

Sands School

Parents' Survey
December 2012

This report presents and describes the responses given by the Parents. It does not seek to go beyond this by attempting to interpret what has been said, to draw any conclusions or to make any recommendations for responding to the information gathered. That is the role of the School Meeting.

Introduction

This survey was carried out in December 2012 and responses were received for forty-four of the seventy students on role at the time, giving a response rate of over sixty per cent.

The survey was designed in two parts, the first being a set of positive statements with tick box options to agree or disagree and the second being open questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

These two approaches are complementary. The first produces a clear quantitative measure allowing the assessments of the different aspects of the school to be directly compared. However, using set questions and tick-box responses has the very great drawback of only allowing the respondent to answer the questions asked and only in the prescribed way. The open questions do the opposite and allow the respondent to assess any aspect of the school in any way they choose. This approach ensures that parents were not constrained by the questionnaire.

The survey results are presented in two corresponding parts. The first is a set of charts showing the responses to the set questions. The second encapsulates the thoughts offered in the open questions.

A final question asked for 'any other comments' and many parents used this to voice their appreciation of their children's school. These comments are reproduced in the coloured text boxes.

A brief note on methodology

Parents and children do not correspond neatly in to one-to-one packages: some parents have more than one child at Sands and may have different assessments for each of their children and sometimes parents of the same child have different views from each other. The survey was designed in such a way that answers for the child-specific questions were asked separately for each child and parents also had the option of completing the questionnaire once as a combined response or a number of times as separate responses.

The results take this into account by weighting by the number of children. So a single response in respect of one child at Sands has a weight of 1, two responses for the same child are each weighted 0.5 etc.

Am full of admiration for what Sands does incredibly well, it models and holds an inquiring/learning space for a young spirit to evolve into an assured self and aspiring human being

The continuation of schools like Sands makes a vital contribution to the lives of many young people, and I have a lot of respect for the school its staff and ethos, and observe the huge support it gives many young people with hugely diverse needs and experiences

Responses to set questions

For each statement there were four choices:

Strongly Agree

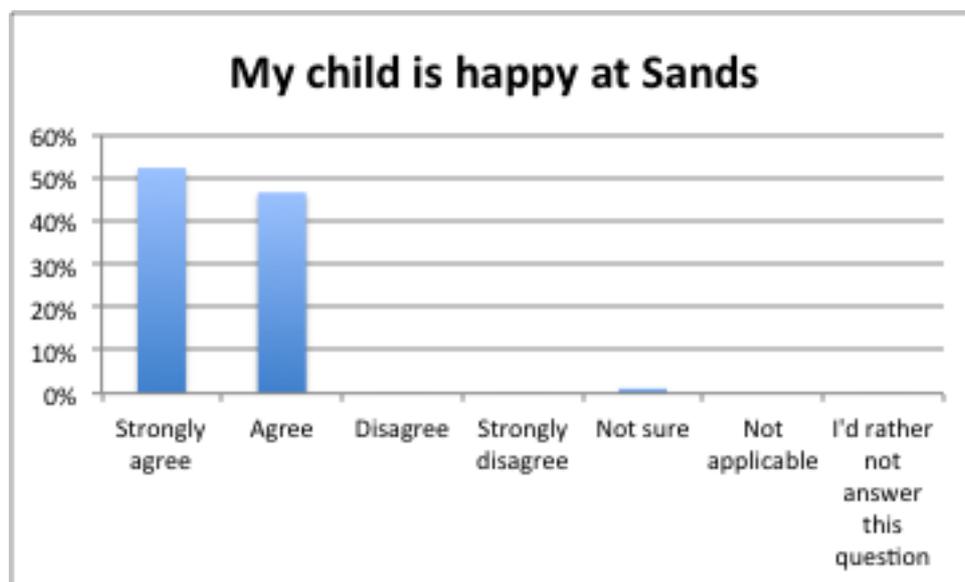
Agree

Disagree

Strongly

But respondents also had the option to say they were not sure or would rather not answer. In the case of meeting a student's particular needs there was the additional option of 'not applicable'. An answer was required for each statement so there was no issue of interpreting non-responses.

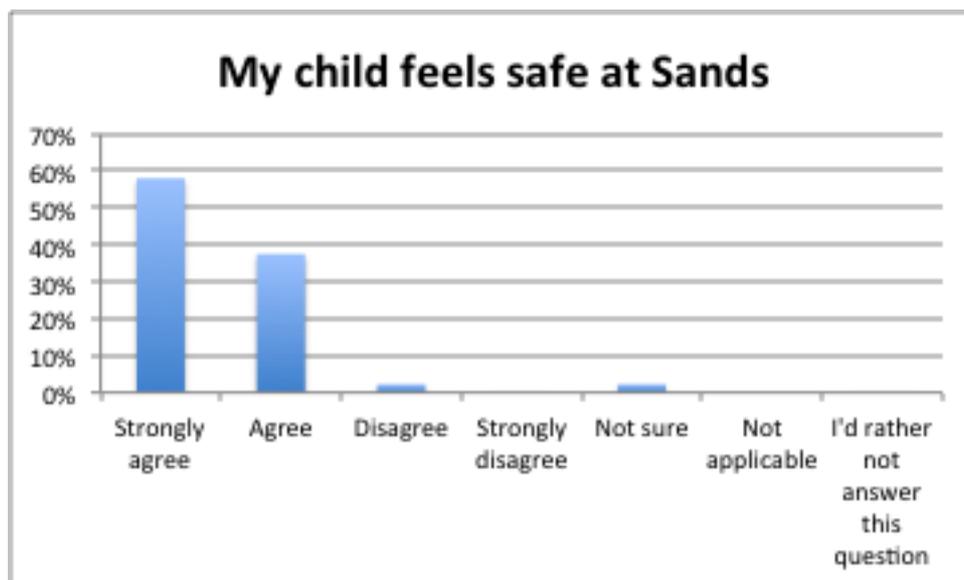
Where a significant number of parents have not agreed with the statement we have looked to see if the children these responses relate to are concentrated in particular year groups.



