**American Youth Policy Forum**

January 31, 2014

**Using Student Surveys: Implications for Leadership and School Improvement Initiatives**

As the second in a series of forums on the topic of student surveys, this forum focused on the use of student surveys at the school district level. This forum provided perspectives from education researchers as well as practitioners, to discuss the invaluable insights about classrooms that student surveys provide.

**Rob Ramsdell,** of **The Tripod Project,** discussed the in-depth survey tool used to help students provide feedback about their classroom experiences and engagement. Dr. Ronald Ferguson, of Harvard University, pioneered the Tripod Project. The survey project was developed over the course of a decade, and incorporates research and input from educators.

Ramsdell begin the presentation by providing context for Tripod’s work, and cited a Measures of Effective Teaching study (funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) which involved 6 communities and 3,000 teachers over a two-year period. Researchers studied multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, and found that out of all the measures, student surveys proved to be the most reliable and predictive of student academic achievement. There are different versions of the Tripod survey for grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-12. The survey can be administered online or on paper, typically takes a class period to complete, and commonly has a response rate of over 95 percent.

There are three key messages that Ramsdell emphasized: The first is that students are good observers, and their perspective is a valuable source of information for educators focused on improvement. Their observations often provide important insights that are not otherwise accessible to teachers or evaluators of teaching quality.

Second, the survey results illustrate what is generally understood -- there is significant variation in teaching quality. Ramsdell showed examples of results that illustrated there is more variation within schools than there is across schools.

Finally, the purpose of the student surveys must be the continued professional growth of educators. Some educators are apprehensive about the idea of using student surveys in an evaluative context. Tripod’s objective is to provide useful feedback and information to improve and refine professional development, and ultimately to improve student outcomes.

When first incorporating student surveys, some schools and educators are apprehensive about some aspects of the process, said Ramsdell. For example, there are often concerns that students will not take the surveys seriously, and some educators worry about the role that the surveys might play in their evaluation or performance scores. They are also sometimes unclear about how the survey results would be integrated with other student data. Ramsdell stressed the importance of thinking of student surveys as a way to improve student outcomes, by informing steps educators take to set goals and to help educators refine their professional practices over time. He stressed the importance of avoiding a focus on any one measure at any one point in time. Rather, he stressed the importance of using multiple measures across multiple years if results are going to be used in an evaluative manner.

**Student Surveys in Action**

To provide a perspective on student surveys at the school district level**, Susan Martin, Chief Academic Officer for the Lewiston Public Schools, and Karen Paquette, Assistant Principal at Lewiston Middle School** explained how the survey has been incorporated into their school district in Lewiston, Maine. Lewiston’s public schools serve 5,500 students, of which 68 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and 22 percent are English Language Learners.

In January, 2011 Lewiston used Teacher Incentive Fund monies to incorporate the surveys into teacher performance evaluations. The initiative was also a part of reforming the compensation system. At the same time Lewiston also hoped to increase the number of effective teachers teaching poor, minority, or disadvantaged students.

**How does student opinion fit in?**

Through student feedback, Lewiston educators learned that it is crucial for teachers to recognize individual differences in their students, a goal in keeping with the district’s use of The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards criteria for professional development. Another valuable insight that students provide is a picture of what the classroom looks like on a daily basis. For example, responses about teachers and fairness were particularly telling, as students are uniquely positioned to provide insight into what constitutes a cooperative and equitable classroom environment.

**Lewiston’s approach: 2011-2012**

Student surveys were new and focused on results as part of the National Board’s work. The planning provoked many questions from teachers and staff, and a lot of thought went into how to best incorporate the surveys into existing professional development activities. An important first step in adopting surveys was to focus more on teacher reflections, and to incorporate the process gradually. Stakes were kept low, and Lewiston schools concentrated on logistical issues.

**Lewiston’s approach: 2012-2013**

During this period, Lewiston began training teachers in the new evaluation tool based on National Board standards by having them work together in cohort groups. This method helped them review school and team data rather than individual data.

More students were surveyed in Year 2. With more respondents, Lewiston also found variations in responses. Lewiston used national and local data to set targets for use in their schools.

**Challenges:**

The logistics of administering the surveys proved challenging. Lewiston schools learned that having students take the survey back-to-back, rather than spaced across several months, was convenient, but they noticed that the students put less time and effort into the survey questions towards the end of the survey period. To ensure more reliable results, the schools spaced testing dates farther apart to counter possible student “burnout.”

Another challenge was administering the survey to students who were new to the country or district, and were not able to read and write at grade level. Lewiston is making an effort to address this. Lewiston also found that administering surveys online was sometimes vulnerable to technology problems and glitches.

Teachers also struggled with perceived accuracy of the survey results. To account for this, Lewiston attempted to inform them about the consistent methodology and patterns of results at the national, district and school levels.

