How to deliver five-star customer service in schools

3 ways to build trust and deliver better experiences for students, parents, teachers and staff

A WHITEPAPER PRODUCED BY K12 INSIGHT

CUSTOMER SERVICE
Why school customer experience matters

What would people say if they could rate your schools on a five-star scale, like on Amazon or Zappos? How would you score?

The question isn’t as silly, or as far-fetched, as it might’ve sounded a few years ago. With school choice driving increased competition in communities from coast to coast, the days of parents reflexively sending their children to their neighborhood public school are long gone.

How you treat parents and other stakeholders is just as important as the quality of education you provide — and that experience can make or break your reputation in the community.

Consider restaurant reviews. How many one-star reviews are the result of a waiter who’s rude, or service that’s inattentive, as opposed to the quality of the meal? People are far more forgiving of a bad experience when they are treated with respect. When they don’t feel respected, they leave — and most never go back.

In surveys with parents, we’ve found that many families opted out of schools not because of a negative experience that their children had, but because of one or more negative experiences the parents had. This is why exceptional customer service is so critical to retaining students and families.

If you’re interested in how to provide a better customer experience in your schools, read on.
3 keys to 5-star school customer service

Providing exceptional school customer service doesn’t have to be hard. If you commit to doing these three things well, you’ll be on your way to carving out a competitive advantage for your schools.

1. Give parents, students and staff a way to reach you

When people have questions or concerns about your schools, do they know where to turn? Nothing is more frustrating for parents than feeling like they can’t contact someone when they need to. It sends the message that you don’t care.

Show parents you welcome their questions and concerns by making it extremely easy for them to reach you using their channel of choice.

HERE’S HOW TO DO THIS EFFECTIVELY:

- Give parents multiple options for contacting your schools, including phone, email, your school or district website, and social media.
- Hold in-person meetings where parents and others can talk with someone face to face.
- Make sure parents know their options by communicating them repeatedly through each of these channels.
**2 Respond in a timely manner**

It’s not enough to give parents an easy way to reach you. You also have to respond to their questions and concerns in a timely manner — within 24 hours if possible, and no later than a few business days at the most.

Every time a parent reaches out, every time a student or staff member raises a hand, let them know you are listening and that you heard their request.

HERE’S HOW TO DO THIS EFFECTIVELY:

- Designate a champion from each department who is knowledgeable and can answer questions in the subject area.

- When you receive requests or concerns, immediately route them to the appropriate team member to start a response.

- It might take time to track down an answer to someone’s question. Don’t leave parents and community members hanging; let them know you’re working on their request and will respond as soon as you can.
3 Ensure every response is accurate, complete and courteous

Every interaction you have with the public should leave them feeling satisfied. That means every question or comment you get from parents deserves a response that is at once accurate, courteous and complete.

HERE’S HOW TO DO THIS EFFECTIVELY:

- If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t guess. Identify the right person on your team who can respond with the correct information and get them involved fast.
- Create a system to track each request, so you can tell whether someone has followed up.
- Actively monitor that system to ensure that all requests are successfully resolved in a timely manner.

**PRO TIP:** “Successfully” doesn’t mean people have to like your answer. Respond promptly and courteously and explain your decision. Stakeholders will appreciate the effort, even if they don’t agree with your answer.
CASE STUDY

A customer-first approach

Santa Ana USD (CA)

As California’s seventh-largest school system, Santa Ana Unified School District serves some 50,000 students — about half of whom come from non-English-speaking families.

“With the language barriers we face, we are conscientious about how we can communicate effectively with families,” says Chief Communications Officer Deidra Powell. “Because so many of the decisions we make are based on how people will get our messaging, providing great customer service has always been one of our goals as a district.”

Santa Ana USD has achieved success by providing parents and families with options when it comes to how they prefer to send and receive information from the school system.

“We have found that an integrated approach is essential,” Powell explains. “Parents who work might not be able to attend morning or after-school meetings. They might not even make it to the ones at night. But they can look at their email. They’ll use text messaging, and they might also be on social media. We have to use multiple means of communicating to make sure we’re providing good customer service.”

To make it as easy as possible for parents to voice their questions or concerns, the district turned to Let’s Talk!, from K12 Insight. The cloud-based communications solution provides a single point of contact for parents, students, staff and other community members to reach district leaders with questions, comments, or concerns. Regardless of what channel — email, phone, social media, in-person meetings, etc. — that the community member uses, each response is filtered into a universal inbox, where it is immediately routed to the right team member at the district for a timely response.

“Let’s Talk! makes it very easy for us to respond,” Powell says. “Our employees have the app on their phones, and when they get a notification that a request has come in, they can respond right away. It has streamlined how we communicate.”

To trim response times even further, Powell has encouraged employees to create templates for responding via text or email, with a polite opening and closing. When a question comes in, “they just fill in the details of their response,” she explains. “That saves even more time and helps make sure we are courteous in all of our replies.”

A real-time reporting feature enables Powell and her staff to monitor the status of all inquiries, so nothing falls through the cracks. After parents and community members receive a response, they can choose to rate the quality of their experience, helping the district improve.

“Every interaction matters,” Powell says of the district’s commitment to customer service. “We’re constantly looking for ways we can make parents feel welcome and improve the service we provide.”

For more on Let’s Talk!, visit www.K12Insight.com/lets-talk.
Picture this. What a 5-star school experience looks like.

Every encounter you have with your community is a chance to win parents, students and staff over — and you should treat it as such. That’s why it’s important to pay careful attention to the “ABCs” of five-star customer service. Writing for ASCD, Lyn Chambers describes these in her article, “How Customer-Friendly Is Your School?”