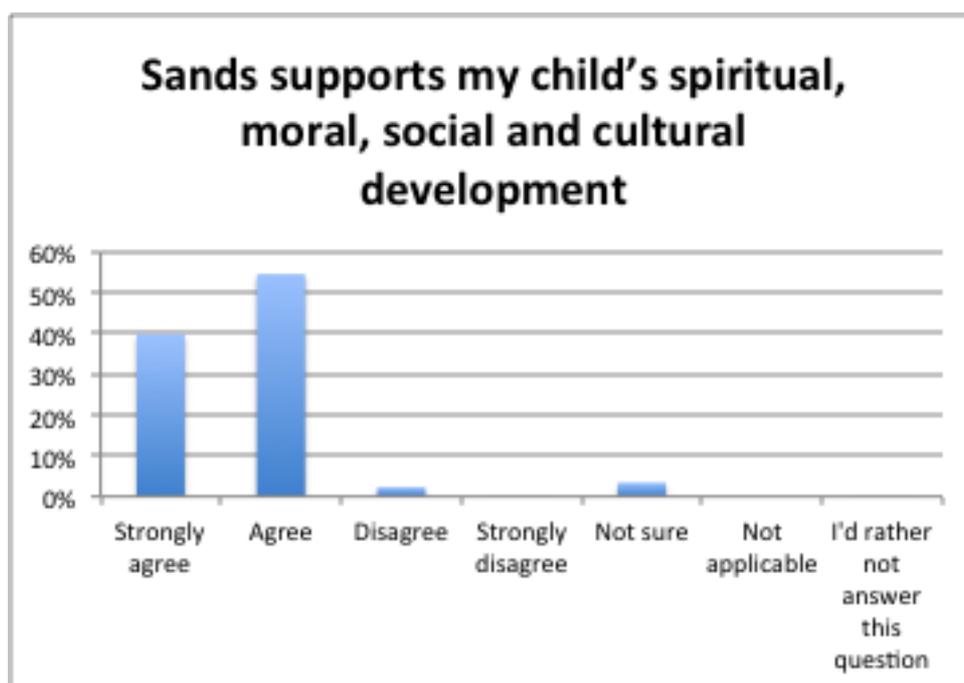
Virtually all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children were happy at Sands. None disagreed but one was not sure.

We have been very pleased with the way our daughter has settled in to Sands and the fact she is doing so well in a couple of subjects probably bears this out. If she is happy and thriving, so are we.

Thank God for Sands and a huge THANK YOU to all who keep the school running!



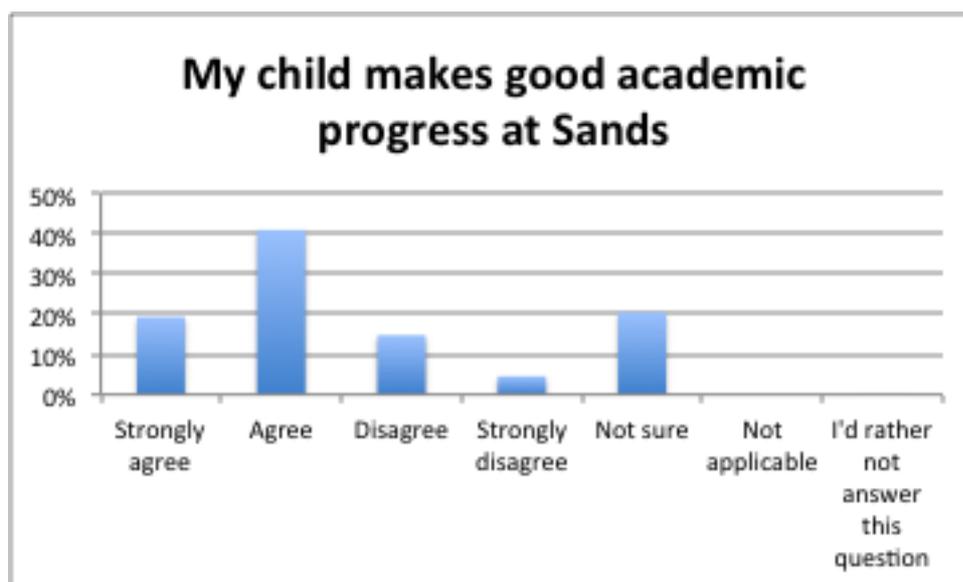
Nearly all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children felt safe at Sands. One disagreed and one was not sure.



