Engaging Students in Classroom Surveys

By Ryan Balch, Ph.D.

This white paper is part of a series on student surveys by Ryan Balch, CEO/Founder of My Student Survey (www.mystudentsurvey.com). My Student Survey is a leading provider of stakeholder surveys for schools and districts across the country. The goal of this series is to highlight key research related to student surveys, share best practices, and provide technical assistance for schools and districts using student surveys.

An often overlooked challenge in adopting student surveys comes from developing buy-in and engagement from students. Students often take many surveys and assessments during the year and there is potential for them to lack the context and understanding of how critical their responses to classroom surveys can be for the growth of their teachers. There are, however, several methods by which school and district administrators can increase student engagement in classroom surveys. These include using a survey that has gone through cognitive interviews, employing a strategic sampling method, creating video introductions for surveys, and encouraging a dialogue between teachers and students about survey results.

The first method of engaging students is to implement a classroom survey that has gone through cognitive interviews. When students do not understand what is being asked of them, it can lead to frustration and a lack of engagement. To prevent this, school or district personnel can conduct cognitive interviews with a representative group of students using a pre-established interview protocol. Cognitive interviews determine whether the item objectives match how the students interpret the actual survey questions. These interviews are helpful in addressing common threats to validity associated with surveys (Porter et al., 2010; Desimone & Le Floch, 2004) and they also allow the

researcher to determine which part of the process respondents may be having difficulty with and why. This allows for the question to be improved. Following the interviews, survey items should be revised based on the results of cognitive interviews and retested. As a result of this process, questions will be more clear and accessible, which allows students to feel more engaged and successful.

The second method of engaging students comes from using a strategic sampling method to avoid survey fatigue. Survey fatigue occurs when respondents reach their limit of tolerance for answering survey questions (Porter, Whitcomb & Weitzer, 2004). After this point, they may provide inaccurate responses, non-responses, or repeated answer strings due to a lack of engagement. Based on our experience working with schools and districts, students should not take the survey more than 2-3 times and there are methodologically sound ways to accomplish this task using a sampling strategy. For example, if all students in a second period high school class take the survey during that period, students will only take the survey one time (with the exception being teachers with planning during that time). For student surveys, the correlation between different classrooms of the same teacher generally falls between .6 and .7 which means that results tend to vary less than other measures of teacher quality such as value-added (Balch, 2014). Therefore it is possible to obtain valid results using a sample of a teacher's students in an effort to keep students engaged.

The next suggestion for engaging students is creating videos that students can watch just prior to taking student surveys. Without an understanding of the importance of the survey and how the results will be used, students may not give the items the attention they deserve. A video can be shown to students immediately prior to the survey or in the days leading up to the survey administration window. Specifically, these videos can outline rationale for why students are

taking the survey, how the results will be used, and why it is important for students to take the survey seriously. In this case, a better understanding leads to better engagement. A particularly powerful way of conveying this message is creating a video that features local students. An example video that was produced by Baltimore City Schools students can be found at: https://vimeo.com/88795482.

The final method relies of having students see how the results from the survey are being put into action. Without closing the loop on the survey process, students may assume that results were never utilized. If a teacher can discuss results with their class (even though this may be difficult), students will develop a deeper understanding of why they take the survey and this can increase engagement in future administrations. Teachers can either present the overall results from the survey and/or discuss the specific changes they will be undertaking in response to this feedback. For instance, if a teacher's Area of Focus was the item "My teacher reviews what we have learned before the lesson is over," then the teacher could discuss a new strategy they are using in response to the feedback (e.g. we will now have a 3 minute review at the end of each lesson based on your feedback). This direct connection between what students said and the subsequent teacher response empowers students and encourages the belief that their voice matters. Since many schools and teachers are asking students to monitor and reflect on their own progress, this communication also allows teachers to model a similar process for students.

As schools and districts plan for engaging teachers in student surveys, there are a variety of considerations that should be discussed:

Readiness Questions:

- Are you using a student survey that has gone through a validation framework using cognitive interviews?

- Do you have a sampling plan that minimizes how many times students take the survey?

- Do you have any materials that students can read or see in advance to understand why they are taking the survey?

- Is there professional development or support available to help teachers learn best practices for communicating results to students?

Next Steps:

- If you are creating your own student survey, develop a validation framework that includes using cognitive interviews as evidence for construct validity. If you are seeking an external partner, verify the process that was used to test survey items.

- Be deliberate in considering your sampling plan to ensure it will not lead to survey fatigue due to students taking the survey more than 2-3 times.

- Develop an engagement plan that includes action steps for engaging students. This includes the development of guidebooks, newsletters, or videos that provide context for how the survey will be used.

- Develop a training for instructional coaches and principals on how teachers can create actionable next steps based on student survey results. As part of this training, discuss examples and techniques for having teachers be able to discuss results with students.

<u>About Ryan Balch</u>

Ryan Balch is a national thought leader on using student surveys at the elementary and secondary level has expertise in measurement development. Before founding My Student

Survey, Ryan Balch completed his Ph.D. in Education Policy at Vanderbilt University as an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Fellow, where his dissertation focused on the development and validation of student surveys on teacher practice. He was the principal investigator for the student survey pilot of more than 15,000 students in 7 districts as part of Georgia's Race to the Top initiative and worked for the National Center on Performance Incentives. In addition, Ryan was the director of teacher and principal evaluation for Baltimore City Schools. During this time, he oversaw the creation and implementation of the district's new systems of evaluation. Previously, Ryan worked as a science teacher and administrator for seven years at Riverwood High School in Atlanta, Georgia. He has a B.A. in Psychology from Duke University and a M.A. in Science Education from Georgia State University.