

Action Research Report: Transition Support Structures at Singapore American School

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by
Sean Smith and Simon Gustafson
Singapore American School
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Dr. Tammy Gregersen

Abstract

A select number of 5th grade students at Singapore American School (SAS) participated in a study so researchers could explore how well they felt supported by the school as TCKs in transition. Students were asked a specific set of questions based on whether they were new to the school or returning. While the majority of students reported feeling well supported, a handful of students that have been at SAS for a number of years still do not feel that they belong.

Topic

What strategies prove to be effective in supporting students at the beginning of the school year when many new students have just arrived and others are dealing with the loss of friends who have departed? We are interested in exploring what is currently in place at SAS as well as learning about how we can better support our students throughout the school.

We are hoping to learn more about Third Culture Kids (TCKs), their transitions, and how we can improve our social and emotional support in our classroom. For the purposes of this study, we will define third culture kids (TCKs) as children who have spent the majority of their formative years (a minimum of 4) living in a culture outside of their parent's passport country (Pollock & VanReken, 2009). The counselors are well versed in supporting students transitioning, but teachers have little training in supporting students in this area. When we learn to help the students we will also learn to help ourselves and others.

Research Objectives

- Learn what transition support strategies are currently in place at SAS.
- Identify ways in which more support could be offered to students.

- Actively engage students, counselors, teachers and administrators in our exploration of the subject.
- Share what we learn through our research within the school community in hopes of inspiring changes to improve our transition support system.

Problem Defined

All students, but TCKs especially, have to overcome many challenges when faced with a transition. This transition could mean moving to a new school or country, or even staying in the same school as their friends depart. We would like to know what strategies prove to be effective in supporting students at the beginning of the school year when many new students have just arrived at SAS and others are dealing with the loss of friends who have departed. What is currently in place at our school and what can we do to better support our students throughout their transition?

Third Culture Kids in Transition

In *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds* by Pollock and Van Reken (2009) there are a number of chapters that address the challenges and process of transition for third culture kids (TCKs). Chapter 13 focuses on building a strong foundation for TCKs as they move from place to place. The parental unit is fundamental to a healthy transition. Important family conversations need to take place as well as consistent loving parenting. Children need to know they are valued and included in the discussions around moving. Respect for the child as an individual, comfort, commitment, and nurturing for the children are crucial as families relocate. If disrespect is more consistent it can potentially cause TCKs to make poor decisions, such as breaking the law. Fundamental to a healthy environment is a strong spiritual core for the child.

In Chapter 14, Pollock and Van Reken provide some concrete ways in which parents and TCKs can successfully navigate transitions. They focus on strategies to be used by the families that are leaving rather than the families staying put. During the leaving process, Pollock and Van Reken recommend building a “RAFT,” a strategy that consists of Reconciliation, Affirmation, Farewells, and Think destination. They also emphasise the importance of maintaining stability through the transition stage. This can be done by using sacred objects such as teddy bears or pictures, or even by attempting to maintain family traditions. Pollock and Van Reken state that it is important to allow TCKs to go through a process of mourning in which they acknowledge the loss of friends and familiar places. Once arrived in the new location, finding the right mentor and group of friends becomes very important. The final stage involves TCKs becoming involved in activities of interest in their new location.

Another component that can assist TCKs in transition are sponsoring organizations. In Chapter 15, due diligence and communication is needed to assess the educational opportunities available for TCKs. If an educational institution is not suitable, then a new organization can be found where educational needs can be met. Education is not merely about the school portion, but also the additional learning in life that is necessary to produce a well rounded individual. During the educational process sponsoring organizations can help to find an educational institution that helps the TCK maintain a positive image, develop talents, maintain awareness of the local community and larger world, and develop empathy towards others. An awareness of different cultures and their impacts on philosophies of education is an important discussion that needs to take place. Many different educational options are available, including homeschooling, international schools, and local schools. All of these choices impact the TCK and the cultural

norms of the family with consistent exposure to new philosophies and cultures. It is important for the TCK to learn the language of their parent's home country as it can help them repatriate to their home culture if they choose to do so in the future.

Literature Review

When reviewing the literature of the last several years, some studies have found that culture adjustments impact both Missionary Kids (MKs) and TCKs (Berg, 2008; Davis et. al, 2010; Peterson, 2009; Hervey, 2009). However, there are some groups and programs in place that can support these adjustments. Davis, Headley, Bazemore, Cervo, Sickinger, Windham, & Reh fuss (2010) found that a two week transition program resulted in a positive level of psychological well-being while depression and anxiety levels dropped. Notably, Davis, et.al, (2010) found that participating in a transition program can help facilitate positive adjustment to the passport culture of record.