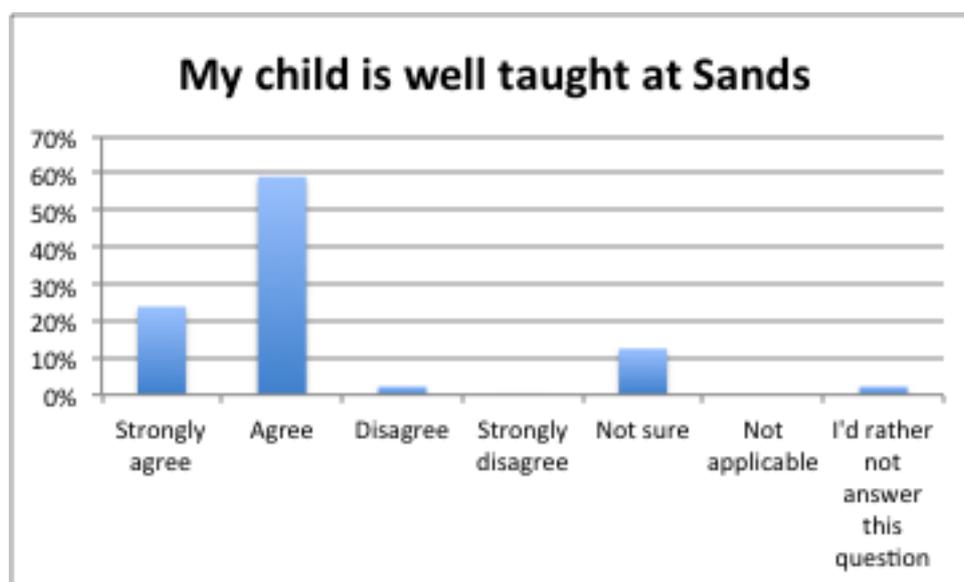
Nearly all parents agreed or strongly agreed that Sands supported their child's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. One disagreed and two were not sure.

I really value the care and commitment of the staff - Thank you!

Keep up the GOOD work!!



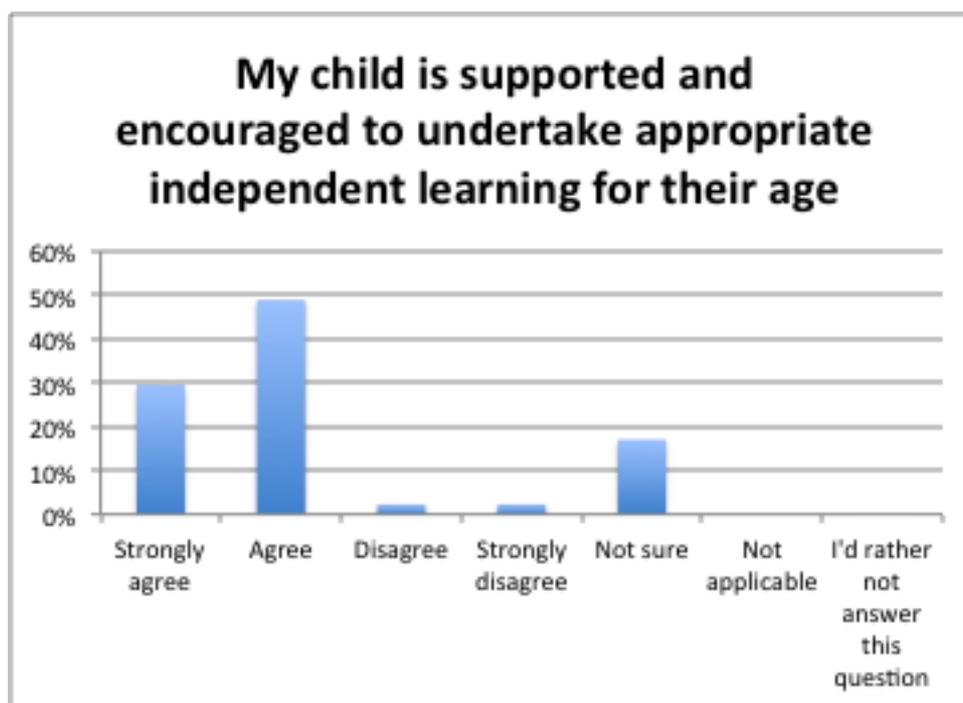
This statement about academic progress produced the most mixed response, with 60% in agreement and 20% disagreeing. One fifth of parents were not sure. Of the nine disagreeing six were in respect of children in O1/O2 and three in respect of O3/Y3.



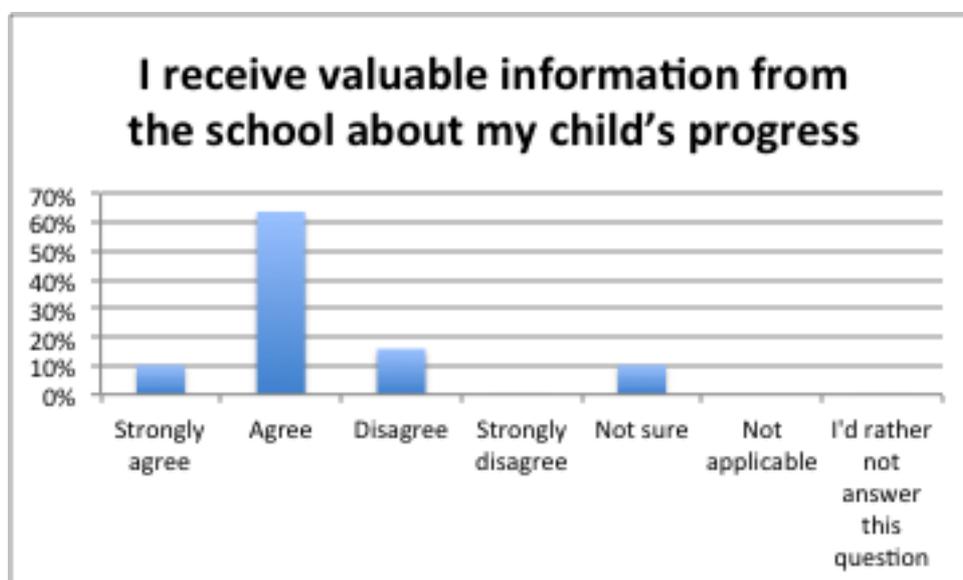
Over eighty per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children were well taught at Sands with only one disagreeing but a significant minority not being sure.

