

## UNDERWOOD PTO SURVEY 2011

A huge thank you to those of you who took the time to respond to our PTO survey last Spring. Over half of Underwood families responded, of whom about 75% had children in grades K-3 and 54% had children in grades 3-6. We received many thoughtful comments and suggestions that have helped us think about how we can continue to grow as a community. We are happy to say that the majority of parents are generally very positive about all aspects of the PTO. However, there was clearly room for improvement in some areas. Below, we have tried to pull together what we learned from the survey, and what we are thinking about in response. If you have comments about this survey, or anything relevant to the PTO, please contact us at [underwoodschoolpto@gmail.com](mailto:underwoodschoolpto@gmail.com).

### WHAT WE DO WELL

**Communications via email, fliers and newsletters.** A large majority of parents “strongly agreed” that these PTO communications were helpful and informative. Not surprisingly, the previous website, which dates back to 2003, was not so well received. As it happens, a revamp was already in the offing, and we now have modernized site up and running ([underwoodschoolpto.org](http://underwoodschoolpto.org)). We hope that you will use it frequently to keep up with all things Underwood! In the future, the PTO will rely increasingly on electronic communication in an effort to be more “green”. This also will align us better with the middle and high schools, both of which now communicate almost entirely electronically.

**Community events and fundraisers.** The Spring Carnival, held on a Friday afternoon/evening this year, was attended by an astounding 94% of the parents who responded, the large majority of whom rated it “Excellent”. The PTO had decided to change the Carnival day from Saturday in response to a prior PTO survey, in which many parents told us that a Saturday event conflicted with sports playoff games, end of year dance recitals and other important Spring events. The Mystery Dinner, Spring Fundraiser and potluck grade dinners also garnered high praise from parents.

We asked parents for suggestions regarding new events or activities, and received some interesting ideas. We list these below to stimulate discussion and gauge enthusiasm for trying some of them.

- Family road race or triathlon
- Attending outside educational events as a group, for example Lego FIRST robotics competitions at North.
- Organizing an event for parents and teachers, perhaps reading and discussing a common text about educational issues.

Thanks to those of you who made these suggestions!

**Volunteer organization:** Parents also strongly agreed that volunteer efforts were very well organized in general. Several people suggested that it would be helpful to have a single place where all of the volunteer opportunities for the year are summarized, so that parents could pace themselves a bit, and plan their efforts throughout the year. We have responded with the new “Helping out at Underwood” flier, which came home in the welcome packet, and can also be found on the website. We hope that this will help you

plan, and will also help those of you who are on the fence about becoming more involved to find something that suits your interests and schedule.

**Budget Priorities:** The priorities that parents listed for PTO spending matched very closely the priorities reflected in the PTO budget. Three items were ranked “High” priority by a majority of parents: technology (67%), support/supply allocation for teachers and principals (62%), and Creative Arts and Sciences (61%). Actual spending on these three items last year constituted about 80% of the total PTO budget, with 29% going to technology, 30% to support/supply allocations and 22% to Creative Arts and Sciences. One parent suggested that we take a longer term view of the budget, and create a strategic plan for several years, rather than simply going from year to year. Although many of our budgetary items by nature repeat every year, we think this is an excellent suggestion in some cases, particularly when it comes to technology spending. In cooperation with Ms. Zimmerman and school technology specialists, we will be working this year to develop a long term plan for technology acquisitions. Look for more information about this effort soon. More details about the Underwood PTO budget will soon be available on the website.

#### **WHAT WE NEED TO WORK ON**

**PTO meetings** were not well attended last year, although people who did attend largely thought that they were helpful and informative.

Many people did not attend PTO meetings because of conflicts with the time at which they were held. Unfortunately, respondents were split exactly down the middle as to whether they would prefer to attend meetings in the morning or the evening. As we have in the past, we will try to accommodate everyone by alternating between the two, and we hope all will understand that there may be meetings that do not fit into all schedules.