In addition, we found in the literature that parental units play a vital role in supporting and guiding their children as they grow up in foreign countries (Peterson, 2009; Hervey 2009). According to Peterson (2009) parental support can help children achieve balanced acculturation and a positive affect towards life. A positive attitude has been found to promote a healthier transition for TCKs and MKs. In Hawaii, Berg (2008) studied government programs that provided services to transitioning military students and families, with parents playing a key role in the process.

Methods and Procedures

The study took place at SAS during the fall of the 2017-2018 school year. The sample was consenting fifth grade students from pre-selected classrooms. The classes participating were

chosen because they work together as a small Professional Learning Community (PLC).

To begin the action research project, we utilized the text and resources of *Safe Passages* by Douglas Ota. Within the text Ota (2014) shares an informative approach as well as action steps to further support TCKs and Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) throughout the transition process. Ota's work has been reviewed and has a forward by VanReken, the author of *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. The portion of *Safe Passages* that we replicated for our action research study was the transitions passports created by Ota (2014). The transition passports are a series of questions, set on a likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), that look at how students are feeling, action steps they are taking to transition, and how they feel supported by the school community they reside in. The transition passport can be shared three times per year, with all students, to get a better sense of how TCKs are navigating transitions. For the purpose of this study, we wanted to better understand how our current program at SAS was best supporting students and next steps we can take as a school to better serve our students. In addition to the questions from *Safe Passages*, we also recorded the participant's gender, number of schools attended since preschool, and how many years they have attended SAS. In all other aspects, the survey was anonymous.

Before administering our survey, we scheduled meetings with our counselor and administrators to discuss our action research project. After receiving their approval, we drafted a parent consent letter and shared it with parents at 'Back to School Night' for the pre-selected fifth grade classrooms. The letter further detailed the program and can be found below in the appendix (item A). The following week we emailed all parents of the pre selected classrooms a Google Form (Appendix item B), to gather digital consent before administering the transition

passport survey. Once all consent was collected, we administered the survey to the preselected classrooms on the same day in their individual classrooms. On the day of administering the Google Form survey to students, a script was read aloud to all students to provide consistency (Appendix item C). In addition, all students completed this Google Form (Appendix item D) on an iPad .

Current Support Strategies in Place

After speaking in depth with our counselor, Mrs. Steigerwald, we learned that SAS has a number of support strategies in place for transitioning students.

All new students have an orientation (typically a group with other new students/ families but sometimes 1:1 if they come at an off time). Then new students are provided a buddy to help them find their way around, sit with at lunch, and play at recess. This is not always successful, but we want them to have a connection. Lastly, the counselor provides new student groups. This is meant to validate and normalize all emotions students are experiencing as they settle in- often kids share things that others are experiencing as well.

For the returning students, the following supports are available, however, with 300 students in the grade it requires a teacher, counselor or parent to 'observe' concerns and 'refer'. In addition, Kid Chats -student concerns are discussed and a variety of things can happen and small group support is provided for any student that needs 'extra' in the area of social/ emotional. One-on-one counseling is also available (students often do drop in). All students have counseling lessons which provides explicit teaching in SEL skills (problem solving/ stress management/ growth mindset/ social awareness/ digital

citizenship etc.). This is all from the counseling lens (Steigerwald, 2017).

In addition to the support structures identified by Mrs. Steigerwald, classroom teachers at SAS recently received professional development in Responsive Classroom to further aid their knowledge and abilities to nurture student's social and emotional development.

Results

Of the 66 students that were invited to participate in the study, 59 students received parental consent and completed the survey. The respondents consisted of 34 females and 25 males. 41 of the 59 students were returning to SAS, and 18 were new to the school this year. The majority of the students (52.5%) have attended two or three schools since preschool. One student reported attending six different schools over the course of the six years since preschool.

The newly arriving students collectively shared a positive outlook on their new school and environment. The most positive responses were recorded for the following statements:

- *The things people here have done to help me arrive well really have helped me* (Appendix Figure 10).
 - 94.4% responded with a 4 or 5
- *I feel okay about moving to this school* (Appendix Figure 7).
 - 88.9% responded with a 4 or 5

None of the newly arriving students responded with a 1 for any of the statements. There were three instances in which a single student gave a 2 response to a statement. The 2 responses were given by three separate individuals for the following questions:

- *I am actively doing things to try to make new friends and connections here* (Appendix Figure 6).

- *I am ready to start my new life here* (Appendix Figure 8).
- *People here have tried to help me arrive and fit in well at this school* (Appendix Figure 9).

When asked to list a few specific things that people here have done that have been most helpful in your transition, the most common responses included:

- people being nice, friendly, or kind (4 responses);
- being invited to play with others and feeling included in the group (6 responses);
- receiving help getting around the school, knowing where to go and what to do (8 responses).