I'm very happy that he's so happy and doing so well!!!!

A fantastic school with a fantastic team of teachers and staff.

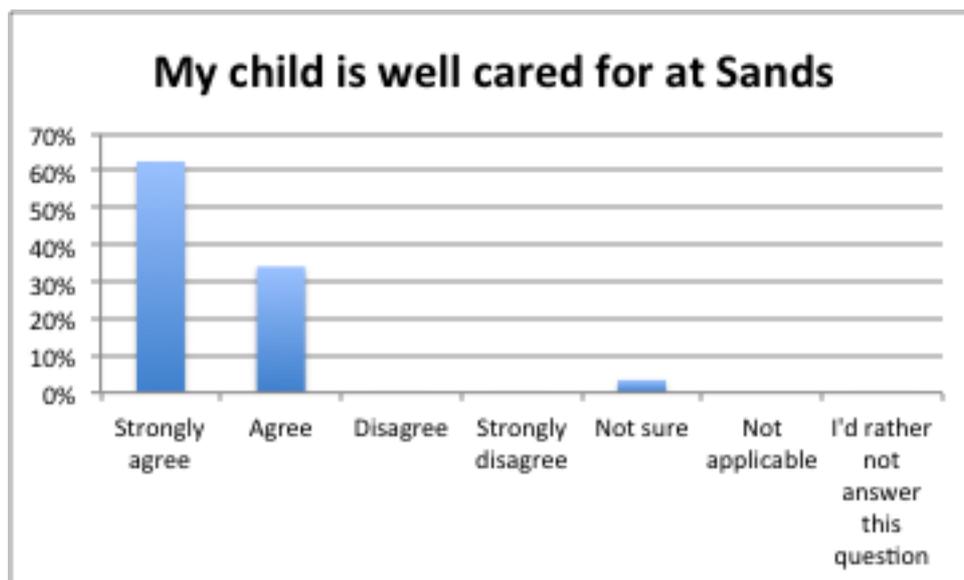


About eighty per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children were being encouraged to undertake independent learning for their age. Two parents disagreed and again a significant minority were not sure.

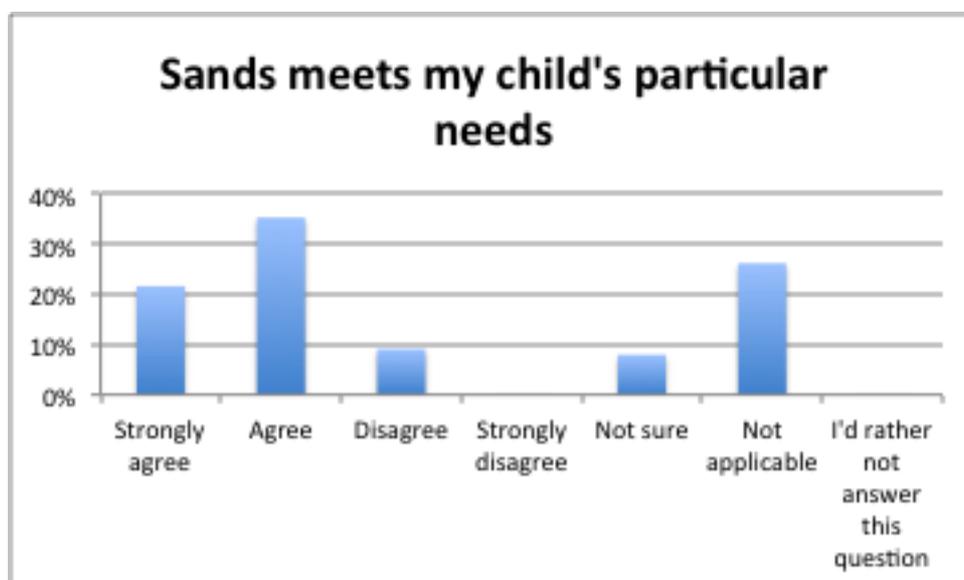


More than 70% of parents agreed that they received valuable information about their children's progress but 15% disagreed. Although the numbers are small it may be significant that most of those disagreeing were in respect of children in Y3 or O3.

The recent improvements in communication are much appreciated.

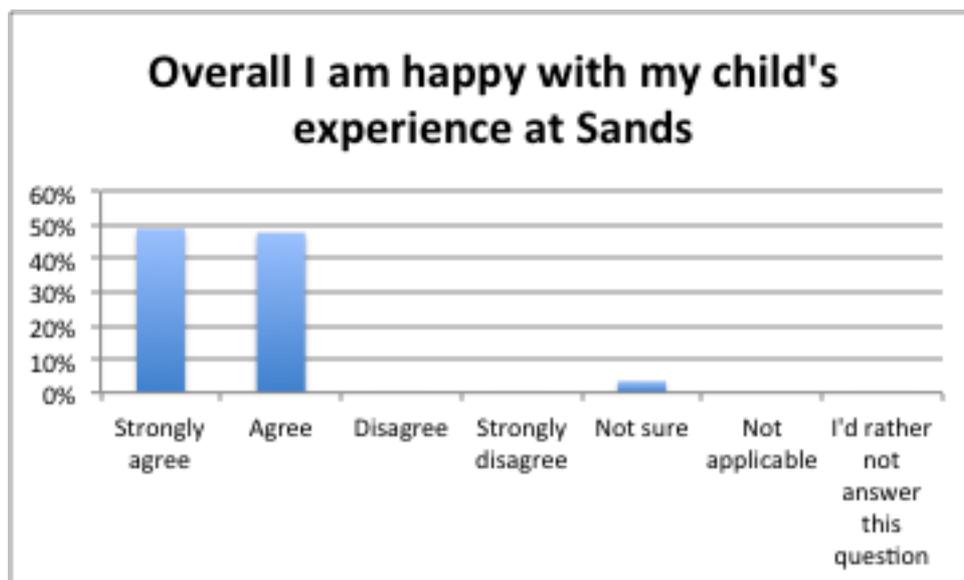


Virtually all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children were well cared for at Sands. None disagreed but one was not sure.