Attitude
How do staff look when someone visits your school or district? Are they happy? What’s their body language? How do they sound on the phone? Do they give off a vibe that they want to be there — or do they seem like they’re having a bad day? Parents and visitors should always be greeted with a smile and a warm, friendly attitude — both in person and on the phone. They should never be made to feel like they’re a nuisance.

Behavior
How long does it take for staff to acknowledge that someone is standing there, waiting? Are your team members guilty of talking on the phone or doing other things while a community member is waiting in the front office? All parents and visitors to your schools should be greeted promptly. If a staff member is busy, someone should be there to let them know that — and to follow up.

Communication
All stakeholder communication should be cheerful and considerate. Think about how you respond via email. Tone can be hard to interpret in writing, so make sure all written communications come across as courteous and respectful. That goes for the signage in your schools too. Is it welcoming (“Please check in at the front office”)? Or off-putting (“All visitors must report to the front office”)? Subtle changes can make a big difference in how your community perceives your schools.
Never assume. Always go the extra mile.

Don’t just answer parents’ questions. Aim to win them over.

Here’s an example of a missed opportunity —

**PARENT**

“When is back to school night?”

**STAFF MEMBER**

“Tuesday at 7 p.m.”

Compare that exchange to this one —

How much more effective would it be if the response was as follows?

**PARENT**

“When is back to school night?”

**STAFF MEMBER**

“I’m glad you asked. Back-to-School Night is one of our favorite nights of the year. We wanted to hold it at a time that was convenient for people to attend. This year, based on feedback from the community, we decided to hold it on Tuesday, Oct. 5, at 7 p.m., in the school auditorium. Here’s a link to a flyer with more information. Please let me know how else I can help.”
Experience matters. Develop a customer-service mindset.

Providing exceptional customer service should be at the forefront of everything you do. It’s not enough to do this in only a few departments; five-star service should be embedded throughout your school system. Here’s how to create a service-oriented mindset in your schools.

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<tr>
<th>Set clearly defined goals and standards</th>
<th>Train all of your teachers and staff</th>
<th>Track and monitor progress over time</th>
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<td>Establish clear standards and protocols for how you will treat people — and how quickly you’ll respond to their requests. Communicate these goals to all employees, regardless of department, and follow through by making your standards a part of annual performance reviews.</td>
<td>Train every member of your staff who interacts with the public until good customer service becomes part of your culture. Explain the difference between good and bad service; model effective communication in your own interactions with staff members; share examples of top-notch service; and recognize and reward employees for a job well done.</td>
<td>To ensure that you’re meeting the standards you set, establish a system for tracking your performance, or what the business world might call Key Performance Indicators. Time how long it takes for stakeholders to receive a response to their questions, and ask parents, students and staff to rate the quality and timeliness of your interactions with them. Use this feedback to inform staff training and develop an improvement plan.</td>
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Higher standard of service

Bibb County Schools (GA)

The 23,000-student Bibb County School District in Georgia also uses Let’s Talk! from K12 Insight to engage stakeholders and improve customer service. One of the key advantages of the service is that it makes it easy for districts to monitor their progress, says Superintendent Dr. Curtis Jones.

Bibb County has set a goal of resolving all stakeholder issues within three business days. A real-time dashboard tells Jones that the district is exceeding its goal, with an average response time of just one day.

Bibb County department heads and principals receive a weekly status report that shows how well their staff responded to questions and concerns. “Because I’m superintendent, I’m able to see how the district is doing as a whole,” Jones says. The district’s communications department monitors submissions, called dialogues, that are still open and reminds employees to follow up, if necessary, to resolve those issues.

When a question or concern is resolved, parents have an opportunity to rate the district’s response on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the highest score. “Our average score is 8.6,” Jones says, “and we are always looking to improve on that.”

Even with an average score above eight, it’s clear from looking at some of the district’s responses to parents that they could have been worded more sensitively, Jones says. Instead of saying “that didn’t happen” or “you’re wrong about that,” a more tactful reply might be: “I understand what you’re saying, and I’m very sorry this happened to you. I think we can try and improve. Let me share with you what we have been doing.”

During monthly leadership meetings with building principals, Jones shares examples of both good and bad customer responses. “We’ll talk through some of those situations and discuss how they could have been handled better,” he says. “My hope is that principals are doing that with their own staff as well.”

Delivering exceptional customer service is essential in maintaining the support of stakeholders, Jones says: “When we go to the public and ask them to allow us to tax them so we can have operating funds for our schools, that means they’ve got to trust us. And that trust comes from the interactions they have with us.”

For more on Let’s Talk!, visit www.k12insight.com/lets-talk.
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DR. CURTIS JONES, SUPERINTENDENT, BIBB COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT (GA)

THE ‘HAPPINESS’ PROJECT

No doubt about it. Happiness is a game changer.

When parents are happy, when students feel engaged, when teachers and staff feel cared for and supported, your schools become indispensable in your community.

Happiness starts with the feeling people get when they walk into your schools — or when they reach out to you with questions or concerns. The quality of your responses and the service you provide will either push your community away — or engage them so deeply that the thought of leaving for a better school experience never enters their mind. The choice is yours.

Take your customer service from good to exceptional.

Don’t let poor customer service come between you and your school community. K12 Insight offers software, research and onsite customer service training built to help your team provide an exceptional school experience. Sign up for a free consult, and discover why more than 30,000 school leaders trust K12 Insight.

Contact us for a free consult www.K12insight.com or give us a call at 703-542-9600.
JOIN THE MORE THAN 30,000 SCHOOL LEADERS WHO TRUST K12 INSIGHT TO HELP THEM BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS, TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND STAFF.