While the responses from the students returning to SAS were also mostly positive, there was a bit more of a spread into the lower end of the likert scale on a few of the questions.

Returning students were most optimistic about the following statements:

- *I am ready to make new friends with some of the new students.* (Appendix Figure 13)
 - 87.8% responded 4 or 5, the remaining students responded with a 3
- *I am actively involved in activities here. I do things with friends on a regular basis.* (Appendix Figure 15).
 - 87.8% responded with a 4 or 5, the remaining students responded with a 3

Figures 1, 2, and 3 in the appendix depict a high number of positive responses, but also a higher number of students responding with a 2 or a 1 than all other questions in the survey.

When the returning students were asked to list a few specific things that people here have done that help you feel seen and valued, the most common responses included:

- inviting them to play and including them (19 responses);

- being friendly and kind to them (11 responses);
- offering help when it is needed (8 responses);
- simply talking to them (6 responses).

One of the unmeasured variables worth mentioning that may have impacted the data is that many of the students may be transitioning through puberty. This natural stage of growth and development results in a high level of stress as well as unexpected changes in feelings and emotions.

Analysis

In analyzing the data, we are continuing to seek out correlations in how different pieces of data influence one another. An initial observation of the data is that there are returning students that feel ready to make friends, but are struggling to fit in or feel like the school is their home. Although, our school actively supports students, some students still need additional support to make their school and community feel like a place they belong.

One hypothesis that could help explain the relatively positive responses from the new students is that an arriving child that moves very often could be more comfortable making new friends easily and has developed this skill through practice. New students could also be riding the wave of excitement and optimism that is often accompanied with arriving in a new location. In contrast, for the much larger population of returning students, further support is needed for individual student's feelings and encouragement in community building actions. Specifically, the results show that 7 students out of 41 scored a 3, 2, or 1 on the question *I am actively doing*

things to try and connect with new students (Appendix Figure 3). This could be a signal that these students have lost close friends often and they are still in the grieving process.

Similarly, 6 out of 41 returning students scored a 3, 2, or 1 on the question *I feel okay about making friends with new students this year* (Appendix Figure 14). This group may find it hard to make friends as they may still be going through a grieving process from saying goodbye to their old friends. The opportunities for friendship are present, but some returning students may have lost the desire to connect with arriving students, perhaps out of fear that they will have to say goodbye once again. Most alarmingly, on the question *I feel good about my life at this school. I feel like I belong here* (Appendix Figure 1), the results showed 4 out of 41 returning students scored a 2 or 1 and one student scored a 3. One possible explanation for returning students feeling like SAS is not where they belong is that they may still feel strong ties to previous schools and previous groups of friends, or they have yet to discover where they can fit into the SAS community.

Conclusion

As this is the first time data has been collected in this way at SAS, more data would need to be collected at regular points throughout the school year to deepen our understanding of this topic. Our future goals include having our counselors utilize the survey adapted from *Safe Passages* by Douglas Ota (2014) with all students, multiple times per year. In doing this our staff can support red flag students who are struggling with the transitions process. Once the survey is shared consistently over time, our staff can get a better sense of how the student body is transitioning; and a support network can be put in place from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Ota (2014) details support networks, or safe harbours, as committees that consist of parents, teachers, and students. As the program strengthens, it has the potential to build a network of other international schools to ease the transition process for all parties involved.

In conclusion, SAS is doing a fantastic job in assisting arriving students through the entrance phase of transitions. Specifically, the special programs run by our elementary counselors to further support students as they enter Singapore play a vital role in arriving student's well being. In the beginning of each school year, weekly meetings with the counselors nurtures arriving students and provides a safe area for them to connect and share with others. Even with a strong transition program, further support is needed to nurture returning students feeling isolated or disconnected from their respective community.

Appendix

Item A: Parent Consent Letter

August 22nd, 2017

Dear Parents,

Every year, SAS welcomes many new students who are transitioning into our community from other countries or other schools in Singapore. We also say goodbye to students who are transitioning away from SAS for various reasons to continue their education in a new location. As an institution, we believe it is critically important to provide the necessary support to students who are leaving, arriving, as well as those who continue to stay with us as they see friends come and go.

As part of a Teacher Leadership graduate degree program through the University of Northern Iowa, Simon Gustafson (ES Music Teacher) and Sean Smith (5th Grade Classroom Teacher) are interested in taking a closer look at how transitions and our current support systems affect 5th grade students in the Elementary Division. Working alongside the ES Counseling staff and ES Administrators, Simon and Sean would like to administer a Google Form survey to a select number of 5th grade students in order to receive feedback about how well they feel supported by the school as they navigate the transition process.