Of those who thought that this statement was applicable to their child 77% agreed that their child's particular needs were met at Sands with 13% disagreeing and 12% unsure.

We think Sand's is fabulous - we feel lucky that our children are able to attend and wish that there were more democratic schools available to children in the UK. I hope that the feedback from this survey will reflect how much we value and respect the teaching staff at Sand's School who work tirelessly to deliver an excellent and well rounded educational experience. The patience and forbearance shown to even the most challenging students is awe inspiring! Sand's is colourful, inspiring, often challenging but never boring.



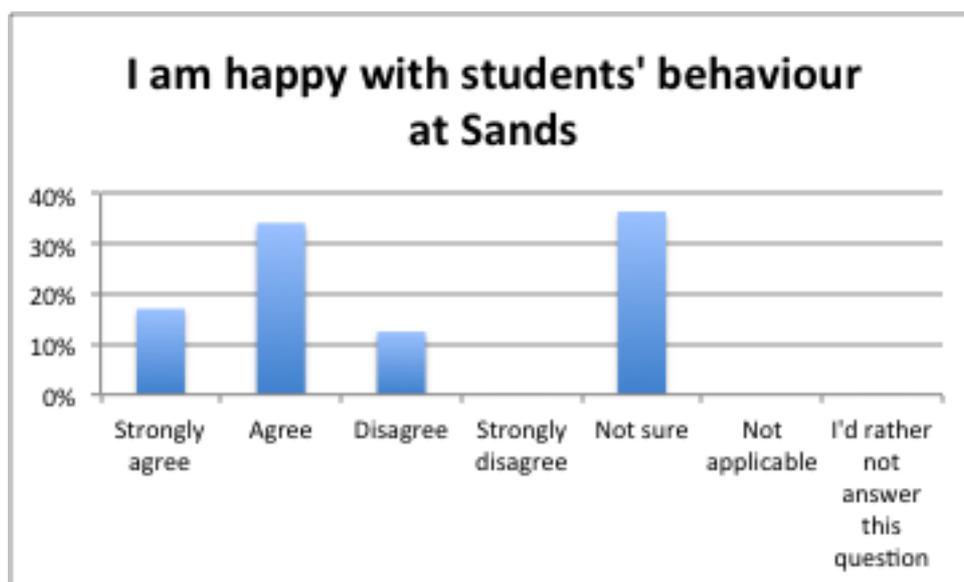
Virtually all parents agreed or strongly agreed that overall they were happy with their children's experience at Sands. None disagreed but one was not sure.

We all think sands is fantastic for our child, thank you

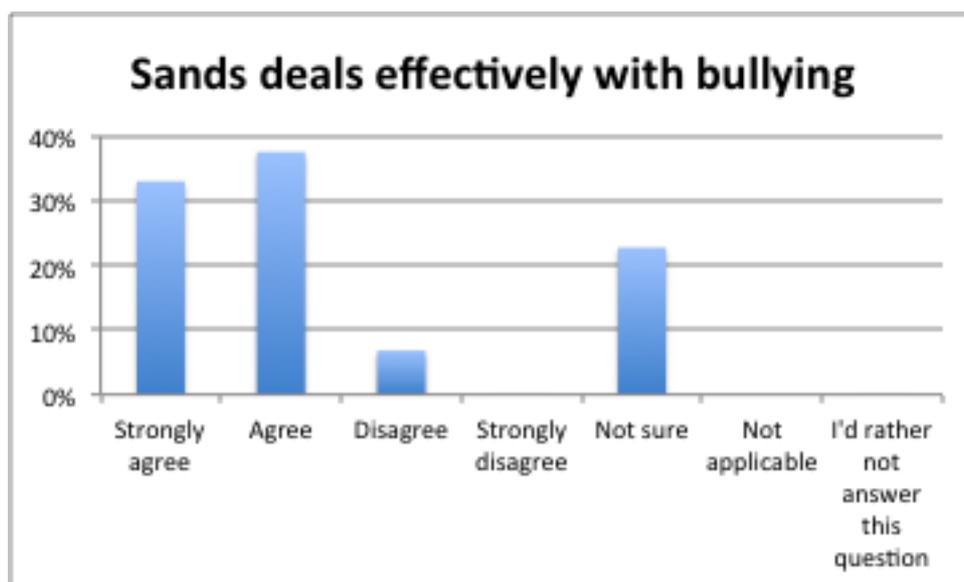
I am very glad my child is at Sands

Overall we are very happy with Sands. The staff are easy to talk to and very dedicated to the children and their work. The school has a great atmosphere and most of the time it works very well.