**Additional Value:**

Lewiston found that the survey data is fostering teacher reflection, and in turn positively influences professional development. Teachers have become more interested in the survey data. The surveys also give students a voice. By the third year, students had become accustomed to the process and took it seriously. The data that the surveys provide is driving significant change. At the individual and school level, the surveys are helpful in addressing student and teacher needs, and writing grants, for example.

Some of the changes that Lewiston has made based on the survey results are: better professional development, including the school survey results in the administration’s overall evaluation, and inclusion of the survey in new teacher induction procedures. Lewiston also created an alternative survey for staff who do not always work directly with students.

**Remaining Concerns:**

Lewiston is concerned about the length and reading level of the 6-12 grade survey, which may have to be adjusted. English Language Learners are also a concern, as there are questions on the survey that could be considered inaccessible to these students. Additionally students from different cultures may see the role of teachers quite differently. Figuring out the exact cost of implementing the surveys is also something that Lewiston is working on, as well as how much time is needed to arrange and schedule for them. Lewiston emphasizes teacher collaboration, so often a student works with several staff members. Then, a student may to take the survey multiple times.

**Question and Answer Session:**

Q: *Can you talk about how surveys can be used in a world where the emphasis is on evaluation versus professional development?*

Rob noted that in his experience there is a high degree of sensitivity around the issue of incorporating surveys into evaluations, and feedback can be difficult to hear. He commented that the surveys emphasize the importance of looking for patterns over several different administrations of the survey in multiple classrooms and at multiple points in time. He reiterated that it is important keep the focus on how survey results can be used to focus goal setting and professional development efforts.

Karen concurred, noting that the culture in Lewiston Middle School has shifted to show that the purpose of the student surveys is much more for professional improvement over time. Susan added that discussion about the use of the surveys was previously more critical. Teacher angst has declined as teachers became more comfortable with the system. She also noted the importance of ensuring teacher buy-in to the use of student surveys.

Q: *Can you* *give us an example of how a result of a low score has helped a teacher to improve?*

Rob pointed to a [video](https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/improve-teaching-with-student-feedback) on The Teaching Channel, detailing the process a teacher went through which could be illustrative. Those kinds of examples are largely anecdotal, however, and at the moment, there are not comprehensive research findings on this question.

Q: *Is it helpful to have teachers coaching other teachers with regard to student survey procedures and best practices?*

Karen noted that there are some examples of this at her school, and that teacher leaders can come in to help in certain areas.

Q: *Who administers the surveys for grades K-2?*

In Lewiston, K-2 classroom teachers administer their own surveys and there is another adult in the room. Karen added that the surveys are administered to small groups, with five or six students at a time.

Q: *What effect does staff turnover have on the survey results?*

Susan commented that that isone more piece of information they would like to look at, and that there is currently not enough data to measure this yet.

Q: *Can the surveys be administered in large urban areas with large schools, in places like Los Angeles or San Francisco?*

Rob informed people that The Gates Foundation’s Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project was focused on large schools districts in places like Dallas, New York City, Memphis, and Denver. The majority of the surveys have been conducted in large urban school districts.

Q: *Are teachers within schools independently using the survey?*

Rob indicated that the Tripod Project wasinterested in developing tools to make it easy for individual teachers to administer surveys on their own for formative purposes..

Q: Is the *survey available in other languages?*

Rob replied that the survey is available in 12 different languages, and that they work with school districts to provide surveys that are appropriately translated.

Q: *Can you elaborate on plans some districts and states have to incorporate survey results into teacher evaluations?*

Rob shared that in Hawaii a very gradual pilot plan is in place. Memphis has used surveys as part of the evaluation system for a few years. Additional districts in Tennessee are also beginning to use surveys in this way this year. Rob commented that most states are leaving it to individual districts to decide how to use student surveys.

Q: *Are there any condensed versions of the survey?*

Susan responded that while Lewiston would like a shorter survey, it is important to have a tool with a substantial research base and a sufficient number of items to provide reliable results and useful diagnostic information.. Doing it well, she noted, in a large scale way can be a challenge and can also be costly.

Rob added that the survey is long in order to ensure results are reliable and also to include measures focused on student engagement executive function in order to deliver additional information that can also be used to further validate results. The survey design was very deliberate, and designed to provide substantive results with a solid research foundation.

Q: *How often is the survey given?* *How much do variables like time of year make a difference?*

Rob clarified that schools typically conduct the surveys in Fall and Spring. Some schools administer surveys once a year, others twice. Ideally he would like to administer the survey multiple times to build up a solid baseline of data. As the work matures, different implementation models are possible. Lewiston administers student surveys once annually in March but with multiple classrooms of students in that time period.