

Engaging Teachers in Student 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.

A primary challenge in adopting student surveys comes from developing buy-in and engagement from teachers. Placing a value on student voice upsets the normal hierarchy within schools and therefore requires a culture shift for teachers to gain comfort with students providing feedback. In some circumstances, resistance to this shift can lead to teachers being less receptive to results and the instructional adjustments suggested by feedback reports. There are, however, several methods by which policymakers can increase engagement in student surveys. These include developing a communication strategy, providing high-quality feedback reports, and utilizing screening procedures to eliminate invalid surveys.

The first method of fostering a sense of engagement involves the creation of a strategic communication strategy. Frequent and two-way communication about student surveys allows teachers to know the plan for the results, express concerns, highlight misunderstandings, and feel prepared in advance. This may start with information in newsletters/emails as well as communication through principals and survey coordinators, but should also include district-sponsored Q&A sessions and webinars (both of which can be online) where teachers can ask questions. Union representatives can play a key role in publicizing these events.

An important component of a communication strategy is fully sharing all survey items prior to administration. This allows teachers to recognize that the behaviors asked about in the survey are familiar teaching practices. As an example, our STeP survey was derived from research-based practices and standards within common observation rubrics (such as Danielson, Marzano, CLASS, etc.), so the behaviors are generally ones that teachers have previously encountered. In the absence of sharing survey items, teachers may start with a different understanding of the content of student survey items. In reality, student surveys are not asking questions such as ‘My teachers is the best’ or ‘My teacher wears nice shoes’. Instead, they ask questions about the frequency of a teacher’s practice such as ‘When we learn something new, my teacher does a few examples with the class’ and ‘My teacher corrects students when they do not follow the rules of the class’. To aid with transparency, districts and/or states implementing surveys should provide easy access to survey items for teachers through public websites affiliated with the district. This access should be highlighted and linked in regular school and district communications.

Second, user-friendly feedback reports provide a method for teachers to take advantage of the instructional benefits of student surveys. Reports should be easy for teachers to navigate but also facilitate change in instruction, goal setting, and answer the question of ‘Now What?’ To help build teacher engagement, feedback reports should contain the following features:

1. Secure, unique logins to access reports
2. Inclusion of overall and scale results *as well as* item-level information
3. Identification of areas of strength and areas of focus using comparison methods
4. Templates that teachers can use to create an action plan
5. The ability for principals to easily identify high-scoring teachers in the building on each item/instructional practice (to serve as models for other teachers)

An example feedback report that incorporates these principles can be viewed at

www.mystudentsurvey.com/reports

The final method for building engagement comes from identifying and eliminating invalid surveys. Previous studies have indicated that invalid surveys exist for roughly 5 to 8% of surveys (Balch, 2012). However, the perception of teachers is often greater than the reality and therefore needs to be addressed for teachers to place credibility in the results. Teachers are specifically and legitimately worried about the student in the classroom who has “an ax to grind” and will use the survey as an opportunity for retribution. In reality, the surveys that are eliminated are primarily from students who raced through the survey.

To address these issues, schools and districts should employ screening procedures to identify invalid responses. The presence of these safeguards can have a dramatic impact on teacher comfort with student survey and confidence in the results. Current research is underway on the best method for incorporating screening procedures, varying from outlier removal to minimum time spent on surveys, with the goal of strengthening the relationship between student surveys and achievement (Balch & Robinson-Cimpian, 2014).

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

Readiness Questions:

- Does your school or district have a communication strategy for informing teachers about student surveys?
- Does your school or district have a regular method of communicating with teachers (which they regularly use) in which to link your district’s information page on student surveys that contains survey items?

- Do feedback reports contain the important elements listed? What needs to be added?
- How does your school or district identify invalid responses? If there is a process, how does your school or district communicate that you use this process to teachers?

Next Steps:

- Develop a communications plan for student surveys that includes teachers. This includes creating a website that contains full versions of your student survey and scheduling Q&A sessions and/or webinars on student surveys.
- Create teacher feedback reports that allow student survey results to drive instructional choices. Be sure to have multiple resources for growth (e.g. video libraries) available and linked to these reports.
- Provide time, structures, and opportunities for teachers to analyze results and learn from one another. This could be training sessions on using student survey data for goal setting or encouraging sharing within existing professional learning communities.
- Use available research or experts to identify processes for screening invalid responses.

About Ryan Balch



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