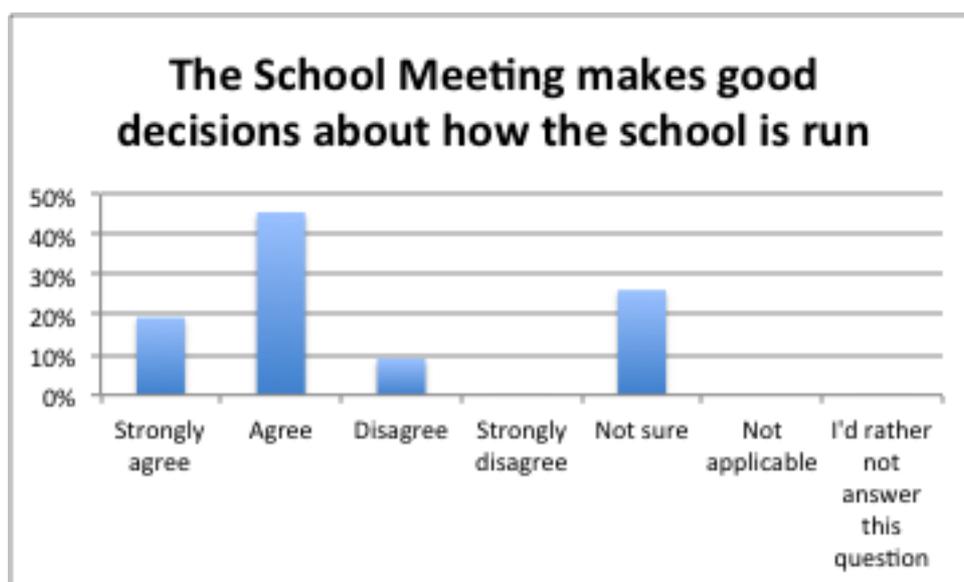
Overall, doing a really great job. Thank you.



Just over half of parents responding were happy with students' behaviour at Sands, more than a third were not sure and 13% disagreed.



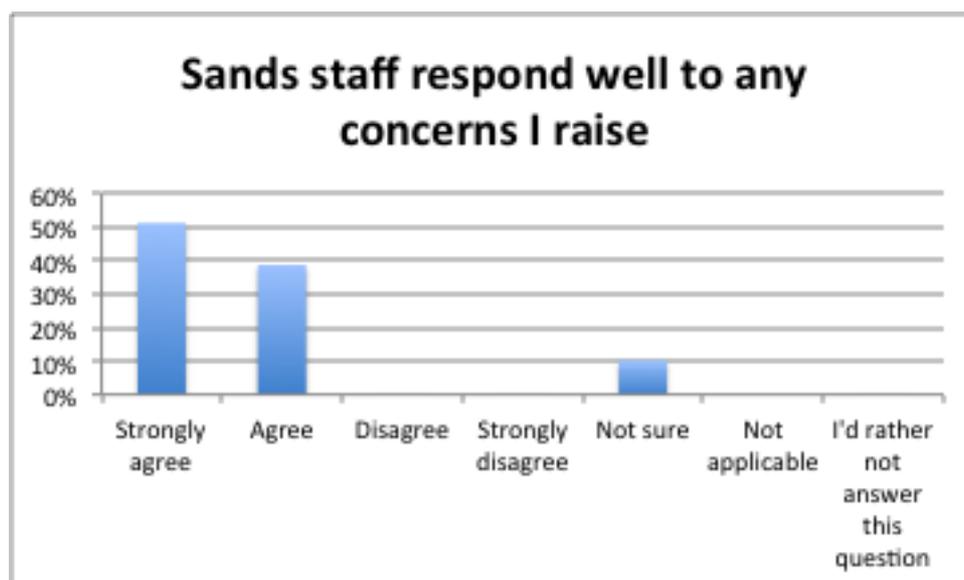
Over 70% of parents felt that Sands dealt effectively with bullying, 23% were not sure and 7% disagreed.



65% of parents felt that the School Meeting made good decisions about running the school, 26% were not sure and 9% disagreed.

Still think the School is great and I wish there were a lot more like it. Every time I see students pouring out of the Totnes Factory School it makes me feel truly ill. Keep it up. I am sure more improvements will make it even better.

I know how hard the staff work and really appreciate the unique and wonderful educational community that is being nurtured at Sands.



Ninety percent agreed that staff responded well to concerns raised with the remaining 10% unsure.

I would like to comment on how approachable, helpful and friendly all the staff I have come into contact with are.

We are coming to end of our time at Sands and I cannot thank all the staff enough for 'holding' and encouraging my child. There have been times when I have felt like tearing my hair out but overall I certainly have not regretted our decision - I feel my daughter has developed into an amazing human being and some of that is down to Sands. It has provided a 'family' for her - another safe place where she is supported to be herself by wonderful adults.

As frustrated as I sometimes get, I cant think of a school I'd rather our child attend. I never thought I would see them so happy to be at school.

Sands is a wonderful school, deeply frustrating at times but nevertheless still wonderful

We are very thankful that Sands exists!

Thank heavens that we have a 'Sands'! :)

long live Sands School and the people in it

The set questions compared

Finally, the responses to these twelve statements can be compared by assigning each statement an overall score. This is based on adding up the individual responses by scoring minus 2 for each 'strongly disagree', minus 1 for each 'disagree', plus 1 for each 'agree' and plus 2 for each 'strongly agree'. The importance of any disagrees is not in any way negated because they are outweighed by the agrees but this overall scoring allows an at-a-glance picture of the relative strengths across the areas assessed, see chart on facing page.