Several people said that they would be more likely to go to a PTO meeting if it addressed a specific subject of interest to them, and/or if they could suggest items for the agenda and have the agenda published in advance. These are excellent suggestions! We will try very hard to plan meetings that parents will find informative and worth their time, and to let parents know the topic and agenda in advance. Our first PTO meeting on September 27<sup>th</sup> will be a chance for parents to hear from Kathleen Zimmerman, and to ask her any questions you might have. If you have specific topics or questions that you would like her to address, please email either her at [kathleen\\_zimmerman@newton.k12.ma.us](mailto:kathleen_zimmerman@newton.k12.ma.us) or us at [underwoodschoolpto@gmail.com](mailto:underwoodschoolpto@gmail.com). We will work with her to generate a list of topics that you can expect to hear about at the first meeting. We also have ideas for upcoming meetings, including adjustments to the math curriculum, and library and technology planning. We welcome your suggestions for topics or agenda items of interest to you.

**Bridging the gap between working and stay at home parents:** A significant number of parents who responded (almost 40%) were neutral or negative when asked whether the PTO does a good job of bridging this gap, which we think is disturbingly high. We suspect that a large part of the problem is the scheduling of events such as PTO meetings,

which we address above. However, we would strongly encourage parents who are concerned about this issue to let us know how we can better address their needs.

**Being inclusive:** A number of parents were either neutral (18%) or negative (5.6%) when asked if the PTO is welcoming and inclusive, which is also too high, because we want everyone to feel that their participation is valued. We would like to emphasize that every parent at Underwood is automatically a member of the PTO, no sign-up or dues are required. However, it is up to each person to decide how much to get involved. There are many opportunities to get to know other parents, including the welcome picnic, grade level potluck dinners, and the Mystery Dinner. An even better way to become involved is to volunteer to help with PTO events and committees. We would love to have everyone's help! Unfortunately, we can't know who would like to be more involved until you take that first step and let us know. If you would like to volunteer, take a look at the "Helping out at Underwood" flier that came in your welcome packet, or access it online.

**Reaching out to new families:** There were also some neutral/negative responses from parents when asked if the PTO did a good job of welcoming new families. This issue was recognized as an area of need last year, and we now have a K and new parent welcoming committee, in which veteran parents are recruited to help new families get integrated into the community, get oriented, and successfully navigate their first year at Underwood.

**The role of the PTO and how it spends its money:** About a quarter of parents were neutral about, or said they did not have a good understanding of, either of these important subjects. We are working on a detailed description of our annual budget, and of the role of the PTO in school life. This is a work in progress, so look out for this information on the website within the next few weeks.

**Allergies:** Thank you for your concern about PTO food provisions and food allergies. We have now made it a policy that all food brought into the school by the PTO be nut free. We also ask that parents bring only nut free items to school functions such as field trips, class breakfasts, bake sales etc. Room parents will remind everyone of this whenever they solicit food donations.

**Safety protocols for field trips:** Several people mentioned that stricter oversight of field trips (especially Ware's Cove) was necessary. We agree, and will work with Ms. Zimmerman and our school nurse to make sure that children are kept safe on and off school grounds, and to develop a set of best practices for dealing with injured children.

## **OTHER COMMENTS**

Several people suggested that one of the most important issues for the upcoming year would be to help ease the transition for our new principal. We agree that facilitating communication between parents and Ms. Zimmerman is crucially important, and we have already built a strong sense of partnership with her. We are dedicated to helping parents communicate with her about those aspects of the Underwood culture that they hold dear.

We are equally dedicated to helping Ms. Zimmerman communicate to parents the positive and extremely well-reasoned goals that she has for the school. We are very excited that she has come to Underwood, and that we will have the pleasure of working closely with her this year. We can all learn so much from one another's thoughts about Underwood!

Several people had comments or suggestions relating to class size, hiring more classroom aides, or subjects that they would like to see emphasized in the curriculum. Please bear in mind that the PTO is not permitted to provide funds for school personnel, nor can we advocate for changes in the curriculum. If you have opinions about either of these important issues, we encourage you to contact the Newton School Committee at [schoolcommittee@newton.k12.ma.us](mailto:schoolcommittee@newton.k12.ma.us).