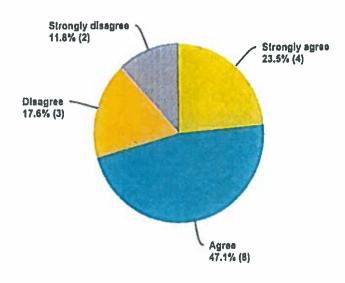
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Q3 The culture of the school is open and welcoming.

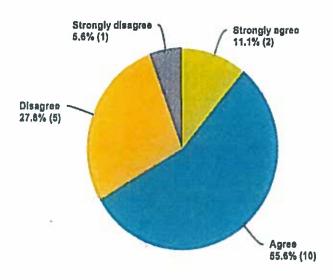
Answered: 17 Skipped: 3



	Strongly agree		Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Average Rating	
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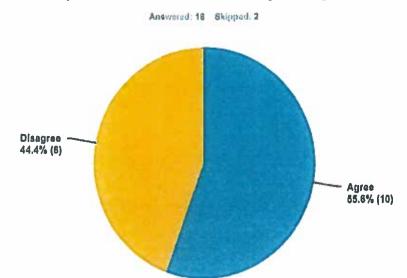
Q4 Communication with parents and other stakeholders is good.

Answored: 18 Skipped: 2



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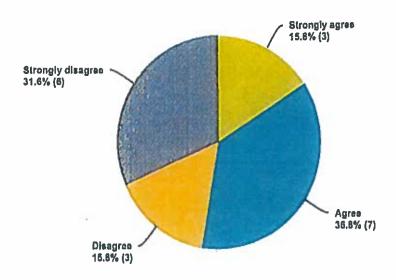
Q5 The school has open lines of communications with the Ministry, DES, parents, and the community at large.



	Strongly agree	Agreo	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Average Rating	
(no lebel)	0.0%	65.6%	44.4%	0.0%			1.33
	0	10	6	0	18		2.44

Q6 Our school leadership encourages openness, fairness and transparency.

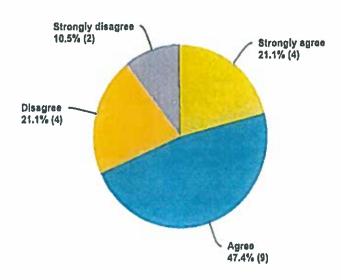
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	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Average Rating
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Q7 Students at this school are carefully monitored and supervised by all staff.

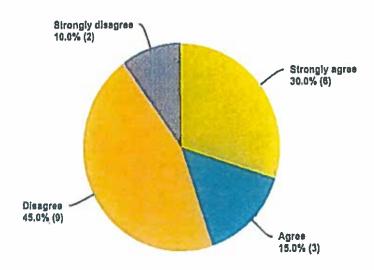
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	Strongly agree	Agreo	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Average Rating	
(no labet)	21.1%	47.4%	21.1%	10.5%			
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Q8 Staff at this school are sensitive to children's physical and emotional needs.

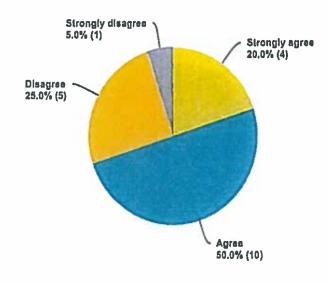
Answered: 20 Skipped: 0



	Strongly 6	igree	Agres	Disagree	Strongly disagree		Total	Average Rating
(no tabel)	2	30.0%	15.0%	45.0%		10.0%		
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Q9 Staff at this school are sensitive to each child's individual learning needs.

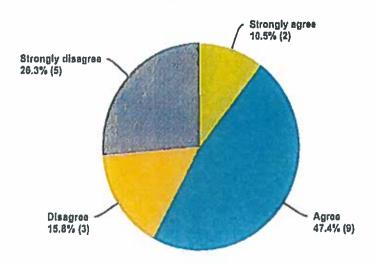
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(no label)		20.0%	50.0%	25.0%	5.0%			
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Q10 Management responds quickly and professionally to challenges that are brought to their attention.

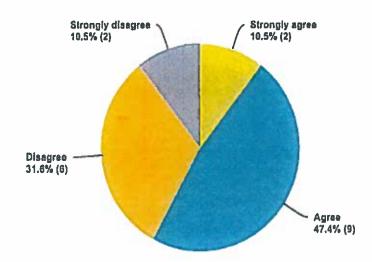
Answered: 19 Skipped: 1



	Strongly agre	•	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	4	Total	Average Rating	
(no label)		10.5%	47.4%	15.6%		26.3%			
		2	9	3		5	19		2.58

Q'i'l There is a culture of courtesy and respect within the school.

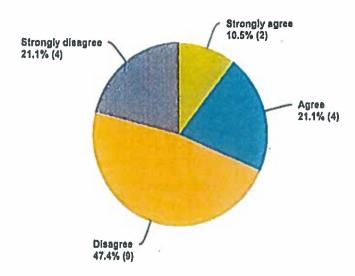
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	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Average Rating
(no label)	10,5%	47.4%	31.6%	10.5%		
	2	9	6	2	19	2.42

Q12 Students are sometimes treated roughly and/or with disrespect by some staff members.

Answored: 19 Skipped: 1



	Strongly agree	Agrae	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Average Rating
(no label)	10.5%	21.1%	47.4%	21,1%		
	2	4	9	4	19	2.79