Scoring 1.5 or 1.6, so between 'agree' and 'strongly agree' on average, were:

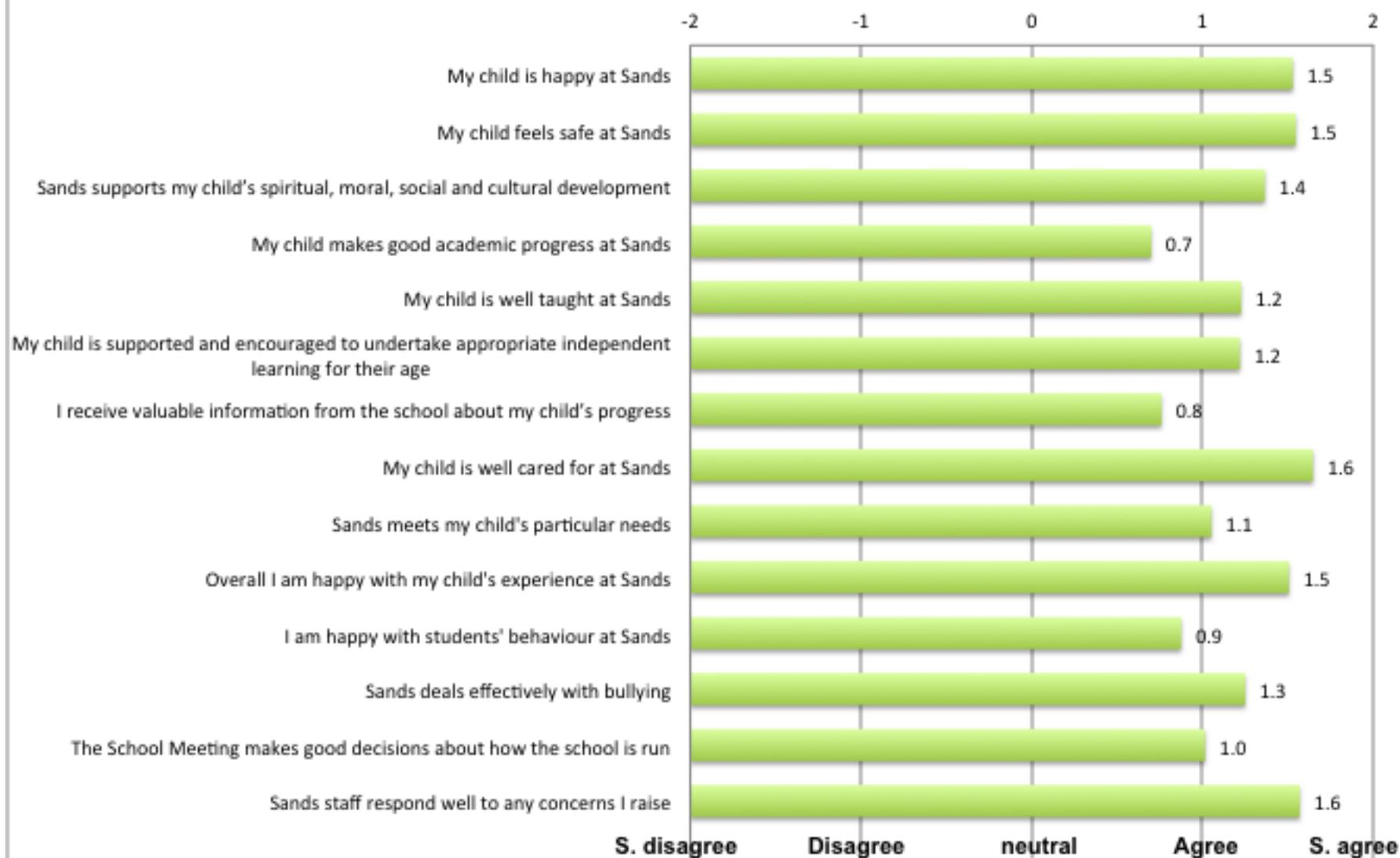
- **childrend being happy at Sands,**
- **feeling safe,**
- **being well cared for,**
- **parents being happy overall and**
- **staff responding to concerns.**

Scoring less than 1.0, so only just agree on average, were:

- **good academic progress,**
- **information about progress and**
- **parents' happiness with student's behavior.**

It is important to emphasize that in these areas the parents' response was still positive, but just not as positive as in others.

Set questions comapred



The open questions

What works well and where Sands can improve

After responding to the statements parents were asked two open questions:

From your perspective, as a parent, what are the things that make Sands the right school for your child?

From your perspective, as a parent, what are there any aspects of Sands that you'd like to see improved?

In each case they were invited to offer up to three suggestions. The questions were phrased to encourage parents to answer based on their own experience of having a child or children at Sands rather than trying to voice an opinion on behalf of parents as a whole.

These questions resulted in 179 comments on what makes Sands the right school for these children and 73 suggestions for improvements. Although differently expressed it was possible to clearly identify the recurrent themes and which views were the most commonly held.

The views, positive and critical, have been grouped together into broad subject areas to give a balanced picture:

- Curriculum
- Ethos, approach, atmosphere
- Teaching & learning
- The Democracy at Sands
- Communication
- Other

The numbers after each view are the number of parents expressing it. A typical comment is included to add some depth to the summaries.

Curriculum

There was huge support for the way in which the curriculum at Sands offers flexibility and choice, allowing each student to follow their own learning path. A number of parents also mentioned the freedom from exams and assessment. The one area of perceived weakness in the Sands curriculum is the amount of sport / exercise that is offered / undertaken.

