

EDUCATION WEEK



3 Questions to Guide Your Use of Student Feedback

Finding Common Ground, Peter DeWitt | [Guest Blog](#) by Jen Wilka April 28, 2016

Education is one of the few industries, perhaps the only one, in which everyone has a firsthand experience and a valid opinion. That translates into lots of ideas from various stakeholders about what should be done differently to improve schools. But why is it that the ideas of the people we're ultimately trying to serve, and arguably those most affected – the students – tend to be the last voices heard and acted upon?

Part of the reason is that it's not always easy to use student feedback productively – or at all!

While there are many ways to get student feedback, the focus of our work at [YouthTruth](#), a national nonprofit based in San Francisco, is through surveys. Here are three ideas and key questions to help get the most out of student feedback for school improvement.

1. Compared to what?

You surveyed your students. You got the data back. You're looking at the findings and see that, on average, your students rate relationships with their teachers a 3.5 out of 5. What do you make of that? Is that how *all* kids feel about their relationships with teachers? What if you knew that the median-rated school in your district received a 4.1 out of 5, or that students nationally rated the quality of teacher-student relationships as a 3.5?

When interpreting and constructing meaning from student survey data, context is everything. Absolute scores only tell part of the story.

- If you're surveying in your own school or classroom, consider: How do student experiences compare across demographic subgroups, such as students of different genders or races? What about the FRPL or ELL students? How have student perceptions changed over time?
- If surveying district-wide, how do student experiences vary across campuses? If there are different school models in your district, are there differences between student perceptions in STEM schools or Project-Based Learning schools versus schools with more traditional approaches?
- If you're working with a regional or national partner, how does your students' feedback compare to feedback from other students in a comparable group – like state or national benchmarks, or other schools with similar characteristics such as rural or high-poverty schools?

2. What do you do when the feedback gets personal?

Student feedback usually includes both positive and critical feedback, and things can get emotional. This is not a popularity contest. But even so, data representing how students experienced *your class*, *your staff*, or *your school* feels really different than student test score data. And you can bet that it will elicit some different reactions – especially if the feedback challenges adult perceptions or expectations.

As educators, our work is often personal, but we don't have to take the feedback *personally*. School leaders, you will likely have the first look at student feedback and therefore a head start on processing the data. Anticipating your team's reactions and thoughtfully planning the data-dive conversation will better position you to coach staff and begin action planning.

Anticipate the 4 D's (some or all of which you may be feeling as well):

- Staff might feel **defensive**, and look outward for explanation. They may shy away from taking it seriously. Reinforce that students are the experts on their own experience, and coach staff to ask why students answered that way.
- Some members of your team might feel **dismissive** – they could question the methodology of the survey or the validity of the data. Make sure this information is included in the survey report or that you have it on hand to share with staff.
- Other colleagues might feel **dejected**, or may be tempted to **downplay the negative** aspects of the student feedback.

Given your student survey results, how do you think your team will respond? Take note of the reactions you think you'll encounter and plan how you'll support your team.

Then, in the group conversation:

- Reaffirm your shared goal or mutual purpose. Since student perceptions are [empirically linked to academic outcomes](#), your shared goal might be to drive academic outcomes. Your mission or vision statement can be useful here too.
- Restate the “why.” Consider inviting department chairs to share about why student feedback is important for their work. This models taking a broad view instead of taking the data personally.
- Maintain safety. Conditions for dialogue require that individuals do not feel threatened. Create space for discussion and debate.

3. What do you expect to learn?

The Research Question: Before launching into any research project, you would define your research questions. At the beginning of a science experiment, you would craft a hypothesis. Similarly, before surveying students, consider:

- How will you use the data?
- What questions should be asked, in what ways, so that the data you get back is useful for your intended purpose?
- What is your hypothesis, as an adult school community, about what you will learn from students?

How you will use the data should guide not only what kinds of questions are asked, but also *when* to survey. Do you need baseline information at the beginning of a leadership transition or school model change? Do you need feedback to drive teachers' professional development plans? Do you need insight about the student experience to inform summer planning?

Hypothesis Testing: Forming a hypothesis about what you'll learn from students will help you and your team engage in the results. A creative approach we've seen work well is an “estimation survey” to test where staff and student perceptions differ. In this exercise, focus in on one theme at a time and ask staff to guess how they think students responded; then reveal the ratings.

- What are the areas of alignment?
- Where do staff expectations and student perceptions diverge? (If you're using a staff survey that covers similar themes, use it here.)

Those areas of divergence are ripe for conversation, and can help surface unconscious bias and differences of opinion in a non-threatening way.

In The End

When done well, student surveys are cost effective, valid and reliable, and allow students to share candid feedback anonymously that they may not feel comfortable sharing through other means. Student surveys are empirically linked to their academic outcomes, and are a leading indicator of those outcomes. So unlike summative data, surveys provide a rapid, formative feedback loop – telling us not just *how* our students did after the fact, but getting to the *why* and helping educators make real-time changes to improve students' experiences, and ultimately their outcomes.

We just have to be willing to ask students, and be prepared to really listen when they answer.

Jen Wilka is the Executive Director of YouthTruth Student Survey. YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student feedback to help educators accelerate changes in their K-12 schools and classrooms. To learn more, visit www.youthtruthsurvey.org