You are receiving this email because your child has been selected to participate in the study. All feedback will remain anonymous and the results will not be published. The hope is that the results from the study will inform us what support strategies are working well and help identify areas in which we can better support our students.

Please indicate whether or not you are willing to allow your child to participate in the study below. Please respond by **August 31st, 2017**.

We have included a few examples of questions from the student form below to give you a better idea of the types of questions we would like to ask your child. We will be happy to share a summary of our results if you are interested at the conclusion of our study.

Thank you for your support as we continue to strive to be a world leader in education, cultivating exceptional thinkers that are prepared for the future.

Sincerely,

Simon Gustafson and Sean Smith
sgustafson@sas.edu.sg
ssmith@sas.edu.sg

Item B: Parent Google Form Consent

Link to Parent Consent Google Form: <https://goo.gl/forms/xUsf9gHDLm6a2Fda2>

Item C: Student Google Form Script

Instructions:

The school is interested in studying how well we support new students, as well as students returning for another school year.

We would like to ask students in Mr. Smith's class, Ms. Kim's class, and Mr. Haydu's class some questions to find out your opinions about how well you feel supported and cared for in certain aspects of your school life.

The survey is anonymous, which means your name will not be used or needed in the results.

The results will be shared with counselors and administrators. At the end, we hope to use this information to better serve and support you and your experience at SAS.

Please complete this Google Form, which has been adapted from Safe Passages by Douglas Ota.

Thank you,

Mr. Smith and Mr. Gustafson

Item D: Student Google Form

Link to the Student Google Form: <https://goo.gl/forms/dcsi39IgA2zkEedg2>

Appendix: Figures

Returning: I feel good about my life at this school. I feel like I belong here.

41 responses

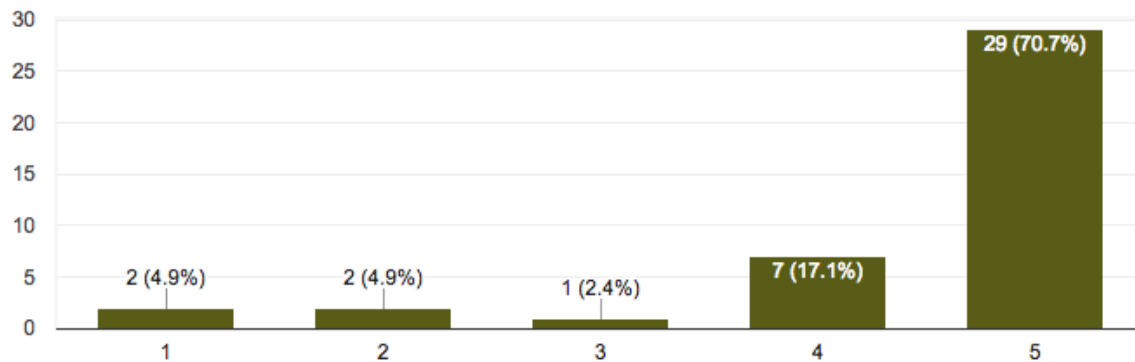


Figure 1. Returning students: I feel good about my life at this school. I feel like I belong here.

Returning: This school and community have become like "home" to me. I belong here now.

41 responses

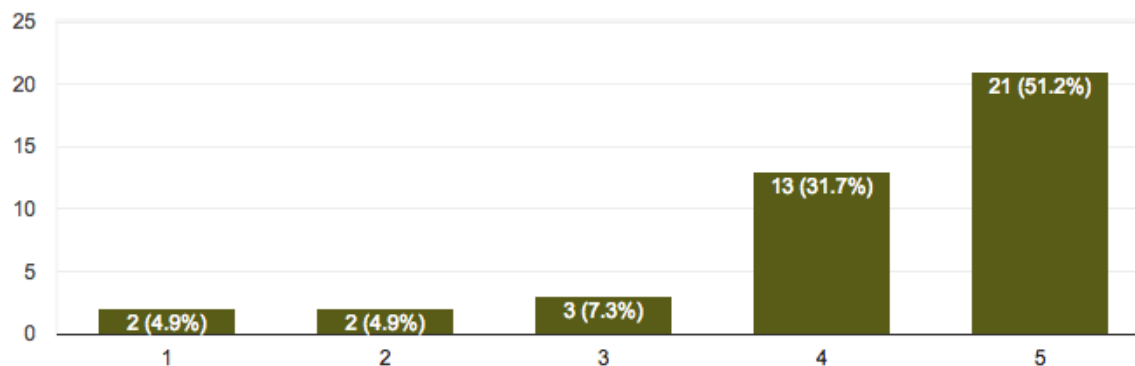


Figure 2. Returning students: This school and community have become like “home” to me.