What makes Sands right:

- Curriculum, flexibility / choice 17
- Meeting individual needs, interests, abilities 10
- Escape from exam statistics 5
- Development of whole child not just academically 2
- Artistic / creative 1

What could be improved:

- More sport / exercise 9
- Music / Music GCSE 3
- Too much untimetabled time 2
- Language teaching 2
- Real world skills, take general studies into O years 2
- More holistic approach 1
- More extra curricular activity 1
- Wider subject choices: cooking, design, textiles 1

“Flexible, without pressure to conform or fit into a certain 'box', learning runs alongside student interest”

“At her old school, our child had to concentrate only on the things that she is not so good at. At Sands, she can concentrate on the things she has got a talent for.”

“The freedom to choose has been very helpful in making school life possible for my child.”

“Sands school puts the child’s needs before statistical targets.”

“I'd like it if there were more opportunities for physical activity”

Ethos, approach, atmosphere

There was huge recognition and support for the way in which Sands values and respects its students and the environment that results from this. Being able to be themselves, express themselves, be heard and be treated as an individual and as an equal, with the support of caring staff who like them, allows students to be happy and self-confident.

The one area for improvement was that the school was too inward-looking.

What makes Sands right:

- Freedom to express, be themselves, treated as an individual 16
- Self belief / confidence 13
- Atmosphere - friendly, relaxed, unpressured, family 12
- Being respected, trusted 9
- Second home, wouldn't miss a day, happiness 9
- Relationship between staff and students 8
- Staff care about the children, know them and like them 8
- Being heard, having a voice 6
- Support from staff 6
- Treated as equal 5
- Responsibility for education 4
- Recovery from refuser 4
- Social / friendships 4
- Ethos 3
- Safe / escape from bullying 3
- Inclusive 2

What could be improved:

- Too inward looking 1

"The freedom to express whatever is going on, and be heard as an equal, which builds self confidence and self belief."

"The happiness and personal development of my child has been important to the staff of sands and is reflected in my child's fondness of the school. "

"It is so lovely for her to feel happy and relaxed at school and experience friendships with staff as well as other children. I know she feels able to be herself and respected for who that is."

"Being treated as an individual who I know will be listened to and respected."

“Sands' strong pastoral care due to very good communication and relations between teachers and students, and again very good communication between students themselves fostered by democratic processes, supportive ethics, and friendly, open, and informal atmosphere.”

“I believe that being allowed to learn at his own pace my son is a much more relaxed and happy child. He has learnt to trust his teachers and respect their knowledge.”

Teaching & learning

While the quality of the teaching and the staff's enthusiasm is appreciated, a number of parents felt there was a lack of encouragement for students to aspire to achieve academically and not attending lessons was too easy an option.

What makes Sands right:

- Teaching 4
- Staff enjoy teaching at Sands 3
- Academic achievement 1

What could be improved:

- More encouragement to learn / achieve 8
- Confidence in independent learning 2
- Quiet study area(s) 1

“The classes are small and well taught, engaging him in the lessons where he is learning well and is now achieving academically.”

“Fabulous staff teaching their specialist subjects passionately - enthusiasm is infectious and my children look forward to their lessons.”

“It needs to place more focus on academic achievement, there are many talented children in the school , not just artistically.”

“Encouraging pupils to excel more - I think the culture steers away from competition and being rewarded for success because of the shadow side of this within the state system. I think this can create mediocrity sometimes and an acceptance of low standards.”

“...the 'democratic' option of not participating is too easily allowed by teachers - or rather goes unchallenged to lightly.”

The Democracy at Sands

Many parents noted the importance to the children of having responsibility for running the school and a few also commented on how this had been brought positively into their children's lives beyond school. There was some concern about the functioning of the Meeting, particularly the amount of time spent agonising over each transgression rather than simply applying to agreed rules.

What makes Sands right:

- Having responsibility in running school 11
- Applying Sands to outside school 3

What could be improved:

- Adhering to rules (rather than agonising over every transgression) 4
- Functioning of the school meeting 4
- More leadership from the adults 3
- More active teaching of what it means to be democratic: responsibilities, rights and consequences 2
- More caution about admitting pupils with very demanding behaviour 2
- Some issues too stressful for children to take responsibility for 1
- Functioning of school council 1
- More parent involvement 1

"He feels that he has a voice, that he is part of the decision making process at the school and that the school systems are formed through the collective decisions of the school community as a whole. This has had the knock on effect of making him more responsible and thoughtful of consequences when dealing with other issues in his life."

"I'm glad that she has the chance to be involved in the running of the school and is included in the resolution of important emotional issues"

"My child feeling the school belongs to her and she has a say in what happens there."

"It's great in principle to have everything decided at school meeting, but I get the impression it results in difficult decisions not being taken or being continuously postponed and discussed."

"It seems to me that boundaries, 'rules' or agreements are not adhered to because kids get too emotionally involved and therefore too much time is spent in meetings agonising about decisions where there already exists agreements and guidelines."

Communication

A number of parents felt they could be better informed about what their children were doing at school, especially if they were choosing not to do things. There was also, for some, a sense of being kept out and not enabled to interact with the school.

What could be improved:

- Communication about how / what children are doing / missing 7
- Tutors following through after discussing issues 1
- Publication of exam results 1
- Regular newsletter 1
- Information on exams 1

"I would like more feedback and more interaction with the school."

"To be informed if child misses lessons, not to wait until parents evening to find out."

"I feel somewhat out of touch sometimes as I have been effectively barred from visiting Sands by my daughter. She regards it very much as her territory."

Other

What makes Sands right:

- Small school 6
- Small classes 4

What could be improved:

- Inconsiderate behaviour disrupting learning / exams 2
- Spruce the place up / cleanliness 2
- Sean well and back 1
- Drug use 1
- More effective staff appraisal system 1
- School security 1
- Terms too short and out of step with other local schools 1
- More coat hooks 1