Returning: I am actively doing things to try and connect with new students.

41 responses

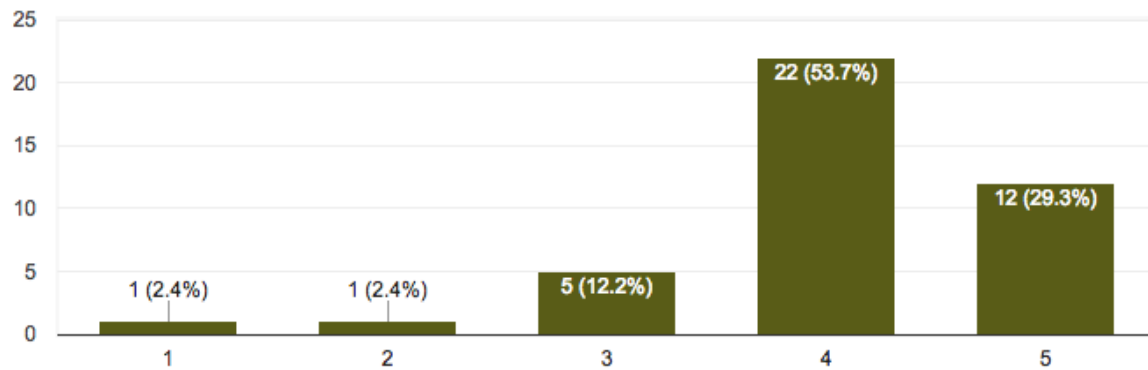


Figure 3. Returning students: I am actively doing things to try and connect with new students.

How many years have you been at SAS?

59 responses

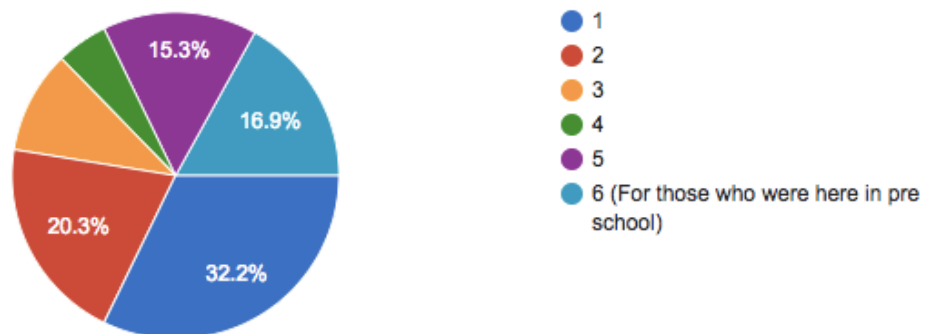


Figure 4. How many years have you been at SAS?

How many different schools have you attended since preschool?

59 responses

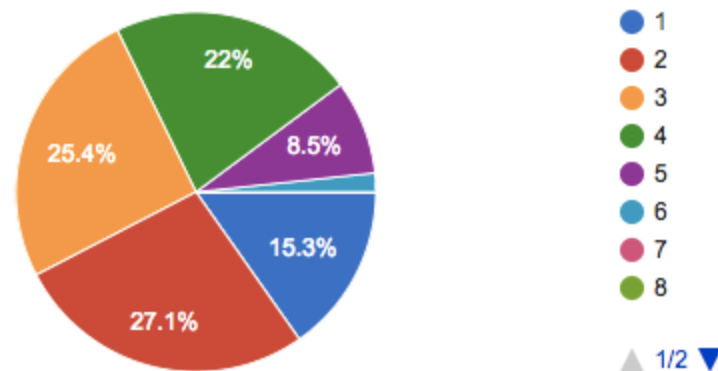


Figure 5. How many different schools have you attended since preschool?

Arriving: I am actively doing things to try to make new friends and connections here.

18 responses

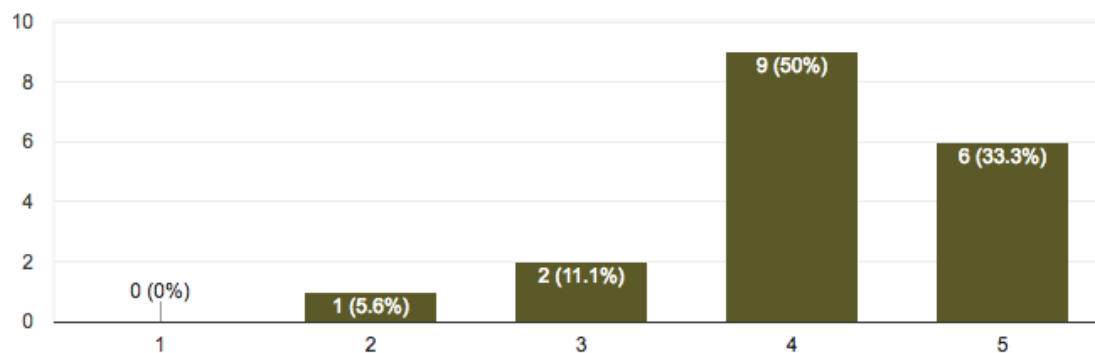


Figure 6. I am actively doing things to try to make new friends and connections here.

Arriving: I feel okay about moving to this new school.

18 responses

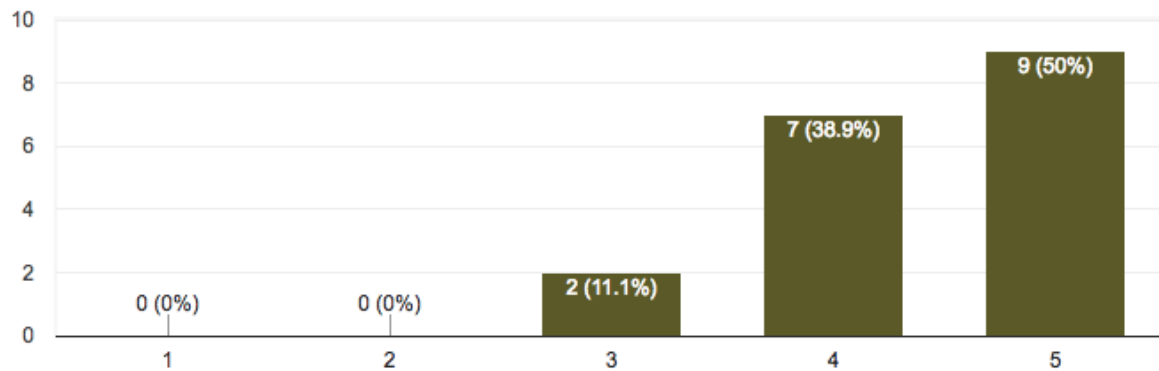


Figure 7. Arriving students: I feel okay about moving to this new school.

Arriving: I am ready to start my new life here.

18 responses

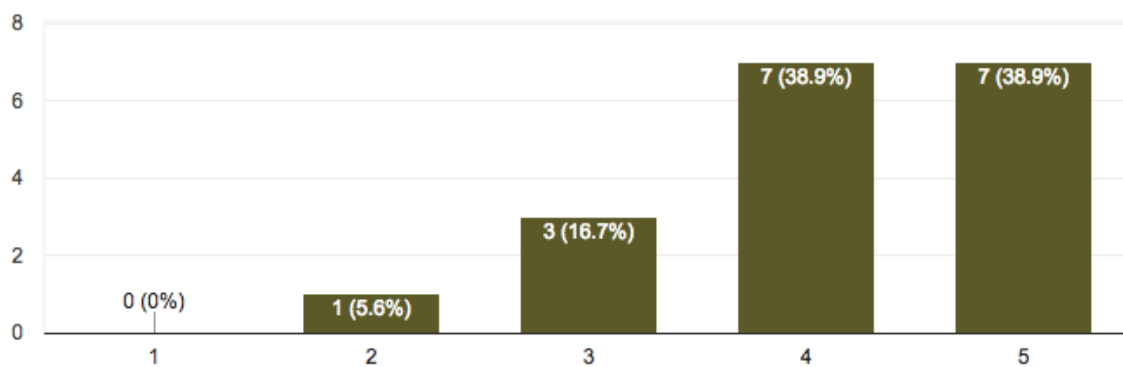


Figure 8. Arriving students: I am ready to start my new life here.

Arriving: People here have tried to help me arrive and fit in well at this school.

18 responses

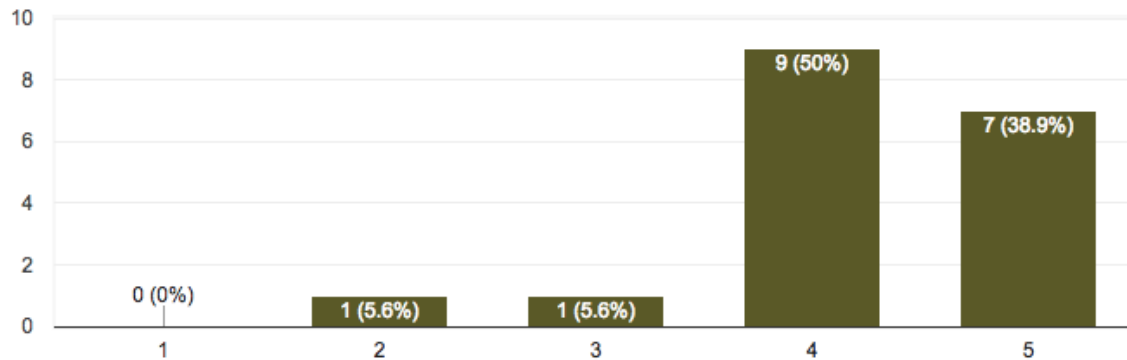


Figure 9. Arriving students: People here have tried to help me arrive and fit in well at this school.

Arriving: The things people here have done to help me arrive well really have helped me.

18 responses

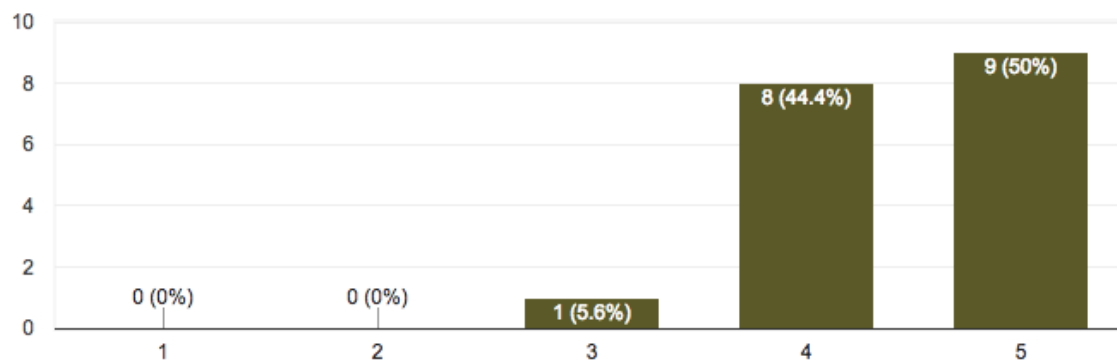


Figure 10. Arriving students: The things people here have done to help me arrive well really have helped me.

Returning: It's hard to be a 'Stayer' when everyone is always arriving and leaving, but I feel like people here really understand that.

41 responses

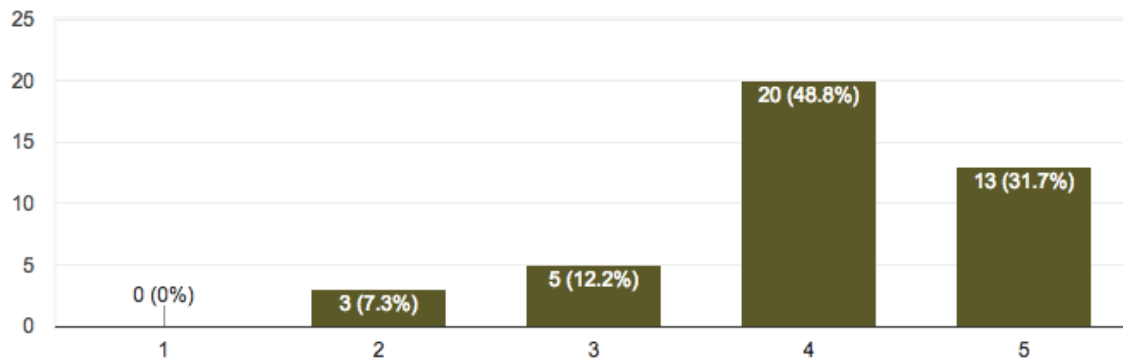


Figure 11. Returning students: It's hard to be a 'Stayer' when everyone is always arriving and leaving, but I feel like people here really understand that.

Returning: People at this school do things that make us 'Stayers' feel really seen and valued.

41 responses

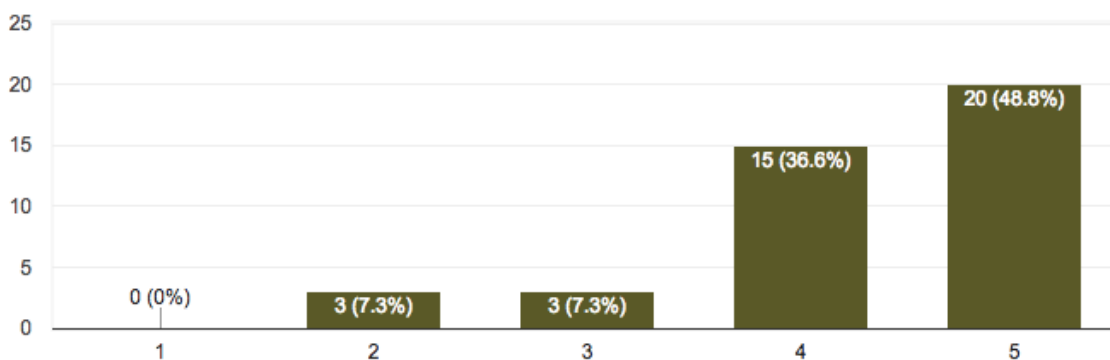


Figure 12. Returning students: People at this school do things that make us 'Stayers' feel really seen and valued.

Returning: I am ready to make new friends with some of the new students.

41 responses

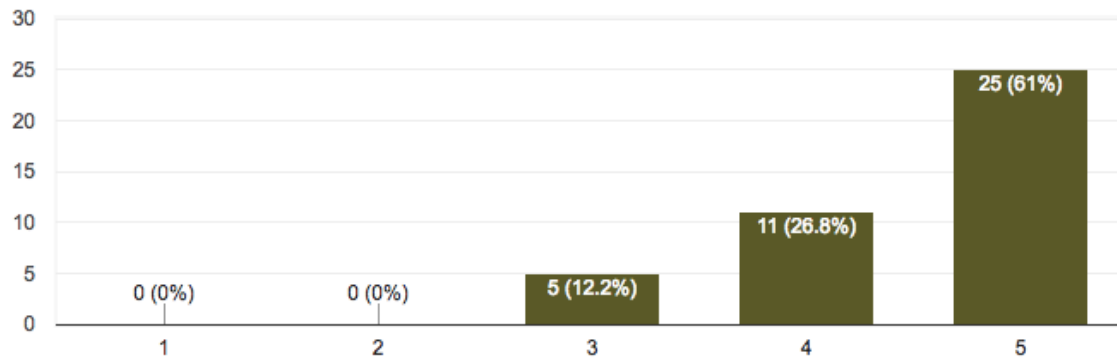


Figure 13. Returning students: I am ready to make new friends with some of the new students.

Returning: I feel okay about making friends with new students this year.

41 responses

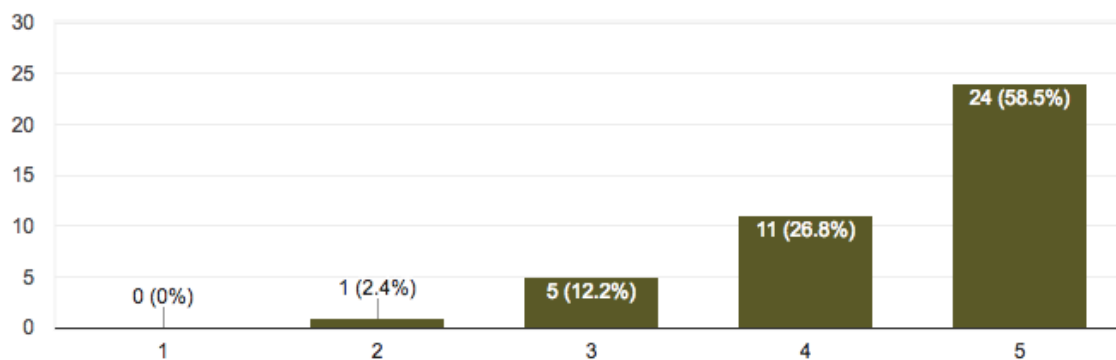


Figure 14. Returning students: I feel okay about making friends with new students this year.

Returning: I am actively involved in activities here. I do things with friends on a regular basis.

41 responses

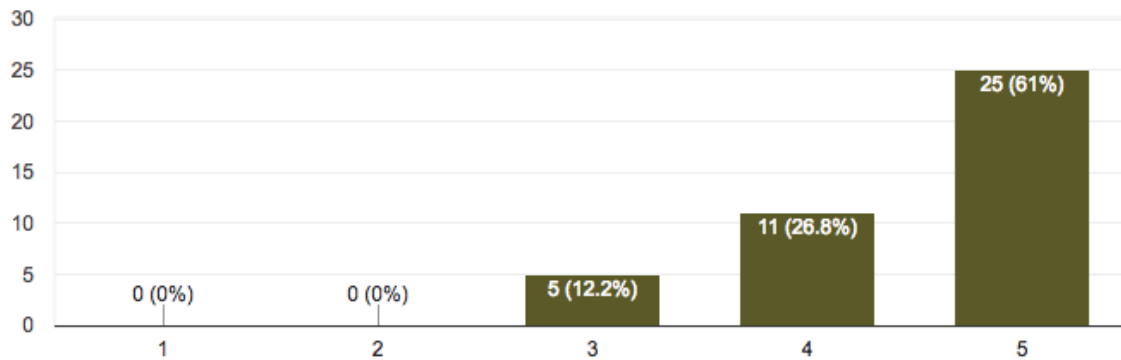


Figure 15. Returning Students: I am actively involved in activities here. I do things with friends on a regular